

How God Restores Us

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Joel 2:1-27 (Joel 2:1-2, 12-14, 23-25)

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SOME MEMORIES STICK WITH US

When I went golfing with friends a few years ago, I hit a ball into a pond covered in reeds.

To be quite honest, I'm really bad at golf. So my ball ended up in the reeds on that hole pretty frequently. I looked at it as a tax and decided not to worry about it.

The friend I was playing with that day was determined to get the ball back.

As we walked past the pond, he encouraged me to step into the reeds and get my ball.

But memories shape us. I grew up in Florida, and there are tons of poisonous snakes in Florida. I survived to adulthood, because I knew instinctively that it's dangerous to wade into the reeds. There's frequently a poisonous snake there.

The area where I was playing golf at the time has absolutely no poisonous snakes.

But not even questioning my masculinity could make this Floridian wade into the reeds.

Some memories stick with us and shape us.

In Joel's day, God's people had some powerful memories that were shaping them.

Very quickly, let's review the history of Judah from the 600s through the 400s B.C.

The story of Judah in the 600s B.C. can be summarized with the word "Revolt."

The word "revolt" probably covers the overall trajectory of Judah's story an even longer time.

How did they revolt against God? The Old Testament Law lays out what was expected of them, the Old Testament Histories tell the story of how they usually did exactly the opposite of what was expected of them, and the Old Testament Prophets contain the specific charges.

Frequently, they neglected worshipping God.

When they turned away from God, they almost always turned to foreign gods.

And when they turned to foreign gods, they almost always began to harm one another.

Consequently, the story of Judah in the 500s B.C. can be summarized with the word "Results."

For centuries, God warned his people that revolt would bring results.

When they ignored him, eventually God allowed the Babylonian Empire to conquer Judah.

Jerusalem, the capital, was destroyed.

The wall around the city was torn down, the Temple was looted and burned to the ground, and the leaders were taken away as captives to Babylonia.

The story of Judah that follows in the 400s can be summarized with the word "Return."

Actually, the return began in the late 500s, when a new empire came to power and allowed God's people to begin returning to Judah.

They began to rebuild their lives and their economy.

They built a new Temple in Jerusalem; eventually, they even rebuilt the wall around the city.

As they rebuilt their lives, they began to make sense of what had happened to them and found new determination to follow God with all their hearts.

Joel probably lived during the days of the “Return.”

Through Joel, God sent a message to His people that drew on two powerful memories.

First, as we saw last week, Joel had the very immediate memory of locusts and drought.

Second was the still-fresh memory of how the Babylonian army had swept in from the north.

Both of these memories evoked strong feelings in God’s people.

GOD SENT A POWERFUL MESSAGE TO HIS PEOPLE.

God chose to use these memories to send another message to his people in Joel 2:1-2.

Blow a trumpet in Zion;
sound an alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful people;
their like has never been before,
nor will be again after them
through the years of all generations.

Joel realized that the locust plague of his own day meant that “something worse” was possible.

If you remember from last week, the plague of locusts in Joel’s day was accompanied by drought, fires, and famine. It was a profound natural disaster, and people certainly died.

As bad as that was, Joel saw in the disaster a message from God.

The message was (first and foremost) a reminder that God was working in their day and calling the people to reach out to Him.

But Joel could see that there was a warning that “something worse” might be coming.

Joel described that “something worse” in dire terms.

Joel saw a mighty army spread “upon the mountains.”

Just as clouds of locusts had darkened the sky, this army would bring utter gloom.

Fire went before them and devoured everything in their path.

They are like a plague of locusts, but they’re also like horses and chariots.

They leap over mountains, and scale walls.

They aren’t stopped by normal weapons.

They shake the earth and the heavens, darkening the sun, moon, and stars.

Joel’s vision was practically apocalyptic!

This “something worse” drew on the people’s powerful, shaping memories.

In some ways, what Joel saw was just like the outbreak of locusts that God’s people had just lived through; the armies were just more numerous, more powerful, and far more destructive.

In other ways, what Joel saw drew on the older memory of the Babylonian army that had destroyed Judah in the previous century. That memory still haunted the people.

But this army also reminded the people of the Lord's army that he would deploy against his enemies at the end of time, on the great Day of the Lord.

This "something worse" would be a powerful message from God to His people.

But what did this apocalyptic army mean? What was God trying to say to His people?

Was God promising to punish or even destroy His people? Was this God's final judgment?

Or was the message something else?

Joel made the message clear:

GOD CALLED HIS PEOPLE TO RETURN TO HIM.

In Joel 2:12-14, the prophet called the people of Judah to return to God.

"Yet even now," declares the LORD,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments."
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD your God?

Joel implied that the people had broken their covenant with God.

In Deuteronomy 10:12-13, Moses made it clear that the covenant with God involved loving God with all one's being and strength. And loving God that way comes out in obedience. Verses 12-13: "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?"

In Deuteronomy, Moses told the people that if they were faithful to the covenant, life would be good for them. But if the people broke that covenant, disaster would come upon them. Moses was very clear.

But Moses also gave the people hope. If they broke their covenant with God, if they disobeyed Him, they would experience consequences. But those consequences would serve to call the people to return to God. Look at what Moses said in Deuteronomy 30:1-3: "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you."

Notice that Moses promised that if the people turned away from God and experienced the consequences promised to them, they could still return to God. And if they returned to God, God would restore them.

That's the promise that Joel was calling upon.

Joel doesn't tell us what the people did.

Joel didn't bother to list the sins the people of Judah committed at this point in history.

We can guess from Israel's sins at other points in history.

The fact that Joel didn't list the sins of the people here is ominous.

In a sense, he wrote to the people of Judah and implied, "You know what you did!"

That's almost worse. If we know exactly what we're accused of doing, we can do something about it. We may even be able to argue or defend ourselves.

But when Joel DOESN'T list the sin of the people, they are responsible for telling the truth and the whole truth if they really want to make things right with God.

Otherwise, judgment waits.

That (in reality) is the position we find ourselves in today.

We're like the people of Joel's day on this topic.

We know that we have turned away from God.

If God were to make an accusation against us, then we could weigh the accusation. We might accept it. We might deny it. We might take responsibility. We might try to justify ourselves.

But we don't get that chance! All we know is that we stand guilty before God. We are accused. We are condemned. We're guilty.

So all that remains is for us to confess our sin honestly to God. *What's your sin?*

Joel's message for the people to return was insistent and urgent.

Joel called the people to turn to God "with all your heart."

They couldn't come back to God with empty actions or words.

Turning away from their sins had to be real, and their turning had to be accompanied by genuine heart love for God. Beyond that, they needed to come back to God after thinking about it and after making a firm decision.

The return of their hearts would be shown with gestures. They would fast and weep and mourn. They genuinely had to regret how their relationship with God had deteriorated.

But if they returned to God in this way, Joel held out hope based on their covenant with God that God might not send this awesome destruction against His people.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son reiterates that God's basic message is return not destruction.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15 is the story of a father with two sons.

The younger of the two sons got frustrated waiting to claim his inheritance, so he asked his father for his inheritance early.

Then the son took everything he owned, went to a foreign land, and squandered it there.

When he ran out of money, the land where he was living experienced a famine.

In order to support himself, the younger son took a job feeding pigs.

While feeding the pigs, he thought about how hungry he was and then remembered that in his father's house, even the hired servants have plenty to eat. And here he was starving!

So he decided to go home and ask his father for a job.

He set out for home. As he approached his home, his father recognized him in the distance.

Seeing the younger son, the father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him.

Like that father, Jesus was saying that His own Heavenly Father longs for us to come home!

That's our Father's heart!

Joel knew that was the real message from God.

So that presents many questions for us today:

- *Have we walked away from God?*
- *What are the consequences we're facing today?*
- *And is God calling us, pulling us to come home?*

GOD RELENTED FROM JUDGING HIS PEOPLE.

The people must have done everything Joel told them to do, because in Joel 2:23-25, we find that God relented from judging his people.

“Be glad, O children of Zion,
and rejoice in the LORD your God,
for he has given the early rain for your vindication;
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the latter rain, as before.

“The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
I will restore to you the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent among you.

Let's try to unpack God's astounding promise to restore His people.

Remember that the immediate setting for what we read is still the natural disaster that included locusts, drought, fire, and famine.

Looking ahead, Joel could see that this disaster could be foretelling “something worse.”

But when the people returned to God, God decided to withhold “something worse” AND began to restore what the disaster had taken.

It started to rain. Can you imagine what it must have felt like when it began to rain after a drought like the people of Judah must have suffered? The first rain must have felt like life and cleanliness falling from the sky. Over time, the rains kept falling. The people didn't have to worry about the rains stopping and the drought returning. There were early rains (probably fall rains) and latter rains (probably spring rains). The natural order of things had returned.

Then God promised to give the people crops again. There would be plenty to eat.

The disaster had lasted for multiple years. Multiple harvest seasons had to be impacted. God promised to restore all that they had lost over the years of the disaster.

But God was talking about more than just stuff. God promised to make everything right again if they would come home to Him.

In verse 13, Joel connected the possibility of restoration to God's very nature.

Looking back at verse 13, Joel claimed that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Joel was reminding the people of the nature of God that God himself proclaimed when He told Moses His name.

In Exodus 34:6-7, God allowed Moses, His servant, to glimpse Him from behind. He wanted Moses to know Him like no one else had, and we get to hear what that amazing encounter was like. “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.’ ”

When Joel called the people to return to God, he reminded them that returning would matter, because calling them home is God's very identity.

He is the LORD, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. That's who He is. It's His nature. It's deeper than a promise.

Returning to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus also implied that restoring those who return to Him is in God's very nature.

Rather than shaming his son, not only did the father welcome his son home, he threw a party.

He had his son bathed and robed, and gave him shoes and a ring.

He threw a party to celebrate the younger son's return.

That's how God treated Judah in Joel's day.

And that's how God promises to treat us! He welcomes us with open arms when we return to Him.

LET'S RETURN TO GOD

God has definitely gotten our attention.

Practically speaking, many of us have had time to think.

Our routines have been disrupted.

We are re-examining and rethinking so many aspects of our lives.

I hope that God has our attention.

Given what Joel Chapter 1 said, we don't want to worry about what God is saying to anyone else; we want to think about what God is saying to us.

So what should we do? Here are three suggestions:

1. Let's Return to God.

If there is any message in these days, this is the first message we should get.

Why? Because just like the people of Joel's day, we wander away from God.

Sometimes the ways that we wander are obvious. Other times our wandering is imperceptible, at least at first.

Consequently, we all need to return to God.

If you're not yet a follower of Jesus, then that is definitely what He wants from you. To "return" to Him means to repent or turn away from living your life apart from Him and turn toward God. I'll explain how you do that in just a few minutes.

For those of us who are followers of Jesus, the message is the same: *return*. How have we wandered away from God? How can we return to Him?

Don't worry about how our society has wandered or about how people you know have wandered. Let's all keep the lens focused on ourselves for right now.

We can't make anyone else return, but what would happen if we would return?

Let's ask how we can return to God, and then let's do it.

2. Let's ask God for Restoration.

God promised to restore everything that the plagues had taken from His people.

As we try to apply that promise to our day, what does that mean?

Our land and our people are certainly suffering, so there is a great deal to restore.

Some of us have gotten sick; some of us have even died.

Some of us have lost jobs and income.

We've all seen how divided the United States is; there are divisions in how we are treated, divisions in how the justice system works, divisions of opportunities and dignity, and divisions of heart.

So what would restoration look like today? What exactly are we praying for?

We are definitely asking God to give us a cure or at least a treatment for COVID-19.

We're asking for our lives back.

Frankly, we are also asking God to give us our jobs and our income and our businesses back.

We are asking God to heal the divisions in our society.

We are also just asking God to bring us together. We've been apart from each other for so long, and for this next era, we want to connect in new and deeper ways.

Let's ask God for restoration.

3. Let's ask God for *Resurgence*.

We're looking for something more than just getting our stuff back.

We want something like what the people of Joel's day must have felt when the rains came after a long, dry period.

We want to feel like we're new. We want to feel like we're better than new.

We want joy. We don't just want the joy we had before; we want more joy than we had before.

We want hope. We don't just want the wishful thinking we had in God before; we want hope that's built on confidence in God.

We want love. Love for God, love for one another, and love for the world.

We want God's presence. We want more of God's presence than we've ever had before.

Ironically, that is the very next thing God promised his people.

At the end of Chapter 2, God promised to pour out His Holy Spirit on us.

We'll be picking up there with our study next week.

But that's what we want! We want God's presence. We want God to fill us. We want life in the Spirit! And as followers of Jesus, life in the Spirit is available to us.

We're not looking for things to go back to the way they were before. We want something more! We're looking to be better Christians. We want to be a better Church. We want to help build a better society.

Let's ask God for resurgence of our faith.