

Wake Up!

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[0 : 00] Well, warm welcome to you all today. It's a real pleasure to see you all here and a pleasure to have a chance to worship God together. Let's begin with a short prayer before I read this week's section of the Bible.

Dear Lord, we thank you for the beauty of the day outside and your kindness to us today. You have been a very good God and we pray that now in the next few minutes you would open our ears so that we can hear what you have to say to us.

We pray that through your ancient word you would speak to us right now so that we will know that you are a God who is always living, always speaking and always has something to say.

Our lives are full and busy with worries and pleasures. So help us, Father, to raise our hearts and minds to listen to you.

Wake us up through your word and turn us back to you so that we can taste the joy and goodness of knowing you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[1 : 17] Amen. Amen. Well, today we're starting a new series in the book of Joel. It's a book of the Bible that's not often preached on, a short one, one that you may find a little difficult to find in your Bibles if you haven't read it recently.

It's page 760 in the Bibles in the pews. And if you'd like to turn that up, I'll read it in just a moment and you can follow along.

So starting at verse 1 of Joel on page 760. The word of Joel, the son of Pethuol.

Hear this, you elders. Give ear all inhabitants of the land. Has such a thing happened in your days or in the days of your fathers?

Tell your children of it and let your children tell their children and their children to another generation. What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten.

[2 : 29] What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. Awake, you drunkards, and weep and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.

For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number. Its teeth are lion's teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree.

It has stripped off their bark and thrown it down, their branches made white. Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth, for the bridegroom of her youth, the grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord.

The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord. The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed. The wine dries up, the oil languishes.

Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil. Wail, O vine dressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine dries up, the fig tree languishes, pomegranate, palm and apple.

[3 : 41] All the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man. Put on sackcloth and lamento, priests. Wail, O ministers of the altar.

Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God. Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast.

Call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord. Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Is not the food cut off before our eyes? Joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels under the clods. The storehouses are desolate.

The granaries are torn down, because the grain has dried up. How the beasts groan. The herds of cattle are perplexed, because there is no pasture for them.

[4 : 41] Even the flocks of sheep suffer. To you, O Lord, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field.

Even the beasts of the field pant for you, because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. Darkness. And the words we have just read are dark. They are grief-filled, and they are hard. We've got to ask the question as we start, why are we looking at them? Well, this little book, which we're going to look at over the next four weeks, it is a book that starts with darkness, and ends in light.

It begins with suffering, and ends with joy. It begins with judgment, but finishes with unbelievable liberal grace. It's also utterly remarkable among the prophets of the Old Testament for the simple fact that the people who first heard this message actually listened to it.

It's very unusual, as you'll know if you've read your Old Testament much, for that to happen. So we see how they returned to the God they'd left, and so we see how God would fulfill his word in chapter 2, that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

[6 : 10] And so we'll see later in the book how God pours out good things on them, promising them more for the future, good things we too will share if we share in their return to God.

It also shows in a really life-changing way how repentance and joy are always held together in the Christian life. You see, we live in a society that essentially thinks that repentance, and it doesn't like that word, repent, at all, does it, thinks that it's psychologically dangerous, basically.

That to think about our sins and our wrongdoings is damaging to us, that it shows unhealthy pessimism, that it will crush our self-esteem, and so crush us.

In a sense, it's like wallowing in emotional sewage. Now, even in church, where hopefully we believe in the idea of repentance, in practice, we very often limit it, don't we, to either just the beginning of the Christian life, or at least to what we think of as a kind of moderation.

You know, a bit of that's all right, but if I spend too much time thinking about this, I'll end up a sort of door-depressed person, like the stereotype of an old-fashioned Scottish Calvinist.

[7 : 34] Now, Joel shows us that this is utterly wrong. He starts by showing us that deep, thorough, heartfelt, even heart-wringing repentance is exactly what will lead, and we'll see that through the course of the whole book, to freedom, to joy, and to wholeness.

Right repentance is not wallowing in sewage. It is flushing the toilet, so that you can live your life in a way that's bright and clean and fresh.

And so, we're going to read this week's chapter, which is a chapter of darkness, because by going through it, we will be able to come out the other side into the light that bursts out of the second half of Joel.

Now, we're going to look at this section in three parts. Firstly, we see how God's voice must be heard. That's just the first three verses, four verses, sorry.

Secondly, that suffering, like they were suffering then, must wake us up to the reality of this world. And then thirdly, that the reality of sin must call us to repentance.

[8 : 46] God's voice must be heard. Suffering must wake us up to reality. And the reality of sin must call us to repentance. So, firstly, Joel's message is simply that the people must wake up and hear.

The word of God must be heard. You see that in verse 5 and in verse 2. Now, nobody knows when this book was written. There's no clue in the whole book. But we do know, as you've seen already, that it was a time of terrible suffering, when the people were undergoing a calamity beyond probably what they could ever have imagined.

Now, there had been a drought. We see that further on in verses 70 to 20. And as happens so often after a drought in those areas, it was followed by a locust plague.

When the plants start to sprout again, the locusts hatch too. And this time, a plague of locusts of really unimaginable awfulness had come and eaten everything that the drought had left.

So, if you look at verse 4 in particular, you'll see how the four types of locusts have come one by one, wave after wave, to devour everything that's green, everything that grows.

[10 : 01] And there is no food left. The crop's gone. The seed for the years to come is gone. And it's on a scale which verses 2 and 3, even the oldest people, the elders, hadn't seen.

And their parents before them had never seen. Now, next week, when we read chapter 2, we'll get a clearer sort of visual picture of what that was like to live through. But it was, it is a very visual picture, and it matches exactly what locust plagues are like nowadays.

Now, my grandfather was once in one, and he was driving along a road and described seeing a distant darkness in the distance, like a strange cloud.

And then, as it drew nearer, the sky began to grow black. And suddenly, the jeep there started to skid and slide across the road as it began to run over locusts.

And as they came to a halt, they came in and just covered the windscreen like a blanket, and they just sat there, unable to move or see anything until the whole thing had passed. Now, these swarms of locusts, which ordinarily are just little grasshoppers, can be 10 billion strong.

[11:14] We know that a single swarm can eat enough food to feed 40,000 people for a year in one day. World Vision tells us that in 1958, there was a succession of locust plagues in which enough grain was eaten by the locusts to feed more than a million people for a whole year.

Now, just imagine, you've been living through a drought. Things are not good. It's been tough the last few years. Crops are small. They're not doing well. And then you come out of your house one morning, and in the light of the rising sun, you see that cloud of locusts, the kind of darkness against the mountains.

And within hours, the air is just filled with millions upon millions of them. The ground is covered. And then when they finally go, every leaf is gone, every blade of grass.

The bark of the trees is stripped back to white wood. Even the branches of the trees have been shorn off by the weight of locusts hanging on them. The fields are like a desert, and the forests look like birch trees in winter.

And because you've seen this on a small scale before, you know perfectly well that in the soil where there are a few seeds left ready to sprout again, there are millions upon millions of eggs ready to hatch and devour it over again.

[12:35] Now, it's hard for us to grasp, isn't it, in the age of supermarkets and international aid, exactly what that means. But that whole region of the Near East is littered with the archaeological remains of cities that were abandoned, completely abandoned, because of events just like this one.

And that is the question here. Will God's land be desolate? Will his people be dead and gone? Or at least fled to other countries far away?

And that's the people's question in verse 15. Is this the day of the Lord? Is this the end, the final reckoning, finally come? And then God speaks into the situation. Because here we have the word of God himself, the word of the Lord that came to Joel in his people's is the day of the Lord.

Hear this. Give ear and never forget it. Tell your children, let your children tell their children and their children to another generation. And then we begin to look at verses 5 to 12.

And in those we see that suffering, their suffering in particular, was to call them to wake up to the reality of the world. Look at what he says in verse 5.

[13:50] Awake, all you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine. Now, Joel's telling them, look out their door, look at what's happening.

And you'd think that the people hearing that would say, we can see perfectly well what's happening, we can't miss it, we open the door and the fields are there. And Joel wants them to wake up because yes, they see the superficial facts, but his people have become almost like drunkards.

When they're awake, they're dozing, they're blind to everything except the next drink. And when they're asleep, they're catatonic. They won't hear, they won't see, they won't think about what reality all of this is pointing them to.

And I think that is often like so many of us. You know, there are so many things in the world, aren't there, that will keep us from thinking about the real hard questions of life and thinking about ourselves.

You know, many of them are very good things. But it's very easy, isn't it, to fill all our spare time with TV or obsessively following the news or computer games. I suspect that's not a big problem in this congregation, but you never know.

[15:00] Or never looking up for our phones or even just by building a pleasant routine of friendship and religion, but never actually stopping to think and wrestle about reality and the reality of our own hearts.

We are very often in the words of the hymn, spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth, and care. So this people here, they have noticed that something has gone wrong, but they haven't thought about why.

They're asleep to that. But now, there is one way to wake up a drunkard good and proper, isn't there? And that is to make sure they can't get any wine. And that's what's happened here. There is nothing left to drink.

The locusts have devoured the grapes, they've stripped the bark off the vines, and there won't be another vintage for several years until the vines are mature again. God's people have become deaf, and now the one thing comes that can wake them up.

What should they do when they wake up? Verse 8, lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth. That's a very vivid picture, isn't it? A bride whose husband-to-be dies between the marriage and the wedding night.

[16:18] Or perhaps like a great, great aunt of mine whose fiance was killed in the First World War, and she grieved all her life, like many people did at that time, and never married.

Lament like that, because the life you were looking forward to has been taken away. Things have happened that should never have needed to happen, because of course it shouldn't ever have been like this.

God had invited his people at that time in the Old Testament into an intimate, committed relationship, a covenant. And when that relationship was as it should be, when the people were obedient and just and warm-hearted and generous, the land would simply overflow with good things.

Deuteronomy 28 talks about God pouring out his blessings on the crops and the cattle and the herds. But if they turned away, if they were hard and unfaithful and cruel, the land would be dry and barren.

And among other things, Deuteronomy 28, 38, you shall carry much seed into the field and gather in little, for the locust shall consume it. And that's what verses 9 to 12 are saying.

[17:26] The land is under a curse, and it is a sign that you have left God and left the right way. And it's come to the point where your religious life, where you offer back in thanks to God, verse 9, the offerings that show your thankfulness for his kindness to you, even that's impossible.

God is saying through Joel, when he's saying, wake up, he's saying, look, what's happening outside you is happening inside you. It shows you that your hearts are dry and dead, and you need to come back to me.

Lament and weep, not just because of the physical disaster, but weep for the selfish, hard hearts that have brought it. Make this disaster an opportunity to turn back to God.

What fool does what we've just heard mean for us today? Because it is slightly different now, isn't it? If you know your Bible, you will know that our relationship with God after Jesus Christ is not linked with physical blessings in the same way.

You know, if we are good, we do not expect to be made rich or have more things than we would otherwise. You know, if we suffer an illness, it's usually, not never, the New Testament's clear about that, but usually, isn't directly linked to sin or particular things we've done wrong.

[18:53] But at the same time, this picture here is a really powerful picture for us, a lesson for us that tells us about the seriousness of sin.

It also tells us this. It reminds us that every suffering, every pain that has ever come since the day Adam and Eve had to leave the garden has been a sign that there is something deeply wrong with our world.

that is a great problem that from Adam and Eve onwards has been because there is something wrong with our hearts. And so, every twinge, every pain, every difficulty, every moment when, as verse 12 puts it, gladness dries up should remind us we are living in a world where something is fundamentally broken and it's broken because of us, because of the sin of our hearts.

Our self-obsession, our self-centered ways and hearts have left us in a world that cannot be right until we are right, until all are right.

And that reminder should always draw us back to God. Now, that's not just a theoretical idea. I'm just thinking of myself for a moment. It's very often illness that has been the most effective thing in bringing me back to God.

[20:13] You know, it wakes me up, as Joel says. You know, it makes you realize what's the most important thing in life. What do I really need to put first each day when it's a struggle to do each

thing one by one?

To use the words of C.S. Lewis, we can ignore even pleasure, but pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures.

He speaks in our consciences. He shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Now, that is definitely not all that can be said about pain and suffering in this world.

But it is one thing that needs to be said about it. It is his megaphone to call us back to him. Now, verses 13 to 20, the reality of sin calls us to repentance.

You see, that megaphone speaks through Joel. In verses 13 to 20, we see how the reality of sin calls back to repentance. See, in verse 13, the priests are to lead the people in weeping, in repenting, and in turning back.

[21 : 21] They're to weep in sackcloth, like the way someone weep for a close relative who died in those days. And you know, there is nothing that they can offer in the house of God. There's no crops, there's no wine to offer, so they've got nothing left to offer except their tears.

And so, verse 14, consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, and cry out to the Lord. Just pray. The desolation, which we see in verses 15 to 18, so that even the animals grown and suffer, is a sign, Joel says, of the coming day of the Lord, God's day of reckoning, of justice, when he'll right all wrongs and punish all evil.

And he's saying, you need to be ready to face that judgment. Get ready now to face that judgment to come. And that's a message we'll hear more of next week. But for now, let's just look at what this passage teaches us about repentance and about turning back to God.

They have nothing to offer. They can't make things up with God. They can't make a bargain with him. They can't pay off their debts. All they can do is call on him and weep.

They can weep with regret for what they've done and for what's had to happen to bring them back. And they can weep with longing for God to put it right. And this is something particularly important.

[22 : 42] See that this is not a call just to the particularly wicked, to the bad people out there, to the pagans or the secularists or whatever. It's a call to everyone and Joel himself, God's own prophet in verse 19, joins in.

He calls on God in verses 19 and 20. He prays longingly for God to put things right. And that's an absolutely crucial truth. The whole people are called to repent and turn back because there is no one innocent before God.

And those are crucial truths for us. You know, repentance is turning our back on sins, regretting it, turning back to God instead. And in it we bring absolutely nothing to him when we come to him.

We cannot offer to make things up. We cannot offer to sort things out. We can just bring ourselves. And often that is done with great grief.

As the New Testament puts it, there is a godly grief that produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret. And repentance is for every single one of us, the most religious, not just the sinners.

[23 : 56] And even then, the most religious, the best of us, have absolutely nothing to offer to him, just as they didn't. And it's something that need never goes away.

As Martin Luther put it, when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, and to pause a moment, that was the very first thing he ever preached, he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.

So when we go out today, what do we remember from Joel 1? Well, pain is God's megaphone to wake a sleeping or perhaps a drunken world. It's there to waken us to the reality of the brokenness of this world and the sin in our hearts that underlies it.

And before we can look forward to the wonderful joy, the hope and the grace of the second half of Joel, we need to come to it through repentance, realizing the reality of sin in our own lives and turning our backs on it in sorrow.

One last thing before we finish. Joel tells people to wake up. When the Christian church, particularly in this country, in America, over the past centuries, has particularly come alive, has particularly turned back to God, the great revivals when many, many people have turned to God, there is a reason those times have been called awakenings.

[25 : 19] And there is a reason they have often begun with people simply weeping for their sin.

And not just people outside the church, but people inside the church suddenly broken by the realization, suddenly humbled by the realization of the depth of their sin and the depth of their need

for God's love and His grace.

That same thing is always open to us all to come back to Him, to realize its depth, and then to experience more of His grace, blessing, and power.

Let's pray. Lord God, only You can produce that repentance, only You can turn us back.

So I pray that You will speak to us through this word, that You will waken us up, give us a realization of our sin, and bring us to know You so that we can come to grace and to joy.

Amen. Amen. Amen.