



Rend Your Hearts (Joel 2:1-17)

Lesson 6

Imagine how terrified you would be if an army of super robots came and attacked your city. They ran faster than any human possibly could. They had pinpoint accuracy with a gun from a mile out. They could clear tall buildings with a single leap. These types of doomsday scenarios are typically the stuff of science fiction books and movies. But in Joel 2 God paints a similar doomsday scenario, using poetic language to describe a foreign army of cosmic proportions charging the people of Judah. They can leap on top of mountains. You can hit them with weapons and they don't flinch. They are like a giant fire: before them the land is lush and fruitful and after them it's the Sahara Desert. Joel builds on the imagery of locusts from chapter one to describe a human army that looks like a coming locust swarm to ravage the land.

But it's not too late! God follows up this terrifying warning with an offer, the offer of repentance. The situation is not hopeless, true heartfelt repentance can potentially turn away this disaster. God is looking for his people to respond as the people of Nineveh did when they received a similar warning: "But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn

and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" (3:8-9)

Why do you think it was that Nineveh repented of their sins, while Israel and Judah were warned over and over and yet were hardened to the prophets?

I. God warns of the coming army (2:1-11)

In chapter one, the verbs we find are all past tense. They describe a devastating locust plague that has picked the country clean. Now, the verbs are future tense; something else is coming. Joel uses the picture of another locust invasion as a metaphor for a coming army that is great and terrible.

A. The call to fear the coming Day of the Lord (2:1-2a)

Here God calls the city to blow the *shophar*, an ancient horn that served as the siren of the day warning that an attack was coming. This was not just any attack, however, it was the Day of the Lord and it was near. As Joel would mention near the end of this chapter, the coming army was actually God's army. Even though this is likely a reference to Assyria or Babylon, Joel sees such forces as ultimately carrying out God's will.

How is it that God can use a wicked army to bring about justice? (See Habakkuk and Isaiah 10)

B. The description of the coming army (2:2b-9)

How does Joel describe this army? What kinds of images do these descriptions paint in your mind?

Many of these descriptions of this army sound a lot like locusts. They are climbing in windows, jumping up on

city walls, and climbing in through the windows. Their destruction is devastating, with lush green spread out before them a barren wasteland behind them. The point here is that this army will bring ruin just like the locusts did, only this time far worse?

How does sin wreak havoc in modern America? In the church? In our own lives?

C. The description of the coming Day of the Lord (10-11)

This section began with a dark description of the Day of the Lord, and then it focused in on the army that God would be sending. After describing them using powerful images for several verses, Joel once again zooms out and describes the total impact of the Day of the Lord. He ties this army and everything else that will come when they bring their destruction as being the work of the Lord. “Who can [endure] it [the Day of the Lord]?” he asks at the end of this section. After the terrifying descriptions, the answer is obvious: no one.

II. God gives the opportunity to repent (2:12-17)

A severe punishment was coming the way of God’s people. But with God’s warnings of judgment come appeals for repentance. Jonah brought a message of nothing but judgment, yet even the ungodly Assyrians figured out that if God was warning them of the coming judgment, maybe that was a chance to get things right. Similarly, God’s warning of this impressive and terrifying enemy that was coming the way of Judah included with it an offer to repent. Because the date of Joel is so hard to pin down, it’s tough to know whether or not the nation did repent and avert disaster for

at least a little longer. In the end, however, the real question is not “Did they repent?” The question is will we?

A. The call for repentance – the offer of God (2:12-13a)

God here asks for repentance, and not just an impressive display of emotion. It would be common for penitence to be demonstrated in these ancient cultures by tearing their clothes and putting on clothes made of rougher material called sackcloth. This isn't necessarily wrong, but God wanted more. He wanted repentance that went down to the level of the heart, and that went deeper than an impressive display of emotion.

What might it look like to merely put on a display of repentance for others (and even God)?

What is the difference between an impressive show designed to impress God and true, genuine, heart repentance?

B. The basis for repentance – the character of God (2:13b-14)

Repentance can be scary. Often we picture God as a mean ogre with a giant stick ready to wallop anyone who goes astray when they come back to him. It's little wonder people want to return to such a god. Embedded in this call to repentance is a reminder of the kind of God the people were repenting to. Here we find a beautiful description of the character of God, likely based off of God's self-declaration of his character to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7.

Although it would be worth taking a whole lesson and exploring each of these characteristics in detail, as a general overview what picture of God does this passage give?

How does meditating on God's character and his kindness encourage repentance?

How do we reconcile a God merciful, kind, compassionate God with the description of oncoming devastation in the first part of this chapter?

There is a beautiful wordplay going on here. Joel calls on the people to “turn” or “return” (Hebrew *shub*) to God (2:12-13). If they do, his response is to “turn” (*shub*) to them (2:14). Much like James, Joel is reminding us that when we draw near to God, he draws near to us (James 4:8), or, as one popular speaker put it: “You can be as close to God as you want to be.”

If we can truly be as close to God as we want to be, what keeps us from repenting and getting closer to God?

Joel asks who can know if God will turn from the disaster he was going to bring (KJV “repent of the evil”) and instead leave a blessing. The end result of this blessing is that the proper worship can resume. God takes the initiative to restore the relationship that has been broken because of the people’s sins.

C. The urgency of repentance – the importance of God (2:15-16)

When is the best time to repent? Right now! After depicting the coming horror and the gracious God who offers a chance to repent, Joel pleads for this to become the top national priority. He calls on the people to give up whatever they are doing and join a national repentance. He wants to make sure that even the very youngest are brought – the nursing infants all the way up to the elders. He calls on those who would typically be excluded – even those who were “on their honeymoon” as we might think of it. A recent marriage was enough that someone was exempt for military duty or public service for a full year (cf Deuteronomy 24:5). But the national sin the nation had engaged in was an emergency, and God was offering a solution. The right response was immediately abandoning whatever else you were doing and gathering everyone together to take care of this issue immediately.

Why do people tend to put off repentance?

What can happen when repentance is put off until a later time?

D. The purpose of repentance – the glory of God (2:17)

It is fascinating to see where this passage ends up. God wants his people to be driven by a desire to avoid the disastrous consequences of their sin. But that desire is not merely a self-interested desire to avoid pain, though no doubt that was a major contributing factor! More than that, God wanted his people to realize that they bore his name and that when they were punished it would lead to the nations having wrong and low views of God.

How does unrepentant sin and the consequences of unrepentant sin mar the glory of God in people's eyes?

How can we develop a healthy desire for God's glory that fear sin in part because of the damage it will do to God's name?

How do we balance a normal self-interest with a desire that God's glory be seen through our repentance and restoration?

God wanted to see mourning and lamenting over what had just happened, but he wanted more than that. He wanted his people to know that more and worse judgment was coming if they did not turn from their sin. He wanted true, heartfelt repentance that was immediate and was focused on a restored relationship with him. God's justice never shrinks back from addressing evil, but his mercy compels him to offer the chance to repent.

In Jesus, the penalty and punishment for our sin is taken care of for all who turn to him. But even as believers, we must remember that while we will never face God's the full penalty of our sins, we still face the discipline [chastening] of a displeased Father (Hebrews 12:3-11) and the consequences of our own sinful actions (Galatians 6:7-8). We too should realize that God will not ignore our sins but that he is today giving us the opportunity to repent and should repent immediately and completely. We should avoid showy displays of repentance but rather, as Joel commends, we should focus on repentance in our heart. As we will see next, and as we see all throughout Scripture, when we do so we serve a God who loves to restore. Who wouldn't want to repent to a God like that?

