

Knowing God

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[0 : 00] Well, warm welcome to you all this afternoon. It's really good to see so many of you here today, and I hope you're enjoying the return to good weather after the rain this morning.

Now, we're about to continue in our little series in Joel, the little prophet in the Old Testament. We're on our third week of four, and we've had two weeks of darkness and judgment and fear. And here we turn to the other side of Joel, to joy and thankfulness and goodness and blessing. So I hope you will enjoy that, and you'll see why the darkness was necessary before we could come into the light.

But before we start, let's pray. Dear Father, you are a great God of unbelievable majesty, of power and of might, splendor and glory.

And yet, Lord, you forgive the sins of those who come to you. You sent your Son, your own Son, to die for us, so that we might live.

[1 : 18] And not just live, but live with you, knowing you, through your Spirit. So that now and always, we might be your children.

And we pray that just now, you will open our hearts. You will make our minds alert. Amen. So that over the next few moments, our eyes might be opened again to the depth of your committed love and your great kindness to us.

And that through that, we might be encouraged to live for you. Until the day we receive your great promises in the new heavens and the new earth.

Amen. Now, if you would turn with me to page 761 in our Bibles.

That's Jewel 2, starting at verse 18, and it's on page 761. Page 761, Jewel 2, starting at verse 18.

[2 : 37] Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. The Lord answered and said to his people, Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied.

I will no more make your reproach among the nations. I will remove the northerner far from you and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his vanguard into the eastern sea and his rearguard into the western sea.

The stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things. Fear not, O land, be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things.

Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green. The tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and the vine give their full yield. 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.

[3 : 47] 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.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, that I am the Lord your God and that there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Now the purpose of the passage we've just read is actually a very simple one.

It is to bring us to know God more deeply. If you look at verse 27, the result of everything in this passage is this, that you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I am the Lord your God and there is none else.

[4 : 57] So this passage is to help us know, that is really know, that God is with his people, that he is our God and that there is no God like him. We'll see next week, incidentally, that in a slightly different way, that is also the purpose of the next section in Joel.

If you look over to 3.17, you'll see a very similar verse, which says that all of this is so that you will know that I am the Lord your God. And as we get to these two sections, we discover that is what the whole book has been about.

We've had two weeks, as we've said, of hearing about judgment. First, a historical judgment, where God used a plague of locusts to bring his people to realize how far away from him they had gone. And secondly, a future judgment. A locust plague was a picture of that judgment to come, which they and we must repent to avoid. But now we're looking at God's kindness to that same people and his kindness to us.

Firstly, this week, the historical blessing, the way he put everything right for those people who had suffered. And next week, the future blessing, what they and we can look forward to together.

[6 : 12] And those two passages of judgment clear the way for and make possible these two passages of blessing so that people can come to know God.

Now, why was all this necessary? Why do we have to wait for those two weeks to get to this week? One of the strange things about jewels, I think I've mentioned, is that the people are called to repent of their sins, but it never once mentions what their sins actually are, which is quite strange when you think about it.

Most of the prophets will be quite, I'm almost going to say lurid, in the way they paint a strong, even frightening or repulsive picture of the evils of their time, whether that's violence and cruelty and swindling or idolatry or cruelty or lies, whatever it is, but not Joel.

And I suspect, although it's not 100% clear from the text, that the reason for that is quite simple.

This is a book, perhaps, from late on in Israel's history.

They've been away in an exile in Babylon, and when they got back, they didn't actually live in those ways that they'd lived before, of idolatry and child sacrifice and all the grotesque sins of their past.

[7 : 30] And in many ways, they lived quite decent and upstanding lives. But there was still a problem. They were very taken up with their farms and their houses and rebuilding their life in the land.

They were distracted, in other words. They wanted to make their lives comfortable and pleasant.

But they didn't really know God. They didn't really pay attention to him beyond lip service.

Their hearts belonged to their possessions and not to God. And so you can see in a moment why that might be relevant to us. You know, the modern church, modern Christians, face a great temptation, all of us, don't we, to be wrapped up in our homes and our cars, our jobs, our families.

And I know personally that certainly that is the great struggle of my Christian life. And I suspect it is for most of us in different ways.

But that materialism of our culture works its way into all our lives. And so often, so often, it is for us as it was for people in Joel's time.

[8 : 37] Suffering and struggle wake us up. They throw us on God in prayer and break us free from our obsessions to know him in a new and deeper way.

Now, back to the passage. Joel will show how, when God answers those prayers for help, he brings us to know him. So, three sections.

Firstly, in 18 to 20, God answers our prayers to bring us to know him. In 21 to 24, we see how rejoicing in God's answers to prayers brings us to know him.

And in 25 to 27, we see how God showers us with kindness again, so that we will help, we will come to know him. So firstly, 18 to 20, God answers our prayers to bring us to know him.

Now, last week, we saw how God's people repented. They prayed to him to give them back what they lost. And now, verse 19, God the Lord answered and said.

[9 : 43] He answered. This is a God who listens to and answers prayer. And he delights in caring for his repentant people. And his answer is in three quite simple parts. In verse 19, he sends them grain and wine and oil.

Their hunger is done. It is a thing of the past. He will supply all their needs and give them wine and oil to really enjoy, not just the basics, but pleasure as well. And he says more than that, you will be satisfied.

I think you'll agree that there are plenty of people with plenty in this world who are not satisfied. So I think that is an even bigger gift than what he has just said. And he will make them no more reproach among the nations, verse 19.

In other words, this was a people who felt deep shame. Now, we don't often feel this in the UK, I think. We're perhaps not the top nation, but we don't get really kicked around like those at the bottom, do we?

But these people have been laughed at. They've been held in contempt. The people around them were saying, this strange little people, they claim to worship the almighty God of the universe, and you can't even give them enough food to eat.

[10:56] What is this, people? And now God says, I will take that away. It will never be like that again. Instead, people will look and say, there's something special here. There's something different.

Is it something about the God they worship that makes this so good? And thirdly, God rescues them from the locust horde. They're very simple, straightforward answers to prayer, aren't they?

Verse 20. The way locust hordes often end their lives is by being swept by a strong wind into the sea where they drown. And they are washed up on beaches where historical accounts assure us they stink horribly.

There was apparently one locust horde in the time of Augustine, the early Christian writer, that smelt so bad that hundreds of thousands of people seem to have got plague as a result of the decaying locusts.

So, not exaggerating here. The verse is saying, everything that you have prayed for will be given.

[12:02] It perhaps says a little more as well. You see that the locusts here are described as the northerner. Slightly strange way to describe them. But, in the prophets in the Old Testament, the northerner is very often used as a description for peoples and armies particularly coming in judgment.

Often very violent, indeed evil, conquering armies. Think particularly of the Babylonians and the Assyrians whose brutality you can see if you ever go to the British Museum and see what they decorated their palaces with.

And the prophets say, out of the north, disaster will come. And the locusts too, they seem to have come from the north. And God is saying, not only the locusts, but all the forces of judgment, I will finish them.

And you will have peace at last. And so these people's prayers have been answered. And verse 27, it's for a very simple reason, as we've said. It is so that you will know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I am the Lord your God and there is none else.

You see, when their prayers are answered, they can see this God is real. This isn't just about ritual or about spiritual matters. This is a real concrete God who does concrete things in the real world.

[13:19] And they see too that this is a God who cares for them, who is with them, who is loving them. And that, of course, is the lesson for us.

It's very tempting with this passage to go to some spiritual meaning about the future and about Jesus. And, you know, that is in there. But, what it tells us is this.

When God answers our prayers, He answers our prayers so that we will know that He is there and that He is there for us. He wants you to know that He is real, that He is with you and that He cares for you and that He can do for you what no one else can do for you.

Now, perhaps you're able to turn your mind back to a prayer that He has answered for you in the past. I think, for example, just simply of God's kindness to my family over the past year as we've moved here.

And when you think about that answer, what does it tell you about the God who answered it? It's worth remembering that God commands us to pray to Him for this very reason.

[14:28] Psalm 50 says, call on me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you and you will glorify me. We very easily think, don't we, that we're being more spiritual by praying primarily for others or mainly for spiritual things or growth in holiness or very inward things, all of which are very, very important and should be prayed for.

But God says, bring your troubles to me. He commands that. And why? This passage shows us because when we see Him rescue us from those troubles, we see He is a great God who loves us and cares for us and is there for us.

He grows our faith in Him through it. Now, to finish this point, this first point, I want to just tell you of someone in a church I was in previously.

There was someone in that church who was an academic from a university who became a Christian. and their wife, who was also an academic, I think an expert in statistics and mathematics, a very hard-headed person in some ways, began to write down all her husband's prayers in a little notebook.

And he asked, why are you doing this? Why are you writing down all my prayers? And she said, well, it's very simple. In a year's time, I'm going to show you this notebook. I'm going to go through the prayers one by one.

[16:03] And I'm going to show you that no more of these prayers have been answered than you just expect by random chance. And you will see that your faith is futile and rather pointless.

It's wishful thinking. And so she kept writing it all year. And at the end of the year, she looked through her little notebook and she said to her husband, I want to become a Christian.

And he asked why. And she told him how she'd looked through the list of prayers and what had happened after he'd prayed those prayers. She thought, there isn't any sensible statistical explanation for what has happened.

Something real had happened. God was answering her husband's prayers. And so she became a Christian. She came to know God through seeing prayer answered.

And if prayer works like that, and it does, then surely we must be people who pray gladly and hungrily. Not out of guilt, not out of fear, but because we have a God who delights to answer us.

[17:11] And not just to answer us in the moment, but who answers us so that we can come to know him and to experience a growing trust and intimacy and confidence in the God who loves us.

Now, secondly, more briefly, verses 21 to 24, rejoicing in God's answers to prayer also brings us to know him.

The second section here, 21 to 24, is, I think, a song. It's the prophet's joyful song. He's giving an example to the people of how they're to respond to the wonderful answers to prayer they've had.

You see how Joel calls the land itself in verse 21 to rejoice in the great rescue that he's given.

He calls the land and the animals to put away their fear and to be confident again because the pastures are green, the trees are bearing figs, the vines are putting out their grapes again.

[18:17] And there's a lot we could say here about the relationship between the world and people and what that means in God's plans for, first of all, his Old Testament people and then for the far future.

But the focus here is simple. Just see, they are to rejoice gladly, wholeheartedly. He calls the children of Zion, that is, the people of God who at that time worshipped God in his temple at Jerusalem, that is, in old-fashioned language, Zion.

He called them to rejoice because God has answered their prayers, God has rescued them. He sent the early rain to help the seeds sprout and the late rain to help the seed and the fruit to grow. Just like the rain at the moment is helping my gooseberries to come on very nicely. He's rescued them. And they're to rejoice in the very simple delights of threshing floors full of grain, their vats full of wine and oil.

God has given them what they needed in great plenty and they are to rejoice in it. They're just simple good things that God has given them in life and they are to be pleased and happy about it.

[19:31] But again, this is for a very simple reason. It's so that you will know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I am the Lord your God. You know, they've just had their prayers answered. It can't be business as usual.

They can't just carry on as if nothing has happened. They need to come and take joy in what God has done to remember it, to praise Him for it and to know and feel that God is with them.

Because it isn't enough just of a prayer answered, is it? If you're going to grow in knowledge of God.

You need to think about it. You need to ponder it. You need to praise God for His goodness to you.

And it's while you do that, you really grow in that awareness of His steadfast love and care for you.

and so to know Him as He really is. And so just to build on what we said in the last point, as well as praying, we need to be remembering the answers to prayer that we receive.

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure I've had an awful lot of answers to prayer in life, which I have thoroughly forgotten. You know, I thought they were wonderful at the time. I maybe even told other people about them.

[20:38] And it's one of the great regrets of my life. I haven't been writing them down for years because they've just slipped my mind. We human beings are marvelous at remembering things that

go wrong. We're really good at recalling those regrets we have in life, aren't we?

But things that went right, they have a tendency to slip our minds over the decades. So, I've made a resolve to start writing them down, I think, and thanking God for them and praising Him for them. Because again, through that praise, we come to know this God more deeply. Thirdly, in 25 to 27, God showers us with kindness so that we will know Him.

You know, Joel seems to be praising God for His great kindness, and then God breaks in. He almost interrupts, it seems, in verse 25. Suddenly, we change speakers.

Because God has not finished pouring good things out on them. He's answered all their prayers. He's done everything they asked. But now He says, I will restore to you all the years that the swarming locust has eaten.

[21 : 49] And if we think back for a moment to what it was like for those people then, they've had years of drought. They've had locusts taking from them the results of years and years, perhaps decades, of toil on their farms and their gardens.

And for them, those years of hunger would seem to be lost years, wouldn't they? Dark years, when everything good in life was on hold. Like someone building a career who's made redundant and can't even get back into the same industry ever again.

And God says, I'm not just going to make things better again. I'm going to make up every loss with greater blessing.

The years the locusts have eaten, I will give them back to you. No wonder, verse 26, they are going to praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you.

And this is our God too, isn't it? This is the God who Ephesians tells us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think.

[22 : 58] And there is a promise not unlike this promise in the New Testament too. In Revelation 21, God says, he will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there shall be mourning, nor crying, or pain anymore.

Now, I think most of us think that's a great verse. But at the same time, we tend to think mainly that it means that there will be no more pain once we get there.

We forget it also means he will wipe away the tears of our regrets and losses. And we all have them, don't we? We all have years in the sense that the locusts have eaten, whether it's regrets about what we have done with our lives or our past sins or addictions or troubles.

And all the mistakes we have made in our lives, there are many of them. And perhaps regrets as they had regrets about what God has had to do to bring us back to him.

[24 : 08] There are many things that make us look back and feel nostalgic and bitter and long for a chance to do things over. And God says, no, I will make every bit of it up to you.

You might not be able to see any way that I can make it up for you. And perhaps in this life that's not possible. But in the next, though we cannot see how he will do it, he will do it.

He will make up every year that the locusts have eaten. And we will have no regret ever again. That is the kind of God we have. A God who showers us with kindness far beyond what we can imagine, far beyond the simple solving of our problems.

To make life once more what it was always meant to be and that life with him. so as we leave now, perhaps over the last couple of weeks we have been reminded of pains and sufferings that have brought us to remind us of our sins.

Perhaps it will in the future as it did for them. but our God makes up that and a thousand times more. And when we come back to him, he makes us in a way that is overwhelming so that we can know that he is a God who is genuinely with us, who is ours, who loves us with a deep love, who will never let us be put to shame again, and who will comfort us and know us and love us forever.

[25 : 59] Let's pray. Lord God, it is hard for us to absorb the depths of your kindness and love.

But we pray that over the coming weeks and days that we will pray and that you will answer and that in those answers we will be able to rejoice and to see your great love and kindness for us and that you are a God who is there for us.

Amen. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.