



Mt Zion Brundidge

PRAYING AT THE CROSSROADS- PRAYERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT •
THE PRAYER OF JOEL • JOEL 2:1-17 • 5/27/2020

MAIN POINT

Restoration begins in prayer with total surrender and dependence on the Lord, who alone can restore our relationship with Him.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

How would you describe the present condition of your spiritual life? Is it vital and full of life, or are you in a season of apathy, complacency, or dullness? Share as appropriate.

How would you describe the present spiritual climate in our church, community, state, and nation? Would you say we're in a season of spiritual famine, moral decline, and decay? If so, who's responsible for it?

What needs to happen for restoration to occur?

There is a great need for God's restoration through revival today. The church desperately needs the Lord. We begin the journey toward restoration through desperation, humility, and brokenness before God. To humble ourselves before God requires great abandonment of self. This begins with us, not someone else, and with prayer in total surrender and dependence on the Lord, who alone can restore our relationship with Him. We desperately need to pray for God's restoration through revival before it's too late. This is what Joel 2 is all about: God's call to prayers that restore.

WATCH VIDEO SESSION 6 OF PRAYING AT THE CROSSROADS—THE PRAYER OF JOEL.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JOEL 2:1-32.

The prophet Joel, writing in the eighth or ninth century BC, relayed to a rebellious people God's deadline for His judgment on sin and His call for restoration. In Joel 1, Joel described the onslaught and devastation that a plague of locusts had brought on the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Despite the locusts, God's people continued in their sin. In Joel 2:1-11, God's discipline intensified—Joel announced that an invading army from the north was approaching. As before with the locusts, the devastation would be overwhelming and far-reaching.

“The LORD disciplines the one he loves” (Prov. 3:12). After reading Joel 2:1-11, how would you describe God's hand of discipline on His people?

How important is it for God's people to understand His perspective on sin? What are the implications if we don't acknowledge God's judgment and perspective?

God was drawing a line in the sand before His people. What should they do? How should they respond? Amid the physical and spiritual famine, God invited His people to return to Him. Genuine biblical repentance was required (see vv. 12-13). Repentance included both brokenness over sin (“Tear your hearts,” v. 13) and a wholehearted return to the Lord. Turning back to God was possible because the Lord is “gracious and compassionate” (v. 13). Contentment with His presence and restoration through relationship were the end goal, not His deliverance. His people must desire and trust Him above all (see v. 14).

What does the use of the phrase “Tear your hearts” in verse 13 say about the seriousness of God's call to repentance?

How do the character traits of God that are mentioned in verse 13 encourage you to repent when you've sinned?

Verses 15-16 demonstrate that the call to repentance wasn't just personal but was also corporate. This was a very urgent, serious invitation to gather and seek the Lord (“Announce a sacred fast,” v. 15). Because God's people were up against His judgment, everyone was required to attend a sacred assembly. It was now or never. The congregation had to be sanctified (see v. 16) if the people were to experience the Lord's renewed presence, deliverance, and restoration.

Have you ever been a part of a sacred assembly in a local congregation? Discuss the significance of a sacred or solemn assembly in the life of a church.

What do verses 15-16 teach us about the seriousness of corporate sin?

This call to congregational purity was also a call for spiritual leaders to step up and lead God's people back to Him. Their role involved both personal and public brokenness over the nation's spiritual famine. The leaders were, therefore, to "weep between the portico and the altar" (v. 17) and to humble themselves and lead God's people in desperate, united prayer for His mercy and intervention. God was their only hope as the surrounding nations mocked His people and asked, "Where is their God?" (v. 17).

How important is united prayer for God's mercy and intervention in your life and your church?

Joel 2:18-32 describes what can take place when God pours out His mercy on His people as they repent, return, and seek Him through humble, passionate, and desperate prayer. God heard their cries and returned to His people. As God's people pray and experience His restoration in the present, their hope and assurance in His future work of redemption and restoration are constantly being rekindled.

Give examples of ways God has restored you, your family, or your church as you've prayed during a seemingly hopeless situation.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What are you doing as a believer and/or as a leader to guide others toward desperate prayer for personal and corporate revival and spiritual awakening? Where do you need to begin?

How might God be calling us to "blow the trumpet" of returning to Him (v. 15) both in personal relationships and our church community through fasting and prayer?

How might this display the power, sovereignty, and goodness of Christ, rather than leave our community asking, "Where is their God?" (v. 17)?

PRAYER

Praise God for disciplining and judging us as His people from a heart of love. Ask the Lord to identify any unconfessed sin or signs of a rebellious spirit in your heart and in your church. Pray

that the Lord will restore your desire to seek Him and His holy, manifest presence with and through you, not just His deliverance and blessings. Ask the Father to grant you the grace needed to seek Him and to lead others to seek His mercy and restoration through revival and spiritual awakening in your life, church, community, and nation.

COMMENTARY

| JOEL 2:1-17

2:1. Commentators are divided over the identity of the invading northern army described in chapter 2. (1) Some see it as a figurative description of the locust invasion of chapter 1. (2) Some see literal enemy troops coming from the north, described as invading locusts. (3) Revelation 9:3-11 compares demonic forces to locusts. Whether this army was man or insect, it represented the judgment force of Yahweh. Joel as a spiritual watchman sounded the alarm, just as other prophets did. Yahweh warned the people through His spokesman Joel on My holy mountain. This and the reference to Zion are the first geographical indicators in Joel. The prophet was called to sound the alarm to the nation from Jerusalem, from the place where the temple stood.

2:2. The people of God have often longed for the coming of Yahweh. Isaiah declared, "If only You would tear the heavens open and come down, so that the mountains would quake at Your presence" (Isa. 64:1). But Joel insisted that this day would be a day of darkness... gloom, blackness, and destruction (Zeph. 1:14-17).

2:3. The coming destructive army would be like a forest fire or a locust invasion. Paradise would be turned into a desert.

2:4-5. An attack of war horses and chariots was the ancient equivalent to blitzkrieg—the lightning war. As Germany overran entire countries in World War II, so this army of locusts would gallop like war horses. The deafening sound of their charge and the roaring of a forest fire are compared to the sounds heard on the coming Day of the Lord.

2:6. As in Psalm 96:9 and 97:4, all the peoples or nations will be terrorized by the appearance of the Lord.

2:7-8. In many biblical passages (e.g., Judg. 6:5; Isa. 33:4; Jer. 51:14) armies are compared to locusts and sometimes locusts are compared to armies (Prov. 30:27).

2:9-11. Joel continued the interplay of soldiers with the imagery and actions of a locust plague. The swarming locusts ate everything in the fields and then came into the city and finally into the houses. So also invading armies breached the city walls and then plundered the houses. Joel used end-time language and moved beyond what happens in normal locust or military invasions. The very heavens were now engaged; Yahweh and His heavenly armies were ready to wreak havoc. Judgment day had come.

2:12. For all that was coming to the people, Joel counseled them to react, not with despair, but with faith (see Hab. 2:4). In saying that they should return even now, and in declaring this to be a word from God, Joel affirmed that God had not finally rejected them and that He was yet ready to heal them. The call here is for repentance—an attitude of remorse for sin and a cry for forgiveness that weeping and fasting visibly express. The emotional demonstration is not just for show—the next verse shows that Joel was aware of the possibility of making a pretense of repentance through dramatic gestures. The weeping and fasting called for are appropriate indications that the people repent with their whole hearts. In other words, they are signs that the people truly feel the weight of their sin and do not engage in repentance flippantly. John Calvin once commented “moderate repentance will not do.”

2:13. Although the Old Testament several times calls on people to circumcise their hearts (see Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4), this is the only place where a prophet calls on them to tear their hearts and not their garments. Ritual repentance, however fervently carried out, is of no use if the heart is unchanged. A frequent criticism directed at Joel is that he was not a great ethical prophet. That is, we do not see in Joel the kind of diatribe against injustice, idolatry, or immorality that we find in the other prophets. It is undeniable that Joel was so focused on the day of the Lord that he had little room in his small book for anything else. Still he captured the very heart of biblical ethics when he demanded genuine repentance from the people. Right behavior results from true submission to God, and this is where Joel pointed. Also, the exhortation to return to Yahweh could be a call to abandon the idols of Canaan, but it is certainly a call to turn away from sin.

The Old Testament frequently repeats the confession that Yahweh is gracious and compassionate (2 Chron. 30:9; Neh. 9:17, 31; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; Jonah 4:2). This was the language Yahweh Himself used when He gave a second copy of the Ten Commandments to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7. The second issuing of the tablets of the Law was itself a second chance for Israel to keep the covenant. Joel, in effect, reminded his people that Yahweh was the God of second chances.

This expression, together with Who knows? whether he will not turn and relent from verse 14, implies that Joel is here dependent on Jonah 3:9 and 4:2. This may be, for the language of the texts is remarkably similar. At the same time, there is no unambiguous evidence about the direction of the borrowing, and we should hesitate about drawing conclusions from these parallels.

2:14. The phrase Who knows? implies divine sovereignty and freedom. God has already pronounced judgment against the nation, and no one can assume that an act of repentance can force God to change His decision (see Amos 5:15). On the other hand, the mercy of God is such that He yet may choose to relent. God is always free to have mercy on whom He will have mercy (see Ex. 33:19; Rom 9:15). We cannot force the issue through any formula or prayer. L. C. Allen notes that Joel issued “a call to faith not in a doctrinal system, but in an intensely personal God.” Still the overall purpose was to draw people to true repentance. The hope is that repentance will be followed by restoration. In particular, Joel looked for a restoration of the agricultural prosperity so that they could make offerings in the temple. This would be a sign that once again they were under God’s favor.

2:15. Again the text calls for the blowing of the shofar, but this time, for a sacred assembly and not to call for troops to man the walls (see 2:1). Again the people are called together for a sacred fast (1:14), but this time, the purpose is not simply to wail and mourn but is in the context of hope for restoration. By linking texts together in this fashion, the prophet related the fasting and mourning of the people both to the recent locust plague and to the anticipated attack from the north.

Although the sacred assembly called for here probably was an ad hoc convocation because of the agricultural crisis, it is ironically reminiscent of the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost). This festival, described in Lev. 23:15–22, celebrated the end of the grain harvest and took place seven weeks after the offering of firstfruits at Passover. In Lev. 23:21 the text commands Israel to “proclaim a sacred assembly and do no regular work” at Pentecost. Joel here called upon the priests to call a solemn assembly and demanded a cessation of all normal activity (v. 16). In a grim reversal of the normal Pentecost, this sacred assembly and cessation of labor mourned the loss of the harvest rather than celebrate an abundant harvest. It is noteworthy that the gift of the Spirit prophesied by Joel came at Pentecost (Acts 2).

2:16. Again the book calls on representative groups (1:2–14), but this time it is with a difference. Previously the text singled out individual groups for specific reasons (old men were to search their memories, drunks were to mourn the destruction of the viniculture, and so forth). Now the text calls individual groups to emphasize that the entire nation had been called to repentance

(except that the call to the priests in v. 17 is distinctive). Here old men are not mentioned because they do something that specifically relates to being old but because, in conjunction with the children and the nursing babies, their presence implies that every person in the community should join the assembly, regardless of age. Similarly, the passage calls on newlyweds to join the assembly, because under normal circumstances, no one would expect them to do so. Also, the call to the newlyweds harkens back to the previous call for Jerusalem to mourn like a virgin weeping over the death of her fiancé (1:8). Furthermore, it is not correct to think of the room and chamber of the bridegroom and bride as two separate rooms. Both terms refer to the room in which marriage was consummated.

2:17. The call to the priests is distinctive in this section in that it singles them out for a special task—they were to intercede for the nation. It is not clear that there is specific significance to the place between the porch and the altar except that it would have been a large enough area to hold a fairly significant number of priests. The priests called on Yahweh to uphold the covenant and not abandon his people. The idea behind this is that God's name would be disgraced before the nations if He allowed His own people to fall. More than that, this was an appeal for mercy.

The phrase can only mean, "Do not let the nations rule over them." The call to repentance in 2:12–17 both looks back to the locusts and looks ahead to conquest by an enemy army. The prayer that the nations not rule over them shows that Joel had already anticipated such an event in the prophecies of 2:1–11.