

Yet Even Now

Joel 2:12-27

Series: Joel and Malachi (Fall 2020)

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Topic: Amid the trials of life we find a compassionate and just God.

Worship: A Gracious and Merciful God

Key Sentence:

Even as we turn to the gracious and merciful God, he has turned to us.

Outline:

I. Turn to a gracious and merciful God (Joel 2:12-14)

II. Gather and cry out (Joel 2:15-17)

III. See his pity expressed (Joel 2:18-20)

IV. Rejoice in his provision (Joel 2:21-27)

Joel 2:12-27 “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³and 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. ¹⁴Who 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?

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather 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.

¹⁷Between 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 a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

¹⁸Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. ¹⁹The LORD answered and said to his people, “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations. ²⁰“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 rear guard into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things.

²¹“Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! ²²Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit; the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

²³“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. ²⁴“The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. ²⁵I 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.

²⁶“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. ²⁷You 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.

Yet Even Now Joel 2:12-27

“Yet, even now.” Our first three weeks in Joel have mostly dwelt in the hard parts of life. The first week was a call to lament, the cry of pain over circumstances and calamities of life. We called it locust week. The calamity and judgment Joel lamented was a locust plague. We too lament the locusts of life, whether in a world-wide pandemic or in the disintegration of a culture. In the privacy of our personal lives and hearts we lament the hounds of addiction, the ravages of lust, the trauma of childhood abuse, the choices our children make, the agony of a failing marriage, the ravages of cancer and disease, the loss of loved ones. Our visual that first week was dead trees – and of course, locusts.

The second week we were tutored in a key response of lament, to cry out. I believe crying out to God is the essential first step in response to any life situation, whether difficulty or opportunity. Too often we go numbly into sin or despair, unwilling to respond to God. In the face of the locust judgment and calamity, Joel instructed the leaders and priests to cry out themselves and then to gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD and cry out. The visual that second week was barren landscapes.

Last week Joel looked up and saw an even greater calamity coming: the Day of the Lord. He saw a day of judgment, a day of darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness. The Day of the Lord is not just a day of calamity, but of final judgment for sin and rebellion. “Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. . . . I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity.” Why is this judgment coming? Because all have sinned and fall short of the glory. The Apostle Paul spends three chapters in Romans laying out the rebellion of humankind, the brokenness and sinfulness of each person, and concludes that there is none righteous, no not one. So apart from the grace of a merciful God all of us are under this same judgment of destruction and death, separation from God in a hell of plague, drought, fire and darkness. This is miserably bad news for us and all around us. But we saw last week that the bad news was not the final news. There is also a day of the Lord for rescue.

And praise God that rescue is also offered to us. We’ll see in Joel today that we can turn to God for he has turned to us in grace, mercy and steadfast love. Today Joel turns from laments of destruction to the pity and faithfulness of a God who hears our cries and saves. Today we reach the “Yet even now,” Joel 2:12-27. Even as we turn to a gracious and merciful God, he has turned to us.

I've divided this text into four small blocks. In the first we hear the great truth that even as we turn to a steadfast and merciful God, he has turned to us. In the second we see that this turning is still accompanied by lament. In the third we see his pity beautifully expressed, and in the fourth we rejoice in his provision. Let's begin with the great turning point, the "yet even now." Joel 2:12-14 *"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³and 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. ¹⁴Who 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?*

"Yet even now." "But even now." All through Scripture in the worst and most guilty moments of humankind's brokenness, there's been a "But, God." In Genesis, when Joseph confronts his brothers who had sold him into slavery he says "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive." That's the principle: people devise evil, but God turns it to good. David says in the Psalms. "They confronted me in the day of my calamity, but the LORD was my support."

Something bad is happening but God rescues. Often the something bad happening is our own sin or its consequences. In Hosea 11 God reviews the sins of his people and says "Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. ⁶The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. ⁷My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all." But then, without even a "but, God," he says "⁸How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. ⁹I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."

The New Testament continues this pattern. Peter says "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." And Paul, showing by many proofs that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God says in Romans 3 "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." All have sinned, but righteousness comes through faith to all who believe.

Probably the greatest “but God” in Scripture is Ephesians chapter 2 – but we’re going to save that for later, for communion. The one we’re looking at is enough. Calamity has come. The Day of the Lord is coming. People will be judged for sin and rebellion. “Yet even now.” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to me. Turn to me. This is God’s call to all people in their sin. You can’t erase your sin. You can’t make your rebellion and self-interest as if it had never happened. You can’t change your life to do enough good to make up for your sin. Sin breaks your relationship with God, and like a mirror once shattered, you can’t put it together again.

All you can do is stop fleeing God and turn to him. Ezekiel 33 “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” This turning is not external and not ritual. It’s a matter of the heart. It’s true that Joel says to fast and weep and mourn but these are merely external evidence of something inward. Turn to me with all you heart, he says, and rend or tear your heart, not your garments.

God desires one thing: that you trust Him enough to turn to him before you run off the cliff. He can be trusted. Joel says “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.” This description of God’s unchanging character is first found in Exodus 34, where God reveals himself as “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” God is merciful. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. God is gracious. He sends his Son as a free gift, saves and rescues as a free gift, not earned by merit, not earned even by turning, but received unearned. God is abounding in steadfast love. That’s the inexpressible word *hesed*, which is “when the one who owes me nothing gives me everything.”

This is the God we turn to, a God, Joel says, who relents over disaster. The word “relent” is fascinating. The other major translation is “comfort.” God’s relenting is comfort for helpless sinners. In the Hosea passage we just read he said “my compassion grows warm and tender,” and compassion is from the same root. If we wanted to translated all three instances with the same word we could say “maybe God will compassion over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and compassion and leave a blessing behind him.” God compassions his people, he relents of judgment, and he comforts. When his people turn to him they find that he has already turned to them in mercy and grace. This is the big thought today, and beginning in chapter 2, verse 15 Joel shows what he’s just told. In verses 15-17 he shows the people turning to God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather 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. ¹⁷Between 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 a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

This sounds like verses we studied in chapters 1 and 2, but it’s crucial to have these thoughts again here. Joel just gave the simple formula for true spiritual rescue: when we turn to him from sin he turns to us in free rescue. This section shows that. It’s worded as a command, but God’s response in verse 18 shows that this crying out actually happened. The shofar was sounded, the fast and solemn assembly were called, the people gathered and true heart repentance took place. It was a thorough community and national repentance. Everybody participated. Children, nursing infants, brides, bridegrooms, everyone.

Led by the priests the people repent and lament. “Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” Lament is not only turning to God in calamity, even the calamity of our own sin, but it is complaining, calling God to be true to his character, asking why. “Make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations.” “Reproach” and “byword” are not common words in English. Reproach means disgrace or shame. The people are asking God not to present his nation before the world as one that has been harshly judged by its God and disgraced. “Byword” is similar, it means an accepted example, in this case an accepted example of disgrace or shame. The nations around Israel, seeing this locust/drought/fire judgment would say “Where is their God now? They say they’re chosen by the only true God, but they face calamity worse than other nations.”

Joel is instructing the priests to lead the people in repentance and in lament. It is this freedom to ask God to be true to his promises and defend his character that allows us to trust even in difficult circumstances or in the shame of personal sin. Verses 18-20 show us that God is true to his character, and that the people of God really did cry out this way. *Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. ¹⁹The LORD answered and said to his people, “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations. ²⁰“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 rear guard into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things.*

“The LORD became jealous for his land.” God does not desire that his creation be subject to the futility of locusts and drought. Creation was not designed to be ravished by hurricanes, devastated by plague or consumed by fire. All these calamities, which at times are also judgments, are the result of humankind’s fall into sin. The consequence of that original sin in the perfect garden of Eden was that the world itself would become a place of brokenness, calamity and death. And the consequence of ongoing human sin can be judgment, where God allows these calamities in direct response to sin and rebellion. But the heart of God is not this judgment. When we turn to God, as the people of Israel had done, we find he has already turned toward us. “Then the LORD became jealous for his land and he had pity on his people.” The word pity is yet another character quality of God, similar to his mercy, his grace, his compassion. This word specifically implies that God sees the difficulty his people are in and is moved to action on their behalf. It’s not just a feeling but the resulting action.

We see this action in Joel’s day, verse 19: “The LORD answered and said to his people, “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.” “The LORD answered.” I love those three words. God hears and answers prayers. Moses says in Deuteronomy “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us when we pray to him?”

In the locust plague the grain, oil and wine had been destroyed. Joel 1:9 “The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD.” Joel 1:13 “Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.” What the locusts missed, the drought got. And what the drought missed, the fire got. So there is no grain for food, but from the point of view of Israel’s faith and practice, the greater crisis is that there is no grain, no oil for the daily offering. The daily practice of the Jewish faith had been cut off, but it will be restored.

The end of verse 19 shows God directly answering their prayers “I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.” That’s exactly what they prayed in verse 17. God’s rescue is done in the sight of the surrounding mocking nations and it is done for the sake of faithfulness to his character and his promises. Finally, verse 20 “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 rear guard into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things.” Who is “the northerner?” It might be a kingdom, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia. Or, as some contend, the northerner might be the locusts themselves.

Normally a locust invasion would come from the south or the east, but it could come from the north. So, as David Hubbard says God's immediate rescue "comes in the form of a rout of the locust invaders, as though God was to drive a wedge through their ranks and bulldoze their center into the desert and their flanks to the seas on the east [the Dead Sea] and west [the Mediterranean.]" That would account for stench and foul odor of the destroyed enemy. Hubbard says "Locusts drowned at sea and washed ashore are infamous for the foul odor their putrid carcasses discharge." Yet, as is typical of prophecy, the whole picture can also point forward to the battles of the Day of the Lord when, as Isaiah says "Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood."

But the main point is that in these verses we see the pity, the compassion, the grace, the mercy and the steadfast love of God expressed. Again, this is to illustrate what we learned in verses 12 and 13. Our God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." That's the beauty of the prophecy. It illustrates the character of God which is eternal, absolute and always available to those who cry out to Him. When the locusts of our lives, whether calamity or our own sin, become overwhelming God is no further away than our turn toward him or our cry to him. You may be running away from God. You may think he's far off. But the moment you turn, there he is, right in your face. Not for judgment – that's the cliff you were headed toward – but for mercy, with steadfast love and rescue.

The remaining verses picture rescue in further images of creation restored and God's provision. Joel 2:21 *Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things!* ²²*Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit; the fig tree and vine give their full yield.* ²³*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.* ²⁴*The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.* ²⁵*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.* ²⁶*You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. My people shall never again be put to shame.* 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. And my people shall never again be put to shame.*

This is just fantastic stuff. Wonderful imagery of even more wonderful promises. Notice in verse 21 that Joel addresses the land directly. This land, which has suffered under the judgment and calamity will be restored.

“Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things!” In verse 20 it was the destroyer, the locusts and the armies that had done great things. Therefore they were judged. But now it is the Lord who has done great things to restore and rescue. In this the very land itself is to be glad and rejoice. After the locust plague and the drought land that turns green does seem to rejoice. It’s doing what God made it for. But Paul teaches that all creation is groaning now, waiting for the day when “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Verse 22. As the land rejoices in its rescue, so also the beasts and the plants “Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit; the fig tree and vine give their full yield.” We remember from chapter 1 that in the face of the locust plague the beasts groaned, and the herds of cattle were perplexed because there was no pasture for them. But now the pastures are green. And the trees, which had been stripped bare are now abundant. In that day of rescue all of creation is restored and rejoices.

That includes us, the people. Verse 23 “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 drought is gone, the rain has come in its seasons. Therefore, verse 24, “The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.” When you turn to God he rescues, he provides, he restores. He who owes you nothing gives you everything. This is promised in the context of the locust plague, but the principle that God restores creation and restores us is eternal. Don’t you treasure verse 25? “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.” In chapter 1 the locusts came as adults and laid eggs and went through a whole life cycle feasting on the poor land. The swarming locusts, then the baby hoppers, the immature adult destroyers, then the fully grown flying cutters. This was God’s great army, God’s great calamity, God’s great judgment in Joel’s day, and now he has relented of it because the heart of his character is grace, mercy and steadfast love.

In the same way in that day, though it will be a day of judgment, yet for all who have cried out to him in trust, turned to him from sin and calamity, it will be a day of rescue. You and I, looking at the locusts of our own lives may feel that the losses are too great. Nothing can make up for the disasters of relational sin and addiction and lust, everything that the fallen world has taken from us and all the brokenness we have suffered. But hear the word of the Lord. “I will restore” I will restore all the years the locusts have taken. “Yet even now,” says the Lord, “turn to me and I will turn to you in rescue and restoration.”

We don't know exactly what that will work out in the New Heavens and the New Earth, but Scripture is consistent in picturing perfect provision calling forth praise for God's work. Verse 26 "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." He's still answering that prayer of verses 15-17. He's promising that things will work out to reveal and glorify his perfect character of mercy, grace and steadfast love. Our response is praise. He's provided, we rejoice. That's the way he always meant it to be.

The section concludes with a verse that ties this to God's big idea, God's big promise "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." God's big idea, as I've said often is "You will be my people and I will be your God and I will dwell with you." That's what God is saying here, at one of the great climactic redemptive moments of the book. "I am in the midst of Israel." I dwell with you. And "You will know that I am the Lord your God." When the calamity and judgment have laid you low, and you've cried out and lamented, turning to God, and when he has rescued and restored, then you will know with all your heart and with all your head that he is the Lord your God.

This is timeless truth. It was true for the people of Judah after the locust plague had passed and the land was restored. It will be true in the last day, that great Day of the Lord when all the years that all the locusts have taken will be restored and redeemed in the New Heavens and the New Earth. And it is true for us in Jesus in salvation. Each one of us, today can experience the grace, mercy and steadfast love of God by looking to Jesus who perfectly expressed that love on the cross and in his resurrection, so that if anyone trusts in Christ they are made new. We'll see that anew in communion, and we can rejoice in it.

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³and 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."