

Call to Repentance

Printed Text · Joel 2:1-2, 12-14, 28-29

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will SUMMARIZE the changes in the heart of the believer and their behavior in response to God, APPRECIATE God's plan of salvation for us, and SEEK God's rewards for righteousness.

In Focus

Brenda woke up early Sunday morning reflecting on her life choices and how they lead to where she was today. Growing up, Brenda always had the ability to charm everyone around her. She often manipulated people to get her way. In college, she was a cheerleader and she dated the star basketball player. Brenda traveled the country with the athletic teams during the seasons staying in hotels and mingling with famous alumni. She was also one of the few freshmen who were fortunate enough to drive their own cars on campus. Her parents warned her that the car, the sports activities, and the travel would end if her grades ever suffered.

During her visit home one Christmas break, Brenda came in the door from the doctor's office to her parents' scowling faces. Not only did they learn that her first semester grades were low but they overheard her phone conversation with a friend where she shared that she was pregnant. They were heartbroken. Brenda's parents taught her to use her gifts and graces for the Lord, but she ignored them.

Returning to campus in January without her car, Brenda found out her boyfriend had gotten engaged to his high school sweetheart. The pregnancy, bad grades, faltering popularity, and the loss of her boyfriend sounded a wake-up call. Now a single mother, who has changed her ways, Brenda walked hurriedly to church service and sat in the back row of the sanctuary. She needed to hear a word from the Lord.

As we see with Brenda's story, today's lesson from Joel says, it's never too late to turn back to God.

Keep In Mind

"Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil" (Joel 2:12, 13, KJV).

Words You Should Know

- A. **Trumpet** – (Joel 2:1); Hebrew sipAr; Awar trumpet of Israel. It is made of a hollowed horn of a ram and is used to sound a warning to the people.
- B. **Theophany** – An appearance of the Lord, usually to some human, with a message or a sign of affirmation.
- C. **Gracious** – (v. 13); Hebrew hannin-; The total goodwill of a superior to an inferior.
- D. **Slow to anger** – (v. 13); Hebrew apayim; God's attribute of resisting immediate punishment of the people for their sins, but wait patiently for repentance and turning.
- E. **Steadfast love** – (hesed); God's faithfulness to His covenant with the people.

Say It Correctly

Inhabitant. in-hab-i-TANT

Rend. REND

Repent. re-PENT

Prophecy. proph-e-SY

KJV

Joel 2:1 Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand;

2 A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations.

12 Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:

13 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

14 Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the Lord your God?

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

29 And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit.

NLT

Joel 2:1 Sound the trumpet in Jerusalem! Raise the alarm on my holy mountain! Let everyone tremble in fear because the day of the Lord is upon us.

2 It is a day of darkness and gloom, a day of thick clouds and deep blackness. Suddenly, like dawn spreading across the mountains, a great and mighty army appears. Nothing like it has been seen before or will ever be seen again.

12 That is why the Lord says, "Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

13 Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead." Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish.

14 Who knows? Perhaps he will give you a reprieve, sending you a blessing instead of this curse. Perhaps you will be able to offer grain and wine to the Lord your God as before.

28 "Then, after doing all those things, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions.

29 In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men and women alike.

The People, Places, and Times

Joel's name means "whose God is Jehovah." The time of the writing of the Book of Joel is debated, and scholars are divided. Some believe it could have been written as early as the ninth century B.C., while others support a pre-exilic date. Most now have arrived at a date between 500 and 350 B.C. The time is after the Babylonian exile, subsequent to the building of the second temple and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Far more important than the time of the prophecy is the content of the message. Judah had previously been taken into Babylonian captivity. Upon release, some of the people decided to return to their homeland, while others decided to remain in Babylon. The temple has been rebuilt, according to Joel 1:2–2:27, and the walls of Jerusalem have been reconstructed. This message from God, delivered by Joel, will impact many future generations.

Background

The Old Testament promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit in this passage in Joel is fulfilled at Pentecost in the New Testament (Acts 2). Clearly, the content of the Apostle Peter's sermon in Acts is a direct interpretation of the prophecy in Joel 2. Judah is a small province under the hegemony of the Persian Empire. As we recall, during a prior period of unification, Judah was the southern kingdom, composed of two of the twelve tribes of Israel, with its capital at Jerusalem (1 Kings 12; 2 Kings 25). Joel's message comes to Judah as a matter of urgency. It will mean life or death for Judah and all future generations. Chapter 2 of Joel is a prophecy from God. Eschatological in nature, dealing with the end times, it tells Judah how God would move Judah into the future from her present condition.

For Christians, the prophecy of Joel applies to us and to Christ's church even today. The Apostle Peter in Acts 2, delivers a sermon with the exact prophetic words from Joel 2. Prophecy functions to teach us God's desires for our lives. It is a warning, a teaching, and a call to action. The prophet must deliver the message to the people, notwithstanding any of their own internal conflicts and hesitations. All of the attention resulting from a prophecy is to be focused on God. The responsibility of the hearer of the prophecy is to take heed, transform his or her life, and spread the word to those who are unaware of it.

The prophecies found in the Book of Joel have an impact on the New Testament, and therefore upon Christianity. Inner repentance, moral control, and faithfulness to God are of utmost importance as the primary goals of humanity, according to God's purposes. Our ultimate path away from God's wrath is through repentance and faith (Joel 2:12–17). Our capacity to have ultimate faith and our ability to interpret the will of God is made possible by the outpouring of God's Spirit on all flesh. God's merciful offering of the Holy Spirit to us is for a purpose. It is to spread the word of God as God's "witnesses" to all the earth. Thus, we are to be examples of the power of the Gospel.

At-A-Glance

1. God's Plague in Judah and the Prophetic Messenger's Warning (Joel 2:1–2)
2. God Uses Symbols to Turn His People Back to Him (vv. 12–14)
3. God's Ultimate Blessing: God's Spirit Poured Upon All Flesh (vv. 28–29)

In Depth

1. God's Plague in Judah and the Prophetic Messenger's Warning (Joel 2:1–2)

Since a locust plague and a drought in Judah have afflicted its people so dramatically, relief from these natural disasters is a sign of a relenting God. Yearning for restoration from this extraordinary ravaging of Judah, Joel addresses Judah with the herald of the trumpet. This sound is of a war trumpet. The message was meant to be loud for all of Judah's guards stationed as lookouts to hear. The warning is then communicated to all of Judah. It is to be enunciated clearly that the day of the Lord is near. The war is being waged by the mighty army of God.

The horn is to be sounded to notify Zion to gather for worship and to sanctify themselves with a fast. To sanctify oneself is to be set aside for God's purpose. Old and young are urgently called to be numbered in this congregation to worship God. The priests and ministers of great faith in God are to be consecrated. In worship to God, the clergy will intercede with prayer and weeping for the people's redemption. On behalf of the people, the priests and ministers ask God to show mercy upon His chosen people. The people's worship is in the presence of others who observe

and wait to mock the futile results of their faith should the Lord decide to publicly punish Judah.

2. God Uses Symbols to Turn His People Back to Him (vv. 12–14)

The Prophet Joel describes the awesome devastation of Judah by locusts and scorching heat. It is the judgment Yahweh inflicts upon the people. At this terrible event, the people of God from all social strata are to observe a general day of penitence, fasting, and prayer. The place for these activities is to be in the sanctuary upon Zion. The Lord God will observe the worship of the people and have compassion upon Israel.

The prophet answers the question, Who can endure this judgment of the Lord when it happens? The only way one can expect to endure it is to repent, which simply means to turn to God and away from evil. God only wants His people to repent, but this repentance must be a complete change of heart. To repent is to turn toward God and away from their current direction of sin. The traditional signs of remorse and penitence are prescribed in God's word as sacrifice through fasting. To sacrifice is to deny oneself. God wants to witness the people's contrite hearts, depicted by weeping, sorrow, and a change in the ways of Judah. This turnabout is a change in the heart with mental anguish and feelings of grief in response to God's disappointment.

The prophet leaves open the possibility that, as their hearts change, the Lord has the capacity to relent from inflicting horrific consequences upon them because of His compassion. Joel asks the question, "Who knows whether God will change from the pronounced judgment?" God is sovereign with the infinite ability to do whatever He wishes. This unpredictable nature of God is not a cause for us to doubt His promises. When God pronounces goodwill, we can count upon His word. That is the compassion of God, the ability to suffer with us and to feel sorrow for us that He has shown repeatedly in Israel's history. God will relent in punishing us if He desires to do so. We are required to relent, repent, and change to move our hearts in the direction of God.

God has the capacity to deal with us according to His love and compassion rather than according to our sin and iniquity. Sacrificial worship becomes central to Judah's relationship with God. An offering of sufficiency, either meat or drink, can be persuasive to God. Judah remembers God's mercy, love, and kindness.

3. God's Ultimate Blessing: God's Spirit Poured Upon All Flesh (vv. 28–29)

Finally, after the prediction of destruction through the mighty army of God, there is a word of hope and promise. After the beatitude of verse 26, a blessing of plenty for Judah's consumption comes a promise. The New Revised Standard Version renders verse 26 this way, "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." God promises grace upon Judah for its restoration. God's people are once again a covenant people. The fear of public shame for their destruction is over.

The prophet then states the benefits of being God's people; the outpouring of God's spirit will come "afterward," meaning after the day of the coming of the Lord. This gift is from God, but it is not limited to a select few who are privileged by some materialistic stratification. The operative word "all" flesh clearly indicates that God is no respecter of persons, be they rich, elite, powerful, woman, or man. Verse 29 specifically mentions the lowly who are included and will receive God's spirit. These handmaids and servants represent the women and men who are the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, and those who labor as service workers—those who are included in "all" flesh (or humans) and will receive God's spirit. Truly the last shall be first. The specific role of the Spirit of God given to the people would be that of revealing the will of God. Their mortal limitations are numerous prior to this outpouring of the Spirit of God. But now the

power to become infinitely enhanced with this new gift provides prophetic vision, and dreams that bear strong truths become a reality.

Search the Scriptures

1. What is the role of the prophet? (Joel 2:1)
2. What was the reason that God sent Joel to prophesy to Judah? (2:27 and 3:17)
3. What would make Joel so effective and convincing at delivering this prophecy? (1:5–6)
4. What is the responsibility of Judah as hearers of the prophetic word? (2:12, 14)
5. What happens at the coming of the day of the Lord? (vv. 2:28–29)

Discuss the Meaning

1. What response did God desire from Judah? (Joel 2:12)
2. Discuss why God wanted the people of Judah to tear their hearts and not their garments? (v. 13)
3. Who were the soldiers of the great army of God? (vv. 1–2, 25)
4. What was the role of priests? (v. 17)
5. What does it mean to receive the Spirit of God? (vv. 28–29).

Liberating Lesson

It is no secret that society's preoccupation is primarily fixed on the pursuit of wealth, power, and domination of one race over another. The sin of the world is consistently against the will of God. A major sin is our disregard for God and His plan for the love and coexistence of humanity. With a spirit of independence, we have taken what God has given us and left Him behind. Yet, God is a God of second chances. Over and over again, we have seen the mercy of God in our lives, and His power in times of trouble. It will be God's Spirit who will guide us in our daily living and in our interaction with each other according to His will. This same spirit will be the basis for our witness and prophetic voice warning others to heed the Lord our God.

Application For Activation

Read Joel 2:1–2, 12–13. Do you constantly witness sin, disobedience, and lack of care for humanity and God in our world? Permit the prophecy given to Joel to infuse your thoughts. Can you see how God's Word can be made manifest in your own life and in the disobedient world around you? Share with your class members the ways in which specific groups and individuals can advance God's kingdom by making a change in their direction and in their ways.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Joel 2:1–2, 12–14, 28–29

2:1 Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the LORD cometh, for it is nigh at hand;

The multivalent images Joel uses predominate in this picture of the day of the Lord. The first image is the military battle. God commands the prophet to sound the alarm of the “trumpet” using the familiar war trumpet of Israel, the *šipAr*. This is a cornet intended to give a clear sound and is actually a curved horn or hollowed-out ram’s horn. The purpose of its use is to warn the people of the coming enemy (cf. Jeremiah 6:1; Hosea 5:8; 8:1). The “sound” is also the Hebrew *ruwa’*, figuratively meaning to split the ears with sound, to shout for alarm or joy. The warning is reminiscent of the guards who were also lookouts, positioned on the fortified walls of the city of Jerusalem. Their function was to sound the alarm and to spread the word all over the city to gather the people for safety within the city walls.

2 A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations.

The second image used is that of an army, swarming and infesting the city with the locust plague. The army spreads upon the “mountains,” or *har*, a mountain or range of hills and hill country. The onset of this army of locusts is importune, steady, and overpowering as Israel’s enemy overruns the city walls and houses, leaving desolation behind it. The “darkness” is the *choshek*, literally, darkness, and figuratively misery, destruction, death, ignorance, sorrow, wickedness, and obscurity. The day of the Lord brings darkness and gloom, familiar from other Old Testament passages including Zephaniah 1:14–15 (“near,” “darkness and gloom,” “clouds and thick darkness”). The anguish and darkness overpower the people (Nahum 2:10 and Isaiah 13:8) who are inflicted by this “great and powerful” army, or *’atsuw*m, which is powerful by being numerous, great, mighty, and strong, as remarked in Malachi 3:2, 4.

“Who can endure” this “great and terrible day”? These descriptions of the day of the Lord represent imagery of a theophany of God or an appearance depicted as a cosmic disturbance.

12 Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:

God, Yehovah, is the self-existent or eternal Jehovah. It is this Lord who sends this enemy from the north (2:20; Jeremiah 1:14; 4:6; 6:1), causing all of the city dwellers, the Judeans, and everyone else to finally turn toward God with their hearts. To repent is to turn in the direction of God, “turning around” completely with all of one’s heart in the opposite direction. In Hebrew “all of ” is the word *gam*, from an unused root meaning to gather, assemble, or corral. Thus, one lives his or her life totally differently than before.

This army that had been sent by God threatens to destroy His enemies (Amos 5:18–20; 9:1; Zephaniah 1:18). Ultimately, the seriousness of the people and the dedication of their hearts in fasting, weeping, and mourning will anticipate the day of God’s final judgment of the world, in which the Son of Man will return to set up his kingdom on earth. The actions God requires of us is to “fast” (*tsowm*), “weep,” (*bekiy*); by analogy, a dripping, overflowing, and “mourn,” (*micped*), a lamentation, or wailing. God is faithful to give the people an opportunity to repent and to return to Him. Marking

their sincere repentance and adherence to God, Joel directs the people to remorseful fasting for the mercy of God.

13 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

God calls upon the Judeans to turn to Him, to worship with all their hearts, and to rend (split, tear, or rip) their hearts. God specifically instructs the people not to tear their garments. The tearing of garments in lamentation is an expression of grief in the presence of misfortune (see Genesis 37:29, 34; Numbers 14:6; 2 Samuel 3:31; 1 Kings 21:27; Ezra 9:3). In this text, tearing of garments is a means of “sanctifying” (qiddes, meaning to set apart) for God’s purposes in preparation for worship. Repentance must be in Judah’s heart. The “heart” in Hebrew symbolizes human will and intellect. God is gracious (Hebrew hannān), merciful (rahīm), and slow to anger (apayim). He imparts the kind of love a mother has for her child. He does not immediately punish, but rather always patiently provides an opportunity for people to repent and turn back to Him.

14 Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?

The Hebrew translation for the word “return” or “turn” is shuwb, signifying to turn back, hence, away. In other words, to literally or figuratively retreat, but not necessarily with the idea of returning to the starting point. Assuming the fast of repentance has taken place (with all of the requisite prayers, fasting, and lamentation), the physical sacrifice of an offering of meat and drink accompanies the worshipful action of the people. The “offering” is minchah, meaning to bestow a donation or a tribute (especially a sacrificial offering). It is usually bloodless and a voluntary gift or oblation. It can also be a meat offering, present, or sacrifice. God then responds in saving action to that repentance. We are not told the people’s response. Thus, we are left to assume that in this awesome day of the Lord, the people responded. The promise of God is that if Judah repents, He will respond in salvation.

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

The manifestation of certain powerful signs of the fulfillment of God’s promise is evident. God will then pour out the Spirit on “all flesh,” much like one pours out a fluid. The action to “pour out” is the Hebrew shaphak, meaning to spill forth blood, a libation, liquid metal, or even a solid. Figuratively, it also means to expend life, to sprawl, or to gush out. The Spirit of God is always depicted as a gift of power given to enable the recipient to fulfill a specific role for God (see Exodus 31:2–5; Judges 6:34; Micah 3:8; Haggai 1:14). The Hebrew word for spirit is ra’ah, which both literally and figuratively has numerous meanings including to advise, appear, approve, behold, discern, or make to enjoy.

The parallel for this text in Joel is found in the New Testament in Acts 2:4. Therein the newly appointed Apostle Peter declares the outpouring of the Spirit upon the disciples, enabling them to become effective witnesses for Christ “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; 2:4).

29 And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit.

God promises that the gift of the Spirit extends to all flesh. The “bond” person, ‘ebed, is a servant. The “female servants” are shiphchah, from an unused root meaning to spread out as a family, a female slave as a member of the household, a maiden servant, or a woman servant. Those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved on the final day of judgment.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Joel 2:1-11

Tuesday

Joel 2:15-17

Wednesday

Joel 2:20-27

Thursday

Acts 2:14-21

Friday

2 Peter 3:1-10

Saturday

Joel 3:1-3, 18-21

Sunday

Joel 2:12-13, 18-19, 28-32