

A Call To Return

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Return to the Lord / Joel 2:12–19; Psalm 51:1–13; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6; Matthew 6:16–21

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.

Return to the Lord your God!

This is the drumbeat of our Lenten worship series this year: Return.

We hear God calling out to us: “Return to Prayer”; “Return from Betrayal”; “Return from False Witness”; “Return from Denial”; “Return to the Kingdom of God”; “Return to the Table”; “Return to Truth”; “Return to the Church”; “Return and See” what God has done for you.

And so, as we launch this series on this Ash Wednesday, this beginning of Lent, we gather together first to hear Joel’s prophecy and God’s invitation. Our Old Testament Reading from Joel gets us oriented to the season, highlights the problem, and lays out the solution in all its beauty and simplicity. God calls us to simply return to Him, because He will address our needs and provide for our salvation.

Our task for today is simple:

First, we will look at Joel’s prophecy and the context in which it came. What was going on? How did God’s Words speak to the situation? And how might that have sounded to the people?

Second, we will think about whether this prophecy applies to us. Are these words only for the Israelites in Joel’s day, or do they have something to offer us as well?

Finally, we’ll hear this invitation and promise offered to us and spend a little time getting oriented to how we will walk down this path.

Let's begin by doing a little time-traveling to ancient Israel, where we can get some idea of the people to whom Joel was speaking and understand more about what was going on in their world.

We don't know a lot about the prophet Joel. He was likely ministering in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The book that bears his name is relatively short—only seventy-three verses organized in three chapters. But it is rich and deep and complex. His jumping-off point is a plague of locusts that had or would strike Israel and that served to foreshadow the coming “Day of the Lord.” Whether that plague was literal or figurative is unclear, but Joel's message is straightforward: a day of judgment will come, and he pleads with the people to turn to God so that they would be found righteous on that “great and awesome day” ([Joel 2:31](#)).

The outline of Joel's prophecy is simple:

Part 1: There's an invasion of locusts that will destroy all vegetation. Joel calls the people to fast at the temple and then offers a prayer of lament over the coming destruction.

Part 2: If you thought that was bad, there's something even more significant coming: “the day of the Lord is coming, it is near” ([Joel 2:1](#)). Joel describes the Lord's army using the imagery of destroying locusts. He issues a call to return to the Lord and to fast and pray at the temple.

Part 3: God responds. First, to the locust plague, offering healing and restoration. Then, on a much bigger scale, God responds in the day of the Lord, giving salvation to all those who call on his name and passing judgment on the worldly nations who have played fast and loose with God's chosen people.

Our reading for today is drawn right out of the center of the book. The imagery of the swarm of locusts has been completed; the comparison to the Lord's army and the Day of the Lord has been made; and the reader is left wondering what can be done.

It's a little like the scene when the rich young man approaches Jesus and asks what good deed he must do to have eternal life. Jesus counsels the young man

to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor, presumably to undercut the man's love for money. And the young man goes away sad. Jesus turns to His disciples and explains how difficult it is for someone with wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven. And the disciples "were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?'"

You almost hear Joel's audience asking the same of him: "Who then can be saved?"

But Joel brings good news; he brings a promise and it's simple:

English Standard Version Chapter 2

32 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.

They needed only to return to the Lord their God,

English Standard Version Chapter 2

for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.

They needed only to stop trusting in themselves and trust in God. They needed only to realize that just as they couldn't stop the swarming locusts, neither would they be able to stop Judgment Day. It will come. All will be affected. And the only solution is to return to the Lord.

But are those words only for the Israelites? Might you be facing a swarm of locusts that threatens to completely destroy you?

You certainly are! There are small, unassuming little things that each do a little bit of damage. But they add up to a destructive force that descends on the landscape and decimates everything good in its path. Your sins are like locusts. And while one little locust doesn't seem all that terrifying, when the entire list of your deeds is considered, it is breathtaking and terrifying. If the "wages of sins is death" ([Romans 6:23](#)), and if, as Ezekiel says, "the soul who sins shall die" ([Ezekiel 18:20](#)), then this locust swarm of our sins is frightening indeed.

Joel's words can and should hit you the same way they hit the Israelites. The Day of the Lord will come, and with it immense destruction and terror. Of yourself, there is no way to escape it. The times you sinned, oh there are many. The times when you coveted something of your neighbor. The times you bore false witness against a coworker or classmate or friend. The times when you figured no one would notice if you took some office supplies from work. The times when you just had to have one more look at the pretty girl at the pool or at the shirtless muscular guy at the construction site. The times when you lost your temper and flipped off the guy who cut you off on the highway. The times when you treated your father with contempt or dismissed your mother's request to clean up your mess. The times when you didn't just disrespect the authorities God gave you in your home, but also in the realm of the church and the state. When you blew off worship because you didn't like the preacher. When you blew off worship because you are living in fear. When you stung together a string of curse words that would make a sailor blush. When you trusted in yourself and your own knowledge then in the wisdom of God. When you decided that you knew better than God about...well...everything. That's the swarm of locusts and their are so many more...and destruction of all of the vegetation is the least of your worries. Eternal death and damnation should absolutely terrify you.

Joel brings good news *for you* too! He brings a promise. And it's simple:

English Standard Version Chapter 2

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.

English Standard Version Chapter 2

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.

In spite of your sinful rejection of God, He invites you to return to Him and promises to bless you. Stop trusting in yourself and look to God. Know that you

can't stop the swarming locusts and you can't stop Judgment Day. It will come. All will be affected. And the only solution is to return to the Lord.

Over the coming weeks, we will explore more deeply how God's call to return plays out in our lives, and we'll do so by walking in the steps of the disciples and those who accompanied Jesus in the final days of His life. We will hear the call to return as it echoes in the ears and maybe come to understand it the way they did. For example, next Wednesday we will spend some time with Peter, James, and John as they accompany Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our theme is "Return to Prayer." Similar themes will follow each week in Lent. I invite you to be here for each of our midweek services as we follow Joel's call to

English Standard Version Chapter 2

gather the people.
Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.

We'll come together and listen to God's call, and we will return to Him,

English Standard Version Chapter 2

for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord, our Lenten King. Amen.