

Sermon Notes
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Times of Refreshing¹

Joel Series: The Day of the LORD is Coming

Sermon 3: Joel 2:18-27

March 25, 2018

“Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming;” (Joel 2:1)

1. Introduction

Good morning and welcome to New City Church Toronto. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Jacques. I am one of the elders here. Some of you know already that I have a passion for recovering the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. Even if some Old Testament books seem strange or difficult to us, still they form part of our story. We know who we are and who God is because we have these books in our Bible. Today we will continue our series in the book of Joel. But first, let us pray.

2. Prayer for Refreshing

Lord Jesus, we carry heavy burdens with us and we come to you for rest.² I confess that I have frequently ignored your invitation to come and be blessed, and I have no one else to blame but myself.

We pray, Holy Spirit, that you would enliven us today, both to hear and to rejoice in the promises of your Scripture. Please make your living Word produce fruit in us so that we will be able to see clearly the ways in which you bless us already and how we may ourselves become a blessing to others.

Blessed Father, enable us to seek you and find you so that times of refreshing may come to us from your presence. Amen.

3. Sermon

(a) Introduction

In the last sermon I took up Joel 2:12 and exhorted you to return to the Lord with all your heart. But you might say to me, “why would I bother? Life seems fine the way it is.” My response today is simple: because it is good for you. And I don't mean ‘good for you’ in the sense of some nasty medicine that you need to swallow because it will do you good. Rather, I mean ‘good for you’ in the sense of someone who stumbles upon a beautiful clean-water oasis in the middle of an arid desert. As Peter says in Acts 3: “Therefore

1. See Acts 3:19 (NASB). Note that the ESV divides the verses differently.

2. See Matt 11:28-30.

repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (3:19 NASB).³

(b) Israel as Object Lesson

Some of us would immediately recognize the value of an object lesson: some practical, even physical, example of a more abstract principle. I want you to consider a view where the pre-Jesus nation of Israel serves as an elaborate object lesson for all other nations and generations.

Our post-Jesus Gospel promises a future resurrection from death into a new created order where we will be fully sanctified in our desires, and where there will be no more pain, or tears, or death.⁴ The Christian faith involves believing and trusting in that promise of things unseen, and that faith in future vindication guides our daily actions in the present.

Although the Christian church is the continuation of the Old Testament people of God,⁵ we today are nonetheless treated somewhat differently from how Israel was treated according to the old covenant. In Jesus, we have a new covenant, and with the new covenant, new promises and expectations. Yet still, the general principles behind both covenants are the same, even if the particulars are different. For that reason, there is still much that we can learn from reading about Israel’s old covenant, because at every point God’s mission in the world has been consistent: God has, since the Garden of Eden, been at work in the world to gather a faithful people for Himself in order to lavish blessing on that people.⁶

As we attend to our passage today, we will have to be cautious on the particulars of how God desires to bless His people. According to the old covenant, blessing was first promised to be material. If God’s people lived their lives in full commitment to God’s commands, then God promised to demonstrate His power to all the nations by giving Israel plenty of food and wealth, and to protect them from harm.

In our context, however, we have to recognize that God’s people is no longer a single ethnic tribe tied to a single piece of land on the eastern Mediterranean. Whereas the old covenant had its own political, national, and religious dimensions, our new covenant fulfills those same dimensions in a different way. Israel had a human king who ruled over a particular territory, with political and economic influence over certain areas and people groups. That king was subject to God’s law as it was taught by the official priesthood and reinforced by God’s prophets.

None of that is quite the same anymore. When God the Father raised Jesus from the tomb, Jesus was proved to be Israel’s eternal king, Israel’s permanent high priest, Israel’s authoritative prophet. With the sending out of the apostles to preach the Good News to all nations,⁷ the political and economic dimensions of the Israel of God dissolved. God’s peo-

3. The ESV divides the verses differently such that this portion spans Acts 3:19-20.

4. Cf. Phil 1:6; 1 John 3:1-3 and Rev 21:1-4.

5. See Romans 11, especially 11:17.

6. See Exod 6:7; 19:5-6; 1 Sam 12:22; Eph 2:8-21.

7. See Matt 28:18-20.

ple don't live in a separate place from the rest of humanity anymore. Instead, we live among the nations. We are their neighbours. We suffer what they suffer. We share the same governments, the same weather, the same cost of living.

We do have the same mission as the old covenant people of God. That mission has always been to make God known to those who don't know God and His blessing. However, we now have a better understanding of the fact that the full blessing that God promises to us will only be realized in a future time when Jesus returns in all His glory to set right what is woefully awry.

(c) The Two Aspects of Joel

Already in Joel's prophecy God was unravelling this dual approach to blessing. The book of Joel speaks to two major themes: the prophet's present and the future Day of the Lord. We, who come to Joel as an ancient text, can see how Joel's present time is a tangible example of the general principle described for the future time.

The two major themes share two important aspects: the terrifying and the comforting. First, the terrifying. We have seen over two sermons how the remnant people of Judah – one of the tribes of Israel – have gotten themselves into a serious predicament. Their failure to uphold covenant and to worship the LORD God as their only god has, quite justly, brought upon them the covenant curses.⁸ They were faced with a terrifying plague of locusts and drought at the same time. As food became scarce, prices would have gone through the roof. Not only material comforts, but also basic necessities were in jeopardy. The people of God were made to feel in their very bodies the result of separation from God. And yet, this suffering was only a taste of what ultimate separation from God would be like. The terrifying message that Joel brings culminates in the solemn promise that there would be a day when God would judge the nations, as we will see when we get to chapter 3.

But both the present and the future have a comforting side as well. Joel's mission is precisely to get the people to turn back to God, to acknowledge God alone as the provider of all blessing. And just as they tasted the result of their own unfaithfulness, so also would they taste, literally, the fruit of God's blessing once they had repented. And that too could be generalized and projected into the future. The Day of the Lord is as much good news as warning. "Every person who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" according to chapter 2, verse 32. A life giving spring will go out from the temple of God, according to chapter 3, verse 18 – the same spring featured in Revelation 22 that flows out of the throne of God and of the Lamb and which feeds all the trees for food and healing.

(d) Main Exposition: Joel 2:18-24

With the preceding as background, turn with me to Joel 2:18 (READ Joel 2:18).

Notice the past tense: "the LORD *became* jealous" and "*had* pity." In the flow of chapter 2 these past tense verbs come to us as a surprise. In verse 17 we were still in the prophet's

8. See Lev 26 and Deut 28.

instructions for how the people should pray, but in verse 18 we are already on to God's response to those prayers. Maybe to save space, maybe for some other reason, the book of Joel does not narrate the fact that the people obeyed Joel's instructions, but instead it simply assumes that they did. They were instructed to return to God with their whole heart (2:12) and they did so.

In fact, if we pay attention to verses 22 and 23, it is clear that today's passage reports God's response some months after Joel's initial call to repentance. Verse 22 says (READ Joel 2:22-23). Enough time has passed for the rains to fall and for the trees to flower and bear young fruit.

The point is, in order to read Joel coherently we have to assume that Joel's audience heeded his prophetic commands and returned to the Lord as they should. And it is in response to their repentance⁹ that God turns to them with compassion and covenant blessing. Specifically, God promises that He is sending grain, wine, and oil in plenty to make up for the years that the locusts devoured (cf. 2:19, 25-26).

But let us consider verse 18 in detail. (READ Joel 2:18)

The Hebrew verb *qinnē*, translated here as 'to become jealous,' is very important. An adjective of the same root is at the heart of the first commandment:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (Exodus 20:2–6 ESV)

God declares Himself to be someone who passionately desires our complete devotion. Imagine a married couple. The jealousy described in the first commandment is like that of a husband for his wife's attention. If a wife began to cheat on her husband with another man, the husband would, rightly, be both hurt and angry. In this case jealousy is the desire to receive what is rightfully one's own on the basis of a special relationship. It is because God loves His people so much that God wants to be with us; God wants our attention and deserves our attention because God made us and called us to a unique life in His mercy. But if we seek satisfaction elsewhere, then God is hurt and angry.

Here, however, in verse 18, we have the flip side of that same jealousy. Just like a good husband, God not only wants our attention and love, but He also wants us to flourish. What would you think of a husband that turns away from his wife when she needs him the most? That would be quite terrible, wouldn't it? But God is not like that. In verse 18 we have affirmation that the plight of the land and of His people is distressing to God.¹⁰

9. See the verb *ānā* 'to respond' in 2:19. I take this, as is consistent with the use of this verb, to imply that God is speaking in response to something the people have done, namely repenting just as Joel instructed.

The whole reason for the plague of locusts was to wake the people¹¹ and to get them to turn back again. As soon as they had, God looked favourably upon them.

God's jealousy for His land and people moves Him to action. And we can depend on the same reaction to us as God's people. God is determined to save us so that we can enjoy Him and His blessing.¹² If we can only learn to pray into this aspect of God's passionate love for us, we will see how God comes to us with spiritual support to see us through to the end, the end being especially the future resurrection life, but also the present life of toiling for what is yet unseen.¹³

In order to better understand what kind of blessing we might expect now, I want to focus in on the promise of verse 19. Verse 20 is a promise to scatter the army from the north and drown it in the Dea Sea to the east and the Mediterranean to the west. Whether that army is the locust army, as the context might suggest, or some other real army, as some commentators think, the point is that God is going to extinguish them as a threat. This army has done great things, but, verse 21 insists, God Himself has done – and will do – great things. And the great things that God is doing pertain to the promise of abundant food. Read with me starting in verse 19 (READ Joel 2:19-24).

Again, paying attention to the tenses, we can note that some things lie in the future and some things are already past. Verse 19 promises that in the near future, when the harvest is ripe, the people will have grain, wine, and oil aplenty and they will be “satisfied.” I would prefer to translate “you will be sated,”¹⁴ which is to say “you will eat until you can't eat anymore.” But that is still future. The grain is not yet in the granaries, nor the wine and oil ready to be pressed (cf. 2:24).

And yet, the crops are on their way. And they don't just have to take Joel's word for it. They can open their eyes and take a look. Verse 22 explains that the pastures are green again; the fruit trees are already carrying their bounty. How is that possible? Well, says verse 23, it is possible because God has already sent the rains at the proper time: the early rains that allowed the planting and the late rains that help the harvest grow.

In other words, Joel's message is “be comforted and trust.” “Do not fear,” rather “be glad and rejoice.” The signs of God's blessing are already visible and nothing will stop that blessing from reaching fruition.

At this point I need you to be patient with me. This is the point where you have to examine yourself. I can guide you to this point, but you, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will have to fill in the blanks. Whereas Joel's audience had every right to expect covenant fulfillment in terms of grain, wine, and oil, blessing in your life may be somewhat different. What I want you to do is to consider what future blessing a sign in your present is pointing to.

10. Cf. Joel 1:6-7 where the first person pronouns are best understood as referring to God Himself. There God's distress over the devastation is palpable.

11. See Joel 1:5.

12. Cf. John 10:10.

13. Cf. Heb 11.

14. This is the meaning of the Hebrew verb *śāba* '.

If you ever enjoy the taste of a special treat, then you are benefiting from what theologians call common grace. Common grace is everything that all of humanity gets to share in due to the simple fact that God created a good world to live in and to enjoy. That special taste of good food, that good kind of soreness you get in your muscles from doing exercise, the materials that allow us to make better and lighter bicycles – whatever it is – all those good blessings point to the future new creation where everything will be utterly good. We too are waiting for the harvest to ripen, but even now, if we just open our eyes, we can see the signs that God is already seeking to bless us.

And we can look at things from another perspective as well, the perspective of sanctification. The reason there is need for a new creation apart from the old one is that without Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are not fit to live in the new creation and must abide in this old one. In the new creation, after the resurrection, we won't struggle with sin anymore. The trajectory that began with Jesus offering Himself for our forgiveness and continues now with the Holy Spirit strengthening us to obey God will culminate at that point and we will be completely sinless. Finally, we will love God with our whole being. Finally, we will treat others the way we ought to have treated them all along.

But that is the harvest. It is our future. Think now about your present. What are the seeds that God has planted in your life? By what means has God watered them and made them grow? What kind of young fruit can you see growing?

(e) Personal Narrative

Ten years ago I began to take Christian faith seriously. Weekly Bible studies had caught my attention and I was beginning to understand the basic Gospel message. When I finished my studies in engineering I found that I couldn't pursue the plans I had before because I was too interested in finding answers to Bible questions. That desire led me to a short Bible school program where I met my wife Paige. But there was still more to learn, so the next year we got married and moved to Vancouver so that I could do a master's program in biblical studies.

Those early years were fantastic. We had been fed spiritually by our studies and by our involvement at our church. I had grown in wisdom and knowledge at a rapid pace. God was first in my life, and day to day life reflected it. But in 2014 we packed up all our things and our little baby and we moved to Toronto. We knew no one. We were trying to adjust to being parents. I was busier than ever trying to prove myself in a PhD program. And, most significant of all, at the most crucial time, I let busyness squeeze out the spiritual disciplines that I knew I needed to survive. I knew full well that I could not survive in a secular environment without steady prayer and Bible reading. And yet, I did not heed my own wisdom.

The three years that followed were without doubt the worst ones that we have lived together as a couple. Like Joel's contemporaries, I experienced the real consequence of straying away from my God. To simply say that I was stressed, or depressed, or frustrated does not do justice to those years. Even though we had been quite certain that God had led us to this place, by the end of the first term I was strongly considering a new career path. It didn't really matter what that path was, as long as it was something else. In the

deep of winter, when crossing busy streets in the dark, I often thought to myself that it would be much easier to be hit by a truck than to keep on going.

And that is just how I was feeling. There were other more tangible consequences of putting work before God. Over time my temper – something that I had gotten control over years before – started to get worse. I was also becoming more and more distant from Paige, and that had a severe impact on her mood and wellbeing. There were growing doubts in my mind about what could be true, and the result was that I was subject to stronger and stronger temptations. In short, my faith was drying up and it had very sinister practical consequences.

I tell you, if it had been up to my own faithfulness alone, I would not be here right now. But, praise God, I have a Saviour who is utterly faithful. When God adopted me as one of His children¹⁵ He did so with the full intention of holding on. The Holy Spirit was still working in me to complete the good work that He had begun (cf. Phil 1:6). I felt a constant call, as we read in Joel 2:12, to return to God with all my heart.¹⁶

Finally, I responded to the Spirit's prompting and reached out to a friend to start a small discipleship group. It turns out that this friend was himself thinking of exactly the same thing. For one and a half years we prayed together and supported each other, and all the while I was praying that God would set me free from my resistance to His grace. I knew all the right things, but I just did not have the desire or ability to follow through.

But even if change was slow, we were both certain that God was doing something. Our meetings were always attended by Jesus. As it says in Matthew 18:20, "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them." And, after months of holy struggle, God did something amazing in my life – a real miracle. God had moved Paige's sister and her husband – called Joel, by the way – to invite us for a special occasion. They saw an opportunity to treat me to a conference in Wittenberg, Germany, the city where Martin Luther had lived, to celebrate 500 years of Protestant Reformation. To make sure I would go, they paid all our expenses.

But they did not know what God was doing through them. They did not know what impact that conference would have in my life. Five strange, wonderful, and challenging days of listening to the Word of God preached loosed a burden in my heart that I could not have loosed myself. The first day was the hardest. When the sessions were over, my brother-in-law and I went walking around in the dark to debrief the day. I was emotional, but he listened and talked and counselled while God worked a change in me. When we prayed finally, I wept because of the pain those years had cost me.

That day, the key was that I had to humble myself under God's Word. I had to repent of my pride and I had to acknowledge how foolish I had been to walk in a direction that I had known was a dead end to begin with. I had to return to Jesus with all my heart, and He was there, happy to receive me.¹⁷ And after that, the conference was all life giving.

15. Cf. 1 John 3:1.

16. Consider whether the people would have repented at all if God had not commissioned Joel to preach to them. God is always the one taking initiative in our salvation and sanctification.

And the change that God brought about in my life was incredible. Up until that moment, I had filled my life with so many distractions – so many projects that I clung to for a sense of accomplishment. And I hated all of it. No matter how much I tried to do, I never felt that I was accomplishing enough.¹⁸ Almost overnight I lost all desire to continue those projects. Suddenly, in a small German city far away from home, all I wanted was to grow in faith. I wanted only to read the Bible again and to renew my prayer habits. I was filled with the desire to teach you about the *solas* of the Reformation for our fall retreat. I was filled with a desire to teach you how to read the Bible. I was filled with a desire to preach an expository series on Joel. And in the midst of it all, I felt the sweet taste of God’s presence in my life. Real joy returned to me. It is as it says in Psalm 1: I, who had learned again to delight in the Word of God, was “like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps 1:3), and no longer like “chaff that the wind drives away” (Ps 1:4).

The Bible often uses the image of fresh water to describe what it is like to be in the presence of God.¹⁹ God is the only one in whom is life itself,²⁰ and that life is always overflowing for our benefit. He is a fountain of refreshing for us, if only we will seek out God’s company and recognize that He is God, and therefore His will takes precedence. And unlike our own will, which is often selfish, God’s will is to do good to you and to me.

(f) Exhortation and Promise: Joel 2:25-27

I have asked you to discern events in your own life. I understand that you may feel dry right now; that you may feel like you are carrying a heavy burden; that something in your life may be squeezing the joy out of you. Receive these words from Joel 2. (READ Joel 2:25-27)

This promise is faithful and true. The verb *shillēm* translated here as ‘to restore’ means to pay back completely. God understands the difficulties that we face in this life, and He intends to make up for it completely. The apostle Paul is convinced of this. That is why he writes in Romans: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18).

Christianity is a faith based on hope. It is a faith based on trust in the promise of the Scriptures that God is guiding history to a perfect end – or rather, a perfect beginning. The resurrection and final judgment will be for us who believe the beginning of life everlasting. What will that life be like? It isn’t entirely clear. But it will be good. And everyone who trusts in Jesus will have that trust vindicated. People out there may laugh at you because of your hope. They may even hate you and shame you for it. But someday, when

17. Like the father receiving back his lost son in Luke 15:11-32.

18. Everything is indeed meaningless unless God is at the center of life; cf. Eccl 1:2; 12:13-14.

19. Some examples are Psalm 1; Ezek 47; Joel 3:18; John 4:10; 7:37-39; Rev 21:6; 22:1-2.

20. More precisely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all have life in themselves; see John 5:26; 6:63. In John 6:63 the Greek τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν τὸ ζωοποιῶν means literally “the Spirit is the life-giver.”

it is too late, they will see that Joel was right all along.²¹ They will see that the LORD is God “and there is no one else” (Joel 2:27). And God’s people will “never again be put to shame” (2:27).

In closing, I ask you again to consider what signs in your past and present are pointing to future blessing. Who first shared the Gospel of Jesus with you? Does the life of some person here represent God’s faithfulness to you? Do you recognize the difference between a day begun with prayer and one begun without it? Is there some good thing that God has set before you to do to bless someone else? Are you attune to God’s invitation to become part of His mission to bless the world? And, of course, are you prepared to confess your absolute dependence on God’s mercy and to reframe your life today in light of Jesus and His sacrifice for you?

The future blessing that Joel foresaw is secure only because the Son of God became a man, overcame our burdens, and died our covenant curse on the cross. And the life that He now lives by the power of the Holy Spirit is available to you now, already, in this present time.

Hear again God’s invitation: “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you” (3:19-20 NASB).

4. Prayer

Let me pray these words by John Calvin:

Grant, Almighty God, that as we continue to excite your wrath against us, and are so insensible, though you exhort us daily to repentance, — O grant, that what your Prophet teaches may penetrate into our hearts, and be like a sounding trumpet, that we may be really and sincerely made humble before you, and be so touched with the sense of your wrath, that we may learn to put off all the depraved affections of our flesh, and not merely to deplore the sins we have already committed: and do you also look upon us in future, that we may diligently walk in your fear, and consecrate ourselves wholly to you; and as you have deigned to choose us for your inheritance, and gather us under your Christ, may we so live under him as our leader, until we be at length gathered into your celestial kingdom to enjoy that happy rest, which you have promised to us, and which you promise also daily, and which has been purchased by the blood of the same, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.²²

21. Cf. Phil 2:9-11.

22. Direct quotation except for updating of English pronouns and verbs from John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King; Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), paragraph 57985. (Specifically, following the commentary on Joel 2:20.)