

The Power of Repentance  
Joel 2:12-18  
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Sunday night,

This past Thanksgiving, to get my mind moving and my heart warmed toward Christmas, I took in the classic novel by Dickens, “The Christmas Carol.” Dickens is the master at making a first impression. He opens the book with such descriptive language of the biting cold weather that Christmas Eve. With his words, he paints a picture of a frigid end to the workday. Kindhearted Bob Cratchit sits in the next room trembling with chills and trying to finish his work so that he can run home to the warm family and a warm fire that waits. In the main room is the main character: the man who embodies the weather. Ebenezer is the name he goes by. Scrooge. He is a coldhearted curmudgeon, a stodgy bean counter, and he has no room in his heart for love.

As we all know, his life is about to change, because his old business partner Jacob Marley is about to pay him a visit. Marley has been dead for 7 years and now pays the price in death for his thoughtless selfish life. Marley comes to say to his old friend, in biblical terms, “Repent, for your day is near.” The stony heart of Scrooge is unconvinced by this warning, and it requires three visiting ghosts to get him to a breaking point. In the end, Ebenezer is a new man.

The reason I love that story is because it reminds me that people can truly change. Yes, it’s a secular story of Christmas—no mention of a manger or a Savior—but still, it’s a story that causes people to stop and consider their current way of life. The Day of Death is near.

The book of Joel is not popular. It’s a black book. Dark. Ominous. Bleak. Chilling. It’s the story of a prophet who we hardly know. He says nothing of himself and we have relatively no information of his call or his background. He comes to the nation of Judah, on the heels of a locust invasion. These big hungry bugs have blasted the land leaving everything bare. The cattle wander confused and starved. The priests have no grain to place on the altar for sacrifice. The people are miserable, poor, and purposeless. And yet, with the catastrophe that has come, their hearts are as cold as ever. They still have no room in their hearts for God or for one another.

So enter Joel. Like Jacob Marley, Joel comes proclaiming, “Repent, while you still can!”

Have you noticed that few people every truly change? Very few people change. They are born into the world selfish, as every human being is. And they go to their graves selfish. Sure, they grow older. Their skin gets saggier, their stomach gets doughy, their eyes grow weak. Physically they change, but inside—they are the same.

Joel is a serious story of surrender. His message will challenge us all! Am I open to change? What does it mean for me to repent and to get my life in line with God?

I'd like to read Joel 2:1-18 to help you get a grasp of the grave situation the people were in. We will direct our study today to vv.12-18, dealing with man's response and call to change.

Let's read 2: 1-18.

As you just experienced, the first portion of chapter 2 does not make for a good "seeker friendly" sermon. This is hell fire and brimstone at its best. Such preaching can be distasteful, especially when the preacher takes an angry tone. Before you get to v.12, you could rightly assume that the God of Scripture is as coldhearted as the Scrooge. He has no room left in his heart for compassion. He takes delight only in meting out the punishment.

But v.12 is a jolting change in tone. Suddenly, the prophet speaks tenderly of the patience of God. Look at the language: "*Even now,*" declares the Lord, "*return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments.*"

*This is the heart of Joel's message and ministry. Let me lay it out for you,*

## **What Joel Was Sent To Say**

### **1. He proclaimed the power of true repentance.**

Notice how carefully he chooses his words. Repentance is powerful but only if its genuine. It has to be more than a show. Sure, the outward expressions are important. Joel encourages some pageantry as he commands the sinners to publicly fast, to weep, to mourn. Those are outward demonstrations of remorse and there is a place for those.

Which of us has not been moved by a brokenhearted man who trudges down the aisle at the time of invitation? He can hardly string sentences together. He is in shambles and he takes full responsibility for his mess. These outward expressions of remorse can move a church to revival faster than a polished poem at the end of sermon.

There's a place for demonstration, but mere formality will not move the heart of God. A person must be heartbroken in his guts over the mess that he has made. 1 Sam. 16:7, "*The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*" That man may weep and cry for hours at the altar, but it makes no difference if God looks at his heart and sees no true change.

I want to ask you: what does your heart look like? Of course, I'm not requesting a EKG, or an X-ray, or an angiogram. I'm talking about the passion you presently have for God. When is the last time that you spent a day grieving over your sins? We are not to be bogged down by our failures, we are not to live in the past, but it seems Scriptural from time to time, to get down on our faces and to say, "Lord, why do you put up with me?"

To say with the penitent tax man in Luke, “Have mercy on me, Oh God, for I am a sinner.”

One might object to this idea saying this is self-pity—counterproductive to the Christian life. No, repentance is far from self-pity, it’s a plea for salvation. It’s returning to the compassionate of God. When we repent, we throw fire on our cold hearts and we draw near to the warm heart of God.

That’s what v.13 is all about. If you miss v.13, you miss the Lord....

Is there an area in your life that remains inconsistent with your witness?

- A loose tongue at home
- A lazy streak at work
- A root of bitterness
- An envious spirit

Where sin resides, you and I are called to repent.

Now, before we move on in the text, let me be sure that we understand what it means to repent.

*Repentance involves:*

- *Confession.* You gotta say some stuff. God calls you to name your sin. Say it out loud to the Lord, and say it out loud to the injured party. Speak your sin, and in doing so, you have begun the process of healing. Scripture is full of references to confessing God-fearers. David gives us the best example in Psalm 51 of a man who has rent his heart.

Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are proved right when you speak  
and justified when you judge.

David denied the truth no longer, and came clean for what he had done.

- *Contrition.* Simply way to say this is “sadness.” We have all observed siblings who get caught biting their brother. “Tell him you’re sorry!” the father says. And the little boy looks at this little brother and says, “Sorry.” You can see it in his eyes. He admits his sin but if he could get away with it, he would bite again and this time harder. This is an element of mystery here as the line between regret and true remorse is often blurry. Only God knows if a person is truly sorry. Even Judas showed some regret, but his sadness fell short of sincere repentance. We must have a broken heart.
- *Conversion.* Joel says in v.13, “Return to the Lord your God.” We must “con” “vert”. Con meaning around. Verto, Latin, meaning “to turn.” Turn around.

Turn your life around. Face God. Getting your heart right with God is the most important part of the process.

Now, let's continue in the text because there is more to this message of Joel. Notice the last part of v.13, and following...

What does Joel do here?

## **2. He promised recovery.**

There is an incentive to obedience. The ten year old boy is told, "Clean up your room and you might get that game you want." A teenage girl is told, "Get an A in the class and you could see some financial gain." There is reason to hope for blessing when you are walking in the obedience.

Human beings are, by nature, self-preserving. Looking out for our own best interests comes quite naturally. So, a man takes a job and it requires him to move. His neighbor says, "Well, hate to see you leave, but you gotta do what's best for you and your family."

It's worth noting, by the way, that the Lord Jesus himself never shied away from offering incentives. He didn't say renounce all wealth and riches! Forget fine food and lavish toys. He didn't say that. He said, "Store up your treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, where thieves do not break in and steal." My friends, we only have to look a moment at biblical pictures of heaven to learn that God has great reward in store for those who stay the course.

Joel looked at his people and said, "Look, who knows? God may put a little something in your stocking." Pay attention to his word and His ways, and he might pay you a little return.

Now, we must acknowledge the theological land mine of v.14. It says that God may relent. That word can also be translated, "repent." It could also be rendered, "Change his mind." How can a God who is unchangeable suddenly change? We must tread lightly here for we could soon find ourselves on the heretical island of process theology, which suggests that God is learning and growing and improving over time. He's getting better.

No, God does not change his mind like a man does. You and I visit the ice cream shop and we bounce back and forth on our selection. This is not how God is to be viewed. He's not in heaven wondering how this whole thing is going to play out. His purposes are like his world—firmly established. He is sovereign.

So what does it mean that Joel says, "God may relent" ?

I find this word interesting. Harbinger. Do you know what that word means? Harbinger. It means an omen, a sign, anything that foreshadows a future event. The first frost is a harbinger of the winter. This word shows up over and over in commentaries and it seems

to make good sense. The catastrophe of the locusts was devastating, but it was only a harbinger of the Day of the Lord. A time of total wrath was on the horizon and the people would be wise to turn around.

So you see, in some ways, Joel plays of Jacob Marley. He says, “Change your ways or else. God isn’t playing.”

And if you do change your ways, you can still experience a time of refreshment. This is one of those unique places in Scripture where human freedom and personal responsibility is put on display. The fate of Judah was up to Judah. God gave them the ability to decide and he would hold them responsible.

In 2008, the pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, Erwin Lutzer published a book with a provocative title, “Is God on America’s Side?” In some ways, Lutzer was seeking to sound the alarm just like Joel did in Judah. Should we assume that God is on America’s side simply because His name is on our money? Is it safe to say the angels are protecting this land from evil because the Founding Documents pay tribute to God? Lutzer says, as you might expect, certainly not. What God wants in America is a people who have turned their face to Him, a people who praise Him for purple mountain majesties, a people who protect the innocent and promote justice. Since 1984, almost every State of the Union message has concluded with the Commander in Chief declaring, “May God Bless America.” What America fails to see, is that we must first turn back to Him.

Do I believe that the 9/11 terrorist attack was the judgment of God for our silent permission of abortion or same-sex marriage? I cannot presume to know. But what I can say is this: harbinger. Harbinger. As frost foreshadows winter, every tragic event below is a reminder that the Day of the Lord is coming. And in this moment, we have time to take shelter by turning back to God. He will protect those that are His.

### **3. He placed the responsibility on the leaders.**

Beginning with v.15, a list of commands comes forth: Blow the horn, announce a fast, proclaim an assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the aged, gather the children, cancel the weddings...

And who is supposed to lead out in this mood of mourning? Who is supposed to set the example and sound the alarm? V.17, the priests. The spiritual leaders should show the way and model godly sorrow for their sins.

People are often prompted by the people who lead. Modeling repentance is moving. Not long ago, I heard Pastor C.J. Mahaney tell the story of a trip he took with his wife. He was going to preach at a sister church and on the way, he and his wife got into a conflict. He wanted desperately to resolve the conflict, to be fully reconciled before he reached the church. As he drove into the parking lot, things had only escalated and there, right in front of the church, he and his wife sat in their car and disagreed. People passed by the car and smiled and waved and the Mahaney’s did their best to fake excitement.

Before long, it was time for the service to start and they were not able to make amends. He climbed up into the pulpit to preach, and the Lord prompted him to share his hurt. He said, "I feel like I need to say that my wife and I had a heated disagreement on the way here. We did not resolve it. I would like to ask you to pray for us that we could reconcile quickly." And he said all this through a broken heart.

After the service, congregants flooded to the platform and one after another said, "Thank you so much for sharing that conflict with your wife. Sometimes us people in the pews need to see that our leaders are real people too." Mahaney said, "If I had known that all I had to do was stand up and spill out my sin, and this would leave an impression on the people, I could have watched a whole lot more football that afternoon!"

The story moved me as I heard him share that experience. His repentance made my heart feel more open to repentance. As people see godly sorrow in those they respect, they too will seek to model it.

Joel said, "When the leaders do the right thing, and demonstrate sorrow for sin, the people will follow. And it's a domino effect. Before long, a spirit of repentance will begin to pervade the land."

And what happens when people are humble, confessing their sins and turning back to God? V.18...

Is the Lord asking you to put away your pride and to demonstrate repentance?  
Is it possible that the Lord wants to pour out blessing upon your life, but he is holding back so long as you do?  
Are you ready to make the change?

Harbinger. It can also be used in a positive way, you know. Just as budding flower foreshadows the warmth of spring, so a soft and repentant heart is a picture of the life and joy that is future for those who face up to their sins and return to the Lord.