

Return to Me

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[0 : 00] Well, a warm welcome this afternoon. It's good to see you all. I'm glad to see the rain held off for you to get here. Now, in a moment I will pray and then read the Bible. So let's ready our hearts in a brief moment to hear God's Word.

Lord, Almighty Father, we come, many of us, with very busy hearts and minds. So we ask that over the next few minutes you would refresh us, that you would strengthen us to serve you. We come now to hear the words of your prophet and to praise you. We ask that what that teaches may penetrate deep into our hearts, so it might wake us up, so that we might give ourselves completely to you. And that because you have chosen us to be gathered as your children under Jesus Christ, we might live under him until we come at last to your everlasting kingdom to enjoy rest forever. Amen.

Now, we're in the second week of our series on the book of Joel, the little book of Joel, which you'll find on page 761 of the Visitor's Bibles on the seats. Joel chapter 2, page 761.

Chapter 2, starting at verse 1. Blow a trumpet in Zion.

Nor will be again after them.

[2 : 39] Like a trumpet in Zion. Like a trumpet in Zion. Before them, people are in anguish. All faces grow pale.

Like warriors they charge. Like soldiers they scale the wall. They march, each on his way. They do not swerve from their paths. They do not jostle one another.

Each marches in his path. They burst through the weapons and they are not halted. They leap upon the city. They run upon the walls. They climb up into the houses. They enter through the windows like a thief.

The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened and the stars withdraw their shining. The Lord utters his voice before his army.

For his camp is exceedingly great. He who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the Lord is great and very awesome. Who can endure it?

[3 : 40] 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. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Consecrate a fast.

Call a solemn assembly. Gather the people. Consecrate the congregation. Assemble the elders. Gather the children, even nursing infants.

Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage or approach a byword among the nations.

[4 : 45] Why should they say among the peoples, where is their God? Then, the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

Now, this passage teaches us two great truths about God. The first is that he will not tolerate sin. Our selfishness, our self-centeredness. He will judge it. And the Bible doesn't play down this judgment in any way, but on the contrary, it paints it in the most vivid and terrifying terms. Because it is unendurable. And it is coming. And if we do not listen, we will face that judgment. And yet, at the same time, there is another truth.

That his mercy is unfathomably deep. That though we have nothing at all to offer him, if we throw ourselves on that mercy, he won't just rescue us from that judgment, but pour out his blessings on

us so that we might have joy and satisfaction in him eternally.

[5 : 56] Now, last week we saw how a plague of locusts came in the time of Joel and was for that people a reminder of God's coming judgment on their sin.

And that that plague of locusts was a call to them to repent, to turn back from the sins they'd been committing. And now we see Joel describe those locusts in vivid, technicolour detail and call the people again to repentance.

But he does it. He describes those locusts in a way that makes it very clear they really are a description at the same time of the coming judgment. So as we listen to Joel's description, we see a metaphorical description of what that coming judgment will be like.

And we'll see why hearing about it helps us rather than just terrifying us. Now, I hope that all of us will realize as we read and look at this that these words are to be heard by each and every one of us.

Whether we're not Christians and have never returned to God, or even if we are Christians, because we must remember, as Peter said in the New Testament, that judgment begins with the household of God.

[7 : 15] And as I quoted last week, the words of Martin Luther, when our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said repent, he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.

Now, we're going to look at this passage in three sections. Firstly, God's judgment is unendurable, one to 11. Secondly, God's mercy is unfathomable, 12 to 14.

And 15 to 18, simply that we are to throw ourselves on that mercy. So firstly, one to 11, God's judgment is unendurable.

The passage opens, doesn't it, with a trumpet call, an alarm call sounding from the city walls, because an enemy has been seen. War is coming. And the enemy that is coming seems to be the locusts that we heard about last week.

And here we will have a picture of those locusts, so vivid that there was one writer, at least, has called it the most accurate description of a locust plague that has come down from the ancient world.

[8 : 24] And yet, when we read it and look at the details, this seems to be the locusts, not as Joel and his people saw them with their eyes, but as they saw them in their nightmares in the months and years afterwards.

Let's look at this vision. Verse 1, Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is near.

Now, those who heard Joel knew what this meant. They knew what the day of the Lord was, the day of judgment, when God would have a reckoning with those who opposed him and also with those who opposed his people.

And here, as in many of the other prophets, it reminds God's people that they too will have to face God's judgment on that day. He doesn't say what sins they're going to face it for.

They knew that well enough, I think there have been many other prophets who had told them. Just as we, if we've read our New Testaments, will be very clear about our own sins if we read them honestly.

[9 : 32] As Jesus tells us that we must love our neighbor as ourself, love as Jesus loved and lay down our lives for our friends as he tells us that we must love God himself with all our heart and mind and strength because that's what we were made to do.

And of course, we know we've fallen far short of that. And it's with that backdrop that he goes on to describe this day of the Lord. So let's imagine ourselves standing on that wall of ancient Jerusalem, standing on those white walls and looking out, looking up to the horizon and seeing the darkness of the locusts spread against the mountainsides.

And the gloom and the thick darkness coming as those swarms of locusts come in, filling the whole sky, making it, verse 2, a day of thick darkness.

In the same way, on the day of the Lord, there will be spread like blackness in the mountains of great and powerful people. Their life has never been before, nor will it be again.

Through the years of all generations, nothing you see or think will ever prepare you for this. And just like the locusts came burning through the fields and grass like fire, leaving desolate wilderness behind them.

[10:46] So in this vision, fire burns before and after this army, consuming everything, leaving nothing but wilderness, all humankind's fields, all that it's built, left nothing but dust and ashes.

And they come on running like horses, with a noise of charging chariots, leaping across the tops of the mountains. And as the faces of the people on the wall pale when they see the locusts coming for the crops, whole peoples will be in anguish when they see this force coming like an army drawn up for battle.

And then they charge. They swarm over the walls like an unstoppable tide, marching straight ahead, bursting through the weapons lifted against them without even slowing.

They flow over the walls and up into the houses, through the windows, where nothing can keep them out. Is Joel describing locusts here?

He is. That's what it was like. But it's also like a nightmare, isn't it? An army rushing onwards like that.

[11:52] And then the earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The most reliable things in all of creation, verse 10, falter and fail. The sun and the moon are darkened and the stars withdraw their shining.

Nothing stands firm. And then you hear the voice. The voice of God himself at the head of his army. The Lord God utters his voice before his army, before his camp is exceedingly great. This is his army coming to deal with sin. This is how much God hates evil and sin.

You know, just in case we thought this was just ancient history, this is just a description of a locust plague long ago. God repeated his words to another prophet, his apostle John, the gentle apostle of love, who in Revelation 9 in the New Testament said that locusts at the end will come up out of the smoke and on the earth with stings in their tails like scorpions to punish the people of the earth. Locusts like horses prepared for battle with breastplates of iron and the noise of their wings like the noise of many chariots. You think this is picture language, isn't it?

[13:09] This is just picture language. And it is. There is no language that will ever portray the terror of the day of the Lord when he will finally come to wipe out evil.

And our only hope is that we do not face that judgment at all. The only hope for us, the only hope for our relatives and for those we know is that we are not there on that day.

Because verse 11, the day of the Lord is great and very awesome. Who can endure it?

And it's against that dark backdrop that we see the second great truth of this passage. Verses 12 to 14, God's mercy is unfathomable.

Now that may seem like a surprise after the first passage, but it is true, his grace, his mercy, his patience, his steadfast love are deeper than we can ever know. And that is why he's painted that picture of judgment.

[14:23] He wants to drive us angry rebels into his arms of love. For the same reason our government has sponsored anti-smoking adverts that 10 years later have burned into my mind pictures of what lung cancer does to your lungs.

It's better to have that burned into my mind than to have lung cancer myself. So in verse 11, we hear God's voice speaking. Verse 11, don't we? But what does he actually say?

Well, what does he say to the people? The first words we can understand here are these. Yet, even now, now, while you still can, now, before it is too late, now, before you are hardened, now, before judgment falls, even now, with judgment right at the door, even now, when you are so far away from me, even now, despite everything you have done, even now, though you think that I, God, could never accept you, even now, return to me.

Return. Come back to me. Return to me with all your heart, he says, not just with empty words, not with just rituals, but with all your heart. Return with fasting and weeping and mourning and show that your guilt is real, that you know you do deserve punishment, just as if you, today, hurt a friend or a relative really deeply, wound them.

You can't go to them with a smile on your face to say sorry, can you? You need to go in a way that shows your apology is real because you feel their pain, you feel the hurt you've done and he says, return to me with all your heart.

[16:15] Verse 13, 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.

Joel quotes one of the most ancient descriptions of God's character given to Moses after God's people had abandoned him long ago in Exodus 34. You know, if you come to him, you won't be

disappointed for he is a God who is gracious and merciful, he's slow to anger, he is abounding in steadfast love and he does relent over disaster.

He calls you to come and he will forgive you when you do. We might think, perhaps, that it's not for us, that we're too bad, that we deserve judgment, but no, he is gracious and merciful.

Not, of course, verse 14, that we can control him, that we can make him do what we want by repenting. Who knows whether he will not return and relent.

You can't presume on it if we don't really regret it. And we're trying just to manipulate him, then we will be disappointed. But if we really come, really repent, then he will turn and relent and not just forgive, but leave a blessing behind him, he says.

[17:40] For them, it was that they would have food and wine again for themselves and, as this verse says, so that they could offer offerings of thankfulness to him again. And it's the same for us, that we might have the joy of knowing Christ and the thankful heart that goes with that once again.

These verses say to us today, even now, return to me, because God's grace and his mercy are unfathomably deep.

And so, verses 15 to 18 are a call to action, to do that, to throw ourselves on God's mercy. Now, we hear that trumpet call again, but now we see not only that it is an alarm, but what that alarm is calling us to do.

Joel calls everyone to come and repent, call the solemn assembly, gather the people, consecrate the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, even the nursing infants, let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.

You know, the whole community is under threat from God's judgment, and so the whole community comes together to repent. Acknowledge your sin together, not just in the quietness of your soul or of your bedroom.

[18:50] And there's nothing more important to do. Are you just married? You're off on honeymoon? There's no reason to put this off, to be absent. There's no one who's exempt. Are you a tiny baby or a nursing mother?

Still, come, because there is nothing more important in all our lives than coming to him like this. We must not delay. We must not put other things first.

We must never say it's not the right time. It's always the time. And here, Joel calls the priests to come and to plead with God, plead with him to spare his people, verse 17, because God had appointed them long ago to bring the people's prayers to God on their behalf, to speak to the God who is too holy for them to approach.

And perhaps, having heard of the terror of his judgment in the first half, we might feel a little of why that's necessary. We might feel how it is that we can't really approach this God.

And of course, God has given us too a priest, Jesus Christ. John writes, if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And again, the New Testament tells us he is a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens, who offered himself to God without blemish to purify our consciences.

[20:13] So, let us draw near to God through him with a true heart, in full assurance, full confidence, that he will receive us.

Because we can be absolutely confident of the forgiveness of God if we come to him repenting of our sin through the priest he's given us. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Do you see what the result was when the people did that all those years ago in verse 18?

When they actually listened to what God said, when they listened to his words returned to me, verse 18, then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

He was jealous. He didn't want to see them hurt. He was jealous to see them comforted and helped once again. He had pity on them.

[21:09] He rescued them. They saw the coming judgment and its horror and they threw themselves on God's mercy. Let us do the same.

And if we do, we will experience the same thing that they did. That verse, verse 18, is the absolute turning point in this whole book. Last week, this week, we saw darkness, terror, judgment, fear, and the call to repentance.

repentance. Next week, it's a transformation. We see grace and kindness and love poured out on that people both then and with incredible promises for the future and it all hinges on that verse.

It all hinges on them coming to God, returning to him and him having pity on them. And it's the same for us. We come to him like that. It is a turning point in our lives like no other. we find for ourselves how rich and how deep and how unfathomable the mercy of the living God is. [22 : 15] He tells us of his judgment so that we could come and be forgiven and receive blessings that go far beyond, as we will see over the next two weeks, anything we could ever ask or imagine as we come to know the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Let's pray. Lord God, these are your words to us. Return to me.
And we pray that you will give us hearts that do return to you and always want to be with you and return to you.
Amen.