

The First Light of Dawn on the Day of the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to read this morning in our Bibles, and we're taking a little break from Ecclesiastes this week. We're back to the prophet Joel, and David Ely has been preaching on Joel a couple of times recently, and we're getting now to the second half of the prophecy, and we're going to read this morning in Joel chapter 2.

Joel is a little prophet stuck between Hosea and Amos, so if you find one of those, go before Amos and go after Hosea, and you'll find Joel towards the end of the Old Testament.

And we're coming to Joel chapter 2 and verse 18. And you'll remember that some weeks ago when David looked at the first part of chapter 2, it was a very grim message indeed.

In fact, most of the first half of the book is a very grim warning of judgment. Locust swarms, destructive armies coming from the skies, as it were, as a blight upon God's people and upon his land.

But here at verse 18 of chapter 2, we read of the great mercy and pity of God for his people. Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

[1 : 2 6] The Lord answered and said to his people, Behold, I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied.

And I will no more make your approach 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.

[2 : 4 1] 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, and that I am the Lord your God, and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

Even on the male and female servants in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.

[3 : 56] The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

For in Mount Zion and Jerusalem, there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said. And among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, good morning to you all.

It is a joy to be back with you once again. Let's turn back to this passage from Joel chapter 2. Now, it's been a little while since we were last in the book of Joel.

So just as we begin, a few words of recap, just as we get started. Judah, God's chosen people, have been drowning in locusts.

[5 : 08] A massive swarm has swept in and it's eaten everything and left them entirely desolate. And out of the midst of that storm, the word of God has come to them through the prophet Joel.

And his headline message so far in this book has been this. Judah, your labor bears no fruit. Your joy has been drained away. Worship has fallen silent.

And all of that has come from the hand of God. Judah, your God has moved against you. Now, that is a stark message for the group of people who are God's people.

In the first part of the book of Joel, Joel charged us to look around at our families, at our churches, at our nation, and to look and take note.

Has fruitfulness withered? Has joy disappeared? Has worship been silenced? And if it has, to dare to ask the question, has God moved against us in judgment?

[6 : 25] Yet, even at the last hour, there is hope for Judah in the book of Joel. Because the true God is not like the idols of the world around them.

He isn't capricious. He isn't volatile. Instead, he is slow to anger. He is abounding in steadfast love and mercy. And so, in the first part of chapter 2, Judah was summoned to repent, to turn back to him, to examine their ways, and to come and call on the Lord for mercy, hoping, confident that he would give it if they came humbly.

And we were left with this wonderful little historical note there in verse 18. The Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

They repented. They turned back to him and God relented and had mercy. And so, when we last left this book, we had that same charge.

If we look around and see that the Lord has judged, well, there is one thing to do, one path to take, repent.

[7 : 49] Now, at this point, it's perhaps easy to feel quite powerless. after all, we are not in charge of nations. We are a small people, really, in a very wide world.

So, what can we do? And yet, each of us has been given something. Each of us has been given some arena for faithfulness, leadership of a family, perhaps, different roles in society, various responsibilities within a church.

If nothing else, at the very least, we have the arena of our own personal affairs and the friendships we have. Each of us has been given something. And in this passage today, we see what repentance in each of these small arenas becomes when we place that, small as it may seem to each of us, into the hands of a God who is abounding in steadfast love and mercy.

In this passage, we see how meager-looking repentance becomes the seeds of a rich and wide harvest of blessing given by the Lord of every good gift.

A harvest of blessing for Judah in Joel's day as the first dim light of the day of the Lord plays on the horizon in the dark. A harvest of blessing for us now, now that the sun has risen and the day of the Lord has dawned.

[9 : 19] And most fully of all, a harvest in the future when the day of the Lord breaks into full light and the sun is seen in every sin-darkened crevice of this world.

So we're going to look at the blessings of this chapter in three parts. Firstly, the foundation of life is restored. Secondly, fruitfulness is restored.

And thirdly, joy is restored. So let's look at the first of these together. Firstly, the foundation of life is restored. The foundation of the good life, the crown of glory on its head is worshipping the true God.

It is having God with us. It is living in his presence. To use the Bible's image, living water flows from the presence of God, from where God is, and it flows out, bringing life to everything it touches.

And so in chapter one, when the worship in the temple, when the offerings dried up, when the worshipping lips of the people of God fell silent, well, that was one of the key signs of God's judgment.

[10 : 38] When that happened, it ought to have been to Judah like a fire alarm going off, a red flashing light. something is not right. The priests and the ministers of the temple mourned because they could see firsthand this rot in the foundations.

They could see that this life-giving relationship between God and his people was at the very least strained. But now God has granted Judah repentance and they've turned back to him.

And so God has relented. He was marching at the head of an army to destroy them. But now he's turned around. And now when he comes to Israel, he's coming to bless them, coming to be with them again.

Instead of leaving them in the dust, God is returning. Look at verse 27. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I am the Lord your God and there is none else.

Life pre-repentance and post-repentance for Judah are going to look starkly different. Before repentance, Judah was like a limp, wilted houseplant after you've been away for a month.

[11 : 58] After repentance, after God returns, there will be life coursing through them again because the life-giver lives with them again. And there will be no doubt, not for anyone, the people surrounding Judah will look at them and see it is obvious that the true God lives with them.

And the gods, the idols, these things that have held so much sway will fall away into complete insignificance because when God is with his people, it is clear there is no one else.

look at both verse 26 and 27. Repeated twice there, God will wipe away the shame of Judah.

The destitution left by the locust plague sweeping through was a visible version of the sin of Judah. They were a laughing stock in the eyes of the world around them because they claimed to be something and yet they lived with bankruptcy.

They claimed to be and should have been the holy people of God and yet they lived in the squalor of their sin. They were rolling in the filth. But God is coming back to his people and so he will put their shame away forever.

[13 : 22] They're not going to be the laughing stock of the world anymore. He will dignify them beyond anything that they ever deserve by being with them. And as the dim light of the day of the Lord plays in the skies on Joel's day here, there is a hint of something more, of something more exhaustive, something more complete, a complete washing, a full, final cleansing from shame that can never be undone.

Forgiveness for what they've done, yes, definitely that. But more than that as well. God has returned to his people and so, in verse 26, their voices are raised in worship.

They know their God again and so they declare how excellent he is. They declare that to him. they say, oh Lord, you have done wonders. You've done amazing things.

They tell each other, have you seen things like this that the Lord has done? Things that the Lord has done for us? And as they worship like that, the rest of the world looks on, the rest of the world sees, and those that hate the Lord tremble because it is obvious that Judah's Lord is God and there is no one else.

Judah has repented and so God restores the foundation of life. Now, when we read blessings like this in the Old Testament, particularly in the Old Testament prophets, we sometimes find it quite difficult.

[14 : 58] And I think this is the question that we find the hardest. What do we make of them today? We read these blessings. How do they apply to us, people who are not in Judah, in Joel's day?

Perhaps this is what we tend to do. This is one of the solutions that people tend to do. They tend to take all of these blessings and then they shift them all to the very end of time. They take them all and they put them there to the final day of the Lord, to the great day when Jesus returns, when he sorts everything out, when he brings blessing.

Part of the reason we do that, I think, is because the spectre of a prosperity gospel looms over us. It looms large in our minds and rightly so. So we prefer to lift passages like this one and put it wholesale, out of reach, where no one in their creative use of the Bible can grab it and use it to hit anyone over the head with.

So we say or we assume things like in the Old Testament, when we read these things, God blessed his people in visible ways in history, but now Jesus has come, things have changed, and everything has been sort of shunted up into an invisible realm somewhere or shunted inwards into our hearts, so he blesses us in our hearts.

We can take these and we can move them into a spiritual place or move them into our hearts. Now, of course, things have changed in many wonderful ways now that Jesus has come, and we'll touch on that again later.

[16 : 26] But last month when we were looking at Joel chapter 1, I tried and I hope I succeeded in persuading you that the pattern of judgment that we saw there from the Old Testament, judgment in history, on nations, on churches, on families, on all sorts of groups of people has not disappeared.

I tried to persuade you that Jesus is Lord and that he is Lord of this world, the world that we live in, and that he is the Lord of history, the history that we live through, that we see unfolding around us.

And one of the kingly things that he does as Lord of the universe, as history unfolds in his hands, is judge. Well, what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

Another of the kingly things that Jesus does as history unfolds in his hands, as king of the universe, is to bless his people. We find sometimes it's easier to just go around the difficult terrain in these passages in the Bible rather than to pick a careful course through them.

But if we do that, we are also ignoring parts of the word of God. Here in this passage, Judah has repented. And in the hands of God, that has been transformed into a harvest of blessing, a foretaste of the great and final day of the Lord, just as those judgments in the first two chapters were a foretaste of that day as well.

[17 : 56] And so if we repent, if our churches repent, if our nations repent, what blessings might the Lord leave in his path for us today? If we offer up our repentance, small as it might seem, well, who knows?

Perhaps God will draw near to us again, renew our worship again, remove our shame again, as he did for Judah. What might that look like?

Well, it might look like all sorts of things in all sorts of different areas of life. For one example, if you have never been a Christian before, for example, then this blessing will look like you becoming a Christian, finding forgiveness, finding new life as you trust in Jesus and have that relationship restored.

But what about when we think broader? How about when we think of the churches, perhaps in the UK, the ones that we're part of? What might it look like if the Lord turned and blessed us again, if we repented and he blessed us?

Well, for a long time now, the church in this country, the worship of this country, has been sort of limping along. At its best, it's been a few lone voices trying to be commendably faithful as they stand, beleaguered, but they stand, and we praise God for that.

[19 : 21] But in many places, the worship of the church has become people simply trying to soothe the brow of a world that hates Christ. And at its worst, the church's worship simply repeats the lies that the devil whispers into its mouth.

And of course, for the last 18 months, the worship of the limping church has fallen silent in many places. Well, imagine how wonderful it would be if the church's worship was made potent again in the hands of our Lord.

How wonderful it would be if the Lord blessed us with that. If the church meeting together became a trumpet blast that rang throughout this country every week. A noise that summoned the world to repentance.

A noise declaring that the day of the Lord's favor is here. A noise that offers freedom from sin to a world that has been made completely bankrupt by it.

Offering joy and fruitfulness to those who are dead. Perhaps that sounds abstract. Let's put that in concrete terms. If the Lord restored our worship like that, if we repented and he blessed us in that way, well, that would mean many of those that you love coming to know Jesus Christ.

[20 : 42] seeing that there is no one else. That everything else they put their trust in is worthless. And that the Lord, the real Lord really does dwell with Christians.

And that they have the message of life. Well, if we turn and repent from a true heart with whatever has been given to us, who knows?

Perhaps the Lord will turn and leave blessing in his path. And perhaps this will happen. When Judah repented, the Lord restored the foundation of life and he restored the worship of his people.

And with that foundation restored, let's move on to the next of the big blessings in this passage. Secondly, fruitfulness is restored.

restored. From the beginning to the end of the Bible, a key part of being human is being fruitful. Right at the start, God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, to take dominion over the world.

[21 : 50] Taking dominion so that under their hands, the world would also be fruitful to the glory of God. When humanity fell, this was a key part of the curse placed on them.

Fruitfulness would come reluctantly, would come with pain and toil. And so throughout the Bible, when things are going well, this image is to some extent restored.

And when things are not going well, the reality of this curse, it bleeds through. And that's what we saw in the first chapter of Joel. Fruitfulness was stripped away, quite literally stripped away by locusts as they swept through and devoured crops and splintered the trees and destroyed vines.

Remember, judgment left the farmers shamed because their labors had been poured into the ground and had come to nothing. They had poured themselves out for no fruit at all.

And that is a fundamentally sort of subhuman fate in the Bible. Toil with nothing to show for it. It is a sign of the created order being out of kilter.

[23 : 04] But God has granted Judah repentance. And so he is coming to be back with his people. And as the living water flows from his presence again, barrenness is going to be pushed back and fruitfulness returns to the people of God.

The first step in that is this. God removes the destroyers. Look at verse 20. The northerner here in verse 20 is that locust swarm that was on the way.

God had mustered his forces against them and he was marching at the head of this locust army and giving orders that no locust dare disobey. But now God now Judah has repented.

And so everything has changed. God no longer marches with the enemy. He is now the lone champion who stands against them. The Lord here goes out to war against his enemies.

And so these locusts are swept into the desert and there they will starve. The vanguard of this locust swarm, that's the front of it, will be swept into the eastern sea, perhaps the dead sea.

[24 : 20] And the back of the swarm, the rear guard, is going to be swept into the western sea, that is the Mediterranean. And the Lord's defeat of this army will be so complete that the stench of their shame will rise up from the shores as millions of rotting locust corpses wash up on the beach.

I hope you're not squeamish about the fate of locusts. The Bible isn't. The locusts will not ruin the fruit anymore. Judah will set out to work in the land that God has given them and will reap the harvest.

These enemies have done terrible and wondrous things. Awesome and mighty deeds of destruction. But their time is over. And now it's God's turn to do even more wondrous things.

Notice the comparison in verse 20 and 21 there. The locusts have done great things.

And then verse 21, but the Lord, he has done great things as well. And it's his turn. And so look at the progression there in verses 21 to 23 as blessing rushes back into the land.

[25 : 39] It's like it's like in spring when the sap starts running through the trees again and suddenly everything bursts into life. Everything that was barren and looked dead is alive again.

Fear not, O land, be glad and rejoice. Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green. The tree bears its fruit. Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice, for God will give you all the rains that you need.

The early rain, the late rain, the whole season of rain. You might struggle to see rain as such a blessing here in Glasgow, but it is. And so in verse 24, the threshing floor shall be full of grain.

The vats shall overflow with wine and oil. Judah repented. God has turned his face towards them. Life has returned. And so they will see the fruit of their hands.

If we repent, what blessing might the Lord leave in his path? Well, this fruitless to fruitful pattern is all over the New Testament.

[26 : 51] In Ephesians, Paul describes the deeds of the world around us as the fruitless deeds of darkness. And these are the things that we have been taken out of, out of fruitlessness to fruitfulness.

Jesus himself tells us that if we abide in him, we will bear good fruit and more so as the father prunes. And so if we repent, who knows?

Perhaps the Lord will bring us this blessing and restore our fruitfulness. What might that look like for us today? Well, again, it could look like different things in all sorts of areas of life.

Perhaps the Lord will bless our evangelism. There will be many new Christians. Perhaps the Lord would mature believers everywhere as his word goes out and bears fruit, leading them in the good works that he has prepared for his people.

But how might it look in the families of our nation? If our nation was to turn and repent, to call on the Lord for mercy, to repent of their sins.

[27 : 56] If God was to turn then and bless and redeem us out of fruitless deeds of darkness, what might the families of this nation look like? Well, for a start, there would be many more actual families as people repented of sex outside of marriage and committed to use God's gift to build something instead, to bear fruit.

And on top of that, on the whole, there may well be many more children as God granted repentance from abortion. From homosexuality, from things that are by nature fruitless.

Many of us will have heard people say recently, perhaps in your office or on social media, that the best thing we can do right now for the planet, for example, is to have no children.

Well, if God grants us repentance and brings us this blessing, restoring our fruitfulness, then perhaps he would overthrow this dark attitude of fruitlessness.

And on top of that, perhaps these children would not simply be alive, but would be faithful. Children who stand with their parents in the kingdom of God. If we repent with what we have, who knows?

[29 : 14] Perhaps the Lord will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers again. Our God is the giver of every good gift and he abounds in steadfast love and mercy.

What blessing might he leave in his path if we turn to him again? Who knows? Maybe generation after generation of faithful children. Now, this fruitfulness pushes into every corner of life as the image of God is restored in the repentant man.

Not perfectly yet, not fully yet, but to some extent, the light of the great day of the Lord that is in the future shines on us even now as we walk with Christ.

When Judah repented, the Lord restored their fruitfulness. And that brings us to the final of the big three blessings in this passage. Thirdly, joy is restored.

One of the key signs of God's judgment in chapter one was that joy had drained away from the people of God. Everything that made human life more than mere existence was gone.

[30 : 28] Wine and oil gone. Life had become like trying to drink from a glass with a hole in it. Unsatisfying. Mere survival.

What they used to have was gone. And what they still had? Well, it left a bitter taste in their mouth. They were not satisfied with it. But God has granted Judah repentance.

And so he's relented. And now joy is back. Verse 19. God will return the grain, the wine and the oil.

And all of that comes with another gift. Satisfaction. And verse 24. The vats will overflow with wine and oil. Remember, those two are signs of gladness, of celebration.

And throughout this whole section repeated. Fear not. Be glad. Fear not. Be glad. Rejoice. Verse 26.

[31 : 30] They will feast in plenty. For the time for mourning is over. Not only will they have all that they need. They will enjoy it. Enjoy it with no shadow of guilt.

No shame. No fear hanging over them. For the Lord is with them again. And has taken their shame away. And their enemies are rotting in the sea.

And so they will be content. When God's face is turned towards his people, he doesn't simply give them gifts. He gives them the ability to enjoy his gifts.

Now we tend to despise the gift of contentment a little bit. It seems a little bit like it's the gift for settling for less than best.

But godly contentment is no lesser blessing. It is one of the great blessings that God could give us. It is not the blessing of settling for mediocre.

[32 : 30] It is the blessing of enjoying the things that are in front of you. It is the blessing of having great pleasure in what God has given you. To enjoy your marriage. Imperfect.

As it might be. And I'm sure it is. The blessing to enjoy your work. Even though it might be very dull most of the time. Contentment is not the blessing of being able to grit your teeth.

And get through the mediocrity. It is the blessing of seeing how extraordinarily wonderful. The gifts of God are. Even the mundane ones. And really enjoying them.

Now when we refuse to repent. When we separate ourselves in rebellion from God. This eludes us. All the gladness of the sons of man drains away.

But who knows. If we humbly repent. In whatever small sphere is open to us. Well who knows. Perhaps this blessing will be added to us as well.

[33 : 29] Joy. Joy. The ability to enjoy the goodness of our father. The one who gives us every good gift to enjoy. Judah has repented.

The foundation has been restored. Fruitfulness has been restored. Joy has been restored. In the hands of God. Repentance has reaped a harvest of blessing.

It's all summed up quite catchily there in verse 25. Perhaps one of the more well-known verses from the book of Joel. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten.

The hopper. The destroyer. And the cutter. It's not only grain, wine, oil, fruit that these locusts have destroyed. They've destroyed. They've destroyed the most finite of resources.

Time. That they'll never get back. Years have been wasted. Years that could have been joyful. Years that could have been fruitful. But were instead spent in rebellion.

[34 : 29] And so have been devoured. Disappeared. Into the bellies of these infesting insects. Yet now all of that is going to be reversed. Perhaps your life has many years that have been eaten by the locust.

Years wasted in rebellion. Wasted far from God. Perhaps you look at the years of your life that you'll never get back. And you see fruitlessness. And you see joylessness.

Well, turn to the Lord. For the first time, perhaps. Or turn back to the Lord. And repent. For he is the Lord who can and who will in due time.

Restore all the years that the locust has eaten. Now these blessings are amazing. They're wonderful to read about.

They display the staggering kindness of our covenant Lord. And yet they are not all. There's more. In Joel's day, the first light of dawn brightens the horizon.

[35 : 38] But it is clear that in time, the sun itself will rise. And the closing movement of Joel's prophecy from here to the end of the book. That is where our eyes turn.

To the great glorious day of the Lord. Verse 28. So far in Joel, the Lord has poured out wine and oil.

He's poured out the early rains and the late rains. Well, one day. He will pour out himself on all flesh.

That is, God will be with his people in a way that he has never been before. Earlier, we saw that hint of something greater coming. A day when the shame of God's people would be removed forever and have no chance of returning.

Well, this is that promise. The day when God sets his words in the heart of all of his people. Men, women, young and old. And not just the Jews. But when all people are invited to call on the name of the Lord.

[36 : 49] And to be saved. That's what this language of prophecy and visions and dreams is all about. It's about the renewal, the restoration of God's people. So that they will become the holy nation that they were always destined to be.

Living by the words of God. In many ways, it is the blessings we've seen in the rest of the chapter bursting into bloom. It is the time when the sun has risen on the day of the Lord.

And the light of a new age spreads further and further across a sin darkened world. Now for Joel, the dawn of the day of the Lord is still in the future.

But for us. Where we stand today. The dawn has come. The sun has risen. Jesus Christ has risen.

And he has ascended. And he has poured out his spirit. And so the apostle Peter on the morning of Pentecost. Filled with this spirit of God. Took these words from Joel.

[37 : 52] And proclaimed to people. From far and wide. That this day is here. That God is pleased to save all who call on his name. That all those who call on him.

All those who have been purchased with the spotless blood of his son. He is pleased to bless. He is pleased to restore the foundation of life.

He is pleased to restore fruitfulness. He is pleased to restore joy. And he is pleased to make man what he was meant to be once more. The sun has risen.

And yet as we move on. Into the final section of the book of Joel. We lift our eyes up. Yet again. Beyond the dawn of the day of the Lord that we live in. Joel pushes us to look onwards.

Even further. Onwards. To the full light of day. To the time when our meager looking repentance. In whatever arena we have been given.

[38 : 55] Is transformed into the full harvest. Of blessing. To the day when we see the Lord face to face. When he returns.

When the radiance of the sun shines on all people. When every seed that has been planted in suffering. Is raised in glory. The day when the glory of the Lord covers the earth.

As the waters cover the sea. When the abundant fruit. Of the tree of life. Bursts. From the bud. And its leaves heal the nations. The day when Christ returns.

And fulfills everything. So looking forward to that day. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father.

We thank you for these wonderful words. That speak so clearly of your kindness to us.
Father we pray that you will help us to repent.

[40 : 03] And turn to you. Knowing that you are a God of steadfast love and mercy. And knowing that you are pleased to bless your people. As a father who loves us.

And Lord as we go about our lives. As we live in this dawn. Of your day. Please help us to look forward always.

To the day when the full light of dawn comes. When we see Jesus Christ face to face. And we experience your blessing fully.

Forever. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.