



God Pursues Judah

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Repentance is grieving over our sin, turning away from our sin and toward God for forgiveness.

Farmers from ancient times have lived with a fear of locusts. Imagine sitting idly by while a swarm of insects thick enough to darken the sun descends upon the source of your livelihood only to leave it, and your life, devastated because of its appetite. That kind of nightmare has led to scientific monitoring of locusts. Societies do whatever it takes to avoid the havoc a plague like this can cause.



What is your worst bug story? Why do you think insects cause people so much fear and anxiety?

There were no such monitoring stations or preventative measures during the days of Joel. And the land was being consumed before the eyes of Judah. But the prophet Joel helps us see that the locusts were more than an unfortunate circumstance; the swarming insects were the instrument of judgment in the hand of God. As the people sat by and watched their land be consumed, the prophet Joel pointed the people not only to their own sin but also to the fact that their current situation was only a shadow of the relentless judgment of God.



Voices from Church History

“The bedrock of Christianity is repentance.”¹

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)

Date of My Bible Study: _____

The prophet Joel warned God’s people about the Day of the Lord—a day in which God would judge His enemies, vindicate His people, and restore the world. In light of the coming judgment, Joel called the people of Judah to repentance. As believers who are restored by God’s Spirit, we are commissioned to call others to repentance, to spread the good news that anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

1. God calls His people to grieve over their sin (Joel 1:1-14).

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

² Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land!

Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?

³ Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.

⁴ What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten.

What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten,

and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.

Joel’s words indicate that God is not passive in His rule over creation. Rather, He is actively involved in the most intimate details of life. The scary side of God’s involvement in life is that sometimes terrible things do happen as a result of His judgment. The people in the days of Joel couldn’t chalk up their situation to happenstance. In light of God’s involvement, then, Joel called the people to recognize the truth of what they were experiencing, and the proper response was to grieve over their sin that had brought the judgment of God:

⁵ Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.

⁶ For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.

⁷ It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white.

⁸ Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.

⁹ The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD.

The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD.

¹⁰ The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes.

*¹¹ Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers,
for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished.*

¹² The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes.

*Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up,
and gladness dries up from the children of man.*

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.

¹⁴ Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly.

*Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.*

Joel gave his people a strong dose of reality. The locust swarm was meant as a wake-up call for the people to recognize their sin and return to the Lord. The beginning of that return involves proper grief over sin.



What does it mean to grieve over sin?



What is the difference between grieving over the effects of sin and grieving over sin itself?

Like the people of Joel's day, our sin has practical and grievous consequences. Though we might be tempted to see these things as merely the outworking of our mistakes, it's much bigger than that. The consequences are evidence of the discipline of God upon us, and until we recognize the work of God inside these uncomfortable and sometimes disastrous situations, we won't recognize and properly grieve over the sin in our lives.



Voices from Church History

"Our sorrow and grief for sin must not spring merely from a fear of wrath; for if we have no other ground than that, it proceeds from self-love and not from any love to God."²

—George Whitefield
(1714-1770)

God is our Father, and when we sin, we show our lack of trust in His wisdom and ways. Our sin, then, is a personal affront to God, and we should grieve over the statement it makes both to Him and about Him in the world where we are His ambassadors. Grief over sin, though, is more than an emotional response. It calls for action, just as it did in Joel's day.



Take a closer look at the latter part of the passage above. What are some of the actions that were to accompany the emotional aspect of grief from the people?

2. God calls His people to return to Him in repentance (Joel 2:12-14).

¹² *“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;*

¹³ *and 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.

¹⁴ *Who 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?


In this passage in Joel, we see two key aspects of what it means to truly turn away from sin and turn toward God:

Repentance is an act of the heart expressed in action.

The physical signs of repentance can be manufactured. We can make a simple choice of the will to appear grieved with our sin. We can weep, we can fast, and we can even do something like tear our clothes—one of the biblical signs of mourning and sorrow. Apart from the heart, though, this isn't repentance; it's hypocrisy.

At the same time, true repentance with the whole heart always results in action (Jas. 2:20-26; cf. Gal. 5:6). That's because what truly happens in the heart always works itself out in practical ways. In this case, then, repentance in the heart results in demonstrated action.

 Why is it tempting to *tear our clothes* but not *tear our hearts*?

 Why must both action and attitude go together?

Repentance is received by a gracious and compassionate God.

When we come to God in repentance, we don't have to wonder about His response. He will not hold back His forgiveness and His love; He's not interested in putting us on "spiritual probation" until we prove ourselves worthy of His mercy. Rather, it's His character to readily and freely extend that mercy and grace to all who come to Him.

 How does knowing the character of God change the manner in which we repent?

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

68. Repentance

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our conversion.

3. God promises to restore His people by His Spirit (Joel 2:18,25-32).

Following God's call to repentance in Joel, the prophet's message turns a corner. Starting in Joel 2:18, the text begins to look forward to the promised restoration of God's people:

¹⁸ Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

Though the text doesn't tell us exactly what happened, the change in the mood of the rest of the Book of Joel is so dramatic that some scholars believe that the people got the message. The people repented, and they began to see the compassion of the Lord played out in their land. As chapter 2 continues, though, we see that not only was there an immediate fulfillment to God's promise of restoration, but the text also points forward to an even greater and more lasting restoration by the Spirit of God:

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. And 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.

²⁸ "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.

²⁹ Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

³⁰ "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

The Holy Spirit was certainly active in the Old Testament (see, for example, Gen. 1:2; Ex. 35:31; 1 Sam. 19:23; Judg. 15:14-20). But starting in the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit showed up like never before. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit didn't come upon an individual but the entire believing community. In the Old Testament, there was particular respect given to older men, yet the Spirit's presence would not be reserved for the "respectable" but would instead be given liberally to "all humanity." From the highest to the lowest, from the richest to the poorest, the Lord would be present with them all in the person of the Holy Spirit. In that day, as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit wouldn't be a divine visitor but a permanent resident, dwelling forever inside those who believe in Jesus.



What does the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in this fashion show you about the character of God?

If you are a Christian, then the Holy Spirit lives inside you. You are the evidence of the day Joel looked forward to. This indwelling in you—no matter your age, gender, race, or socioeconomic condition—reminds us all of God's generosity and His desire to live in intimate relationship with His people.

But look closely at the passage. You'll see that this promise of the Spirit—no matter how revolutionary it might have sounded to its first hearers and no matter how amazing it seems to us living in its fulfillment—is placed in the context of "the great and awesome day of the LORD." In addition to this outpouring of the Spirit, that Day of the Lord that Joel described will be full of terror and judgment.

Though we are living in the time of the Holy Spirit's indwelling, we are awaiting the final Day of the Lord, when God will at long last execute final judgment on His enemies. But even in this moment, there is an escape provided. That escape is the cross.

Voices from the Church

"We are invited to rejoice in a God who is still pouring out his Spirit on those who, in glad and humble response to his call, turn to him to be saved."³

—David Prior



Why do you think many Christians find it challenging to talk about the judgment of God?



What are some practical but appropriate ways you can present the reality of God's judgment with those around you?

Conclusion

As we look forward to the Day of the Lord in our time, we must remind ourselves that God's patience with the sin of humanity will not last forever. The day is coming when we will be held accountable for what we have done with the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So will those around us.

Though it might not be popular to talk about God's judgment in our day and time, it is an inescapable reality. We cannot be the kind of Christians who love to talk about God's love and yet harbor some embarrassment when it comes to discussing the reality of His coming judgment of sin. Let us not be the people who drink deeply of the gift of the Holy Spirit in our day and yet stingily withhold the message of escape from those around us. The way of escape during the Day of the Lord is available, and that is why we are active in sharing that message with those around us.



Voices from the Church

"To repentant sinners the Lord declares, 'Fear not... be glad and rejoice: for the Lord will do great things' (Joel 2:21). You need not be ashamed of your wasted years. God is going to remove from you the evil army, and you will eat and be satisfied. You will never again be ashamed! (Joel 2:19-20,26-27)."⁴

—David Wilkerson

CHRIST CONNECTION: Joel warned God's people about the Day of the Lord—a day in which God would judge His enemies, vindicate His people, and restore the world. The only way for us to escape God's wrath on that day is to be found in Christ, who was judged in our place and in whose vindication we share.



HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God has given us His Spirit to show that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

1. What are some ways we can display grief over our sin that brings honor to God and credibility to our mission?

2. Why is an attitude of repentance both helpful and necessary for living the Christian life?

3. How has the Holy Spirit strengthened and equipped you for the mission of telling others about Jesus? How can you use your spiritual gifts to encourage both believers and unbelievers?
