

The Lord in the Midst of Israel

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[0 : 00] We can begin our service with the singing of Psalm 97.

Psalm 97, the beginning of the psalm. God reigneth, let the earth be glad, and isles rejoice each one. Dark clouds encompass, and in right with judgments dwells his throne.

Fire goes before him, and his foes it burns up round about. His lightnings lightened it the world, earth saw and shook throughout.

Hills at the presence of the Lord, like wax did melt away. Even at the presence of the Lord of all the earth, I say, The heavens declare his righteousness, all men his glory see.

All who serve graven images, confounded let them be. Who do of idols boast themselves, let shame upon them fall.

[1 : 10] Ye that are called gods, see that ye do him worship all. Sion did hear, and joyful was. Glad Judas daughters were.

They much rejoiced. O Lord, because thy judgments did appear. And so on. Sing these verses.

Psalm 97, from the beginning. God reigneth, let the earth be glad, and isles rejoice each one. God reigneth, let the earth be glad, and isles rejoice each one.

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[3 : 01] God reigneth, let the earth be glad, and isles rejoice each one. G descend away Okay.

All can His holy sea All who serve graven in interest Confound with death in me Who do provide us both themselves Fresh him upon them fall Be that upon them fall Say that he could have What she wants Say that he could have

For us And to the soldiers' men They must rejoice O Lord, because Thy judgment still appear Let us join together in prayer. Let us pray.

Lord our God, as we come before you in prayer, help us to draw near so that we are conscious of being in your presence, And that we are not simply coming because we have to come or because it is our beholden duty, but because it is the desire of our heart and that we fully appreciate that in prayer we are most close to us.

To you. We know that there is no place that you are not to be found, although we confess that often we are not looking for you, nor are we aware of your presence.

[6 : 11] It is known to us that many lived their life here in this world and they could not get away from you, in the sense that they were constantly aware of your near proximity.

There was never a moment that they would be comfortable outside of the orbit of your gaze.

We give thanks that that is the reality of how we live our life here in this world. And we pray forgiveness for the many ways in which we offend you.

We can hide from our foes. We can hide from our friends even. We can make pretence of being what we are not.

And we can live outwardly conforming to your own word and making out that it is what governs our lives.

[7 : 28] And yet inwardly we are rebellious. We know that in the current climate that many have entered into an experience of an atheistic attitude because of the way that our lives are conducted.

We can regularise our lives in attending a place of worship, whether that is once, on the Lord's Day or twice, or even three times in the week.

We can make a difference in the past. And we can make a difference. And we can make a difference. We can make a difference in the past and not only do our lives, but we can make a difference in the past. Even though they are good activities, and we should not neglect them.

But if we are simply observing the norms that are expected of us without engaging in the spiritual realities that such engagements bring, then we not only cheat our God but cheat ourselves. So help us to live our life consistently, especially we pray for your people that they know in themselves that they have this life, that it was a new life begun in them through Christ. And having been born again by the Spirit of God, they live their life here in this world, giving every indication that that life is their possession.

May we be of them, may we be like them, and may we give every indication outwardly and inwardly that we are your people. We bless you for Christ, for all he means to you, your people. We bless you for the way that he lived his life in this world, for his birth, for his ministry, for his walk, for his love and compassion, for his forbearance and long-suffering, even in the face of many who oftentimes doubtless wearied him with their self-interest and independent spirit.

[10 : 22] May we have the glory that is yours in you at all times, and we confess that self-interest is often intruding between us and you. We bring before you our cares and concerns and pray for our homes and our families and our families and pray for the neighbourhood, community, our congregation, the congregations of the island, the presbytery and beyond, and we pray that you would mercifully undertake for us, thankful that you are able to do for us what no other can. We bring the cares and concerns of our congregation to you, and we pray for those who worship with us. May they do so in spirit and in spirit and in truth, and while we are unable to meet together in person, may we be aware of meeting with them at the throne of grace. We remember every home and family represented, and we pray, Lord, that you would do for all that we leave in your care more than we can pray for or ask. There are many who are unwell and well. We pray for their recovery. There are many who need special prayer for their spiritual life. They may not be known to us, but they are known to you. We would ask that you would bless them, body and soul, and that their walk with you would prove that they are growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We remember in your presence again, our nation, and those who govern us, and we're thankful that we may be in the bright day of hope with regard to COVID-19.

But there are many issues concerning us at this time, not least of which is the effectiveness of the remedies proposed and the resultant delays in delivering the vaccine, so that some so that some may yet succumb to this virulent form of illness.

remember the many nations of the earth that are currently suffering as our own is, and many who have difficulties greater than our own because of poverty and the fragile infrastructure that marks them out.

also we can think of the populous nations of the earth where there are many other issues that mark them out in need of your own intervention, providing food and healthcare and bringing bloodshed to an end by bringing the wars that are constant to an end.

[14 : 04] So we pray Lord for your mercies and we give thanks that there is a God to whom we can come and that there are mercies that are bound towards us that we should list and we take delight in doing.

So continue with us at this time watching over us as we wait upon you seeking cleansing from sin in Christ the Redeemer's name we ask it. Amen.

We are going to hear the word of God as we have it in the Old Testament scripture. The book of the prophet Joel reading from chapter 2 and we are going to read from verse 12 to the end of the chapter.

Joel chapter 2 verse 12. Verse 12. Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart and with fasting and with weeping and with mourning, and rent your heart and not your garments, and turn to the Lord your God.

For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him, even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the Lord your God.

[15 : 43] Blow the trumpet in Zion. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather the people. Sanctify the congregation.

Assemble the elders. Gather the children, and those that suck the breasts. Let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.

Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them.

Wherefore should they say, Among the people, where is their God? Then will the Lord be jealous for his land, and pity his people.

Yea, the Lord will answer, and say unto his people, Behold, I will send you corn and wine and oil, and you shall be satisfied therewith.

[16 : 50] And I will no more make you a reproach among the heathen. But I will remove far off from you the northern army, and will drive him into a land barren and desolate, with his face toward the east sea, and his hinter part toward the utmost sea.

And his stink shall come up, and his ill savour shall come up, because he has done great things. Fear not, O land.

Be glad and rejoice, for the Lord will do great things. Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field, for the pasture of the wilderness do spring.

For the tree beareth her fruit, the fig tree, and the vine do yield her strength. Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God.

For he has given you former rain, moderately, and he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain and the latter rain, in the first month.

[17 : 57] And the flowers shall be full of wheat, and the fountains shall overflow with wine and oil. And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the canker worm and the caterpillar, and the pammal worm, my great army which I sent among you.

And you shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, that hath dealt one this day with you.

And my people shall never be ashamed, and ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and none else.

And my people shall never be ashamed, and it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions, but also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit.

[19 : 04] And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the Lord come.

And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered, for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the Lord hath said.

And in the remnant, whom the Lord shall call. And so on. May the Lord add his blessing to this reading of his word and to his name be the praise.

You can read again verse 27. And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and none else.

And my people shall never be ashamed. I think there's a consensus of opinion concerning the dating of the prophecy of Joel, which insists that we cannot with any accuracy determine when the prophet laboured.

[20 : 31] There's such a variety of opinion that has been expressed by the commentators over the years, that it is not very easy to fall on any certain date.

So for that reason, not only have the various commentators chosen to agree to disagree, it is far wiser if it has no real bearing on the matter that the prophecy contains.

There are many things that appear within the prophecy that are to do with the need that God's people has to listen to him.

There are many repeated sins. There are many repeated sins. Sins that are repeated in every generation, be they ancient or modern.

There are many people that are to do with the prophecy of the prophecy. And the words of the prophet remind us of that very fact.

[21 : 59] We are going to look at the text that we have, the passage that we have, but look at it in a broad way.

First of all, noting that the prophet Joel reminds us that there is a great day of the Lord that awaits his people.

In the beginning of chapter 2, we read, blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain.

Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand.

We recently considered that day of the Lord. We find sometimes it speaks of an imminent day of judgment.

[22 : 58] That is a day of judgment. That is a day where God's people and a nation will experience God's displeasure. And sometimes it is a broader reference and a more distant reference to the final day of judgment.

There is also, secondly, a repeated call to the people for them to come in repentance to the Lord.

Again, the words that we read in chapter 2. Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, with fasting and with weeping and with mourning.

And while we have no certainty of the historical context, we can, with fair certainty, think of some of the issues that are spoken of here.

Sometimes the language is figurative or metaphorical and it describes God's way of judgment.

[24 : 22] But sometimes it is describing to us a literal judgment at God's hand. The people are expected to bring sacrifices in gratitude for the harvest.

And because the harvest has suffered, they are forced to come empty handed.

All the crops have been devastated by a plague of locusts. And their empty handedness is something they have to recognize as a judgment from God.

But the prophet says it is not too late to repent. And see, if you do repent, then your repentance will not be a cause for regret.

And those who are linguistic experts in language suggest that the words spoken by the prophet from verse 23 onwards appear to us as already existing, as if the blessings promised already come.

[25 : 41] Whereas in reality these blessings belong to the future. But when God promises something, sometimes he wants us to understand that what he says is as good as done.

Sometimes you experience that with the words of Christ when he spoke to his church. He spoke using language that suggested that the work that he had come to do had already been accomplished.

And yet at the same time what we have to see here is that there is a need for them to repent.

And it is not because God is willing to overlook their sin and disregard it. But because of his own promises being contingent upon action on their part.

God's response is certain and cannot be doubted. So I want us to think about the nature of the judgment and the reason for it.

[27 : 02] And the remedy that is suggested. And the provision that God says before us that he has made as a consequence of the circumstances that we have.

Now we can, shallot we can say about the judgment of God. But we must understand that when we speak of judgment, that the judgment the scripture refers to is God's doing.

And his interest preeminently is in dealing with his own people. So that when he judges, they are to learn from the judgment.

The nature of their sins is not highlighted. It's not specified. Although we do find in the first chapter and verse 5.

Awake he says, you drunkards. And weep and howl all you drinkers of wine. Because of the new wine. For it is cut off from your mouth.

[28 : 20] For that is the reason for God's displeasure. Plain and simple.

There is no doubt in their minds that these judgments are calling them back to God.

And calling them back with a genuine sense of their sin. And an understanding of why they need to repent.

There is no going through the motions. They have to conform externally the sackcloth and ashes that are spoken of.

We find it in the first chapter. Again in the first chapter. Gird yourselves and lament ye priests. Holy ministers of the altar. Come lie all night in sackcloth.

[29 : 27] Ye ministers of my God. For the meat and the drink offering is withholden from the house of your God. The destruction that has been completed throughout the land can be understood by some natural calamity.

And in a sense these lands were not immune from catastrophic climate change.

And also events within nature that devastated the crops. Such as plagues of different descriptions.

And we know that those who depend upon the crops of the ground.

That they are vulnerable. Even to this day when we see so many advances made in agriculture. We see that there are exposures to all kinds of events over which man has no control.

[30 : 54] They may be able to use fertilizers to make the plants grow. And yet they are open to seasonal pestilences that may come unaware.

Some form of blight that may affect the crop. However well prepared they are. Or they could be exposed to the ravages of nature.

Too much rain or frost or whatever. All of these things are still prevalent. But in the days of the Prophet. The plagues that were most often spoken of were plagues of insects.

And to those who lived in a relationship with God. They attributed such pestilences to God's displeasure.

In verse 4 of chapter 1. We read that which the palmer worm hath left hath the locust eaten.

[32 : 09] And that which the locust has left hath the canker worm eaten. And the canker worm what it has left the caterpillar has eaten. Four different insects or four different pests.

And they've all come with their own cost. And in the spiritual realm. If things are not as they ought.

The child of God has to raise his eye heavenward. And although he can think of many things that are the cause of their plight. Perhaps they can recognise what it is that they are most prone to.

And the person who is thinking of himself as being in a safe place.

Where they are immune from any form of fall or backsliding. They are the most vulnerable of them all. We could.

[33 : 20] We could. Sin is something that is in the world. And we can think under the banner of sin. That while we are all sinners.

We are not all guilty of the same sins. Nor are we vulnerable to the same sins. But if we think ourselves safe from any one of them.

These very sins might be the ones that catch us out. There are indwelling sins. There are the sins that are the natural corruption that is within it.

That requires to be mortified. There are actions that we should not permit. There are thoughts that we should suppress.

There are activities that we should avoid. If we are Christian believers. And the second thing arising out of that is a related failure.

[34 : 31] A lack of a watchful spirit. A prayerful spirit. An understanding of the kind of environment in which we live.

As if we live in a world where we are now secure. And in a sense the Christian has that security. That if they are in Christ they will never fall.

But even the Christian is someone who may succumb to any amount of temptations.

And lack of watchfulness is a reason for that. Lack of prayerfulness over our own souls. Is it in a book of the Song of Solomon. Where the mourning of the child of God is that they have not watched over their own garden.

And they have fallen prey to that. And again the little foxes. Are these which are described as breaking in and wreaking havoc.

[35 : 51] An indication of how the small things. Or the most destructive. We might think ourselves secure as Christians from many of the major sins.

But in reality there is no place that we will not be exposed to temptation. Laxity in our use of the means of grace.

Our resting on formalism. I believe that this time of pandemic has tested out many people in this world.

Many Christians. Confessing Christians. Professing Christians. Who have been shaken out of their regular.

Outer habits. Of attending the house of God. And being in company with the Lord's people.

[37 : 03] Which in a sense garrisoned them. And kept them secure in many ways. But when some, in fact many possibly, were left to their own devices.

And depending upon more formal, structured spiritual life. That revolved around their own, their own doing.

And their own being, being active in their spiritual life. They found themselves not as active as they could be.

If we neglect our own spiritual needs. In so far as our personal communion with God. In word and prayer. That has got serious consequences for every one of us.

The fact that sin clings to us like leprosy is no excuse. That the world plagues you is no excuse. We must learn that we will not succeed in this matter.

[38 : 25] If we are wrong in this basic point. These farmers that were plagued ploughed. These farmers planted.

These farmers did everything that they should to tend their crops. They weeded. They worked tirelessly. And then when harvest came, there was nothing.

It was eaten away. And this is the danger. That when testing comes, if we are not guarding against all comers.

And all possibilities. If we are not ensuring that all is right between ourselves and God. Then we will be exposed in some way.

The remedy that is presented to us is often repeated. But the fact that we are familiar with it.

[39 : 27] Does that make it something that we are expert in? Or something that we are practicing? In chapter 1, he tells us to lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth.

In verse 11, Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen, O ye vinedressers, for the wheat and for the barley. Because the harvest of the field is perished.

In chapter 2, in verse 12, we see again. Therefore now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and weeping, and with mourning.

And rent your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God. For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

All of these things we know. And we know that we are to do it. We know that we are meant to do it.

[40 : 45] We know that it will benefit us to do it. And when God sees our penitence, he blesses us.

Then will the Lord be jealous for his land, and pity his people. Yes, the Lord will answer and say unto his people, Behold, I will send you corn, and wine, and oil, and you shall be satisfied therewith.

And the promise, the prospect is there, upon repentance. It sounds so easy. It may not be so. But it will follow.

The Lord is waiting to be gracious. As soon as we humble ourselves. As soon as we respond to him in his merciful dealings to us.

And he waits to be gracious. And yet sometimes he is kept waiting. Because our stubbornness, and our hard-heartedness, and our insistence that all is well when it is not, is something that keeps back the blessings.

[41 : 53] He promises to answer prayer. He promises to satisfy their desires, to remove their reproach, to destroy their enemies. And these things are fact.

Every one of the Lord's people will understand that upon condition of their turning to God from their sin, God is waiting to be gracious and to bless.

And when he blesses, there is no lack. And yet, it is something that too often we see a resistance to.

What is God's provision, finally? Well, we see from verse 23 onwards, the words that give us hope in the face of God's displeasure.

Be glad then, you children of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you the former rain moderately. He will cause to come down for your rain, the former rain and the latter rain in the first month, and so on.

[43 : 12] At the heart of this, the blessings of God, that are temporal, where the judgment is temporal, but the attendance, spiritual consequences that has brought the temporal judgment, also brings spiritual blessing if it is dealt with spiritually.

And there is a greater promise at the heart of what he has to say. Many see here, and we are familiar with the words of the prophet towards the end of the chapter that are quoted by the preacher on the day of Pentecost, when there is the promised outpouring of God's Spirit.

There is, at the heart of what the prophet has to say, the understanding that Christ the Redeemer is going to come.

Perhaps here, perhaps here, there is a blessing, which is greater than any blessing that we can imagine, that is seen in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In verse 25, the question is often asked, I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the canker one, the caterpillar, the palmer one, thy great army.

[44 : 56] How can these years be restored? The verb used to describe the restoration is from the Hebrew word shalom, which means peace.

But it has also a main meaning, fullness or completeness. All that was lost will be restored.

Lives full of regret look back and mourn. And is it right or is it something that is offensive to God?

God is a God of mercy and he is a God who shows mercy in abundance. And we are encouraged to rejoice in the Lord. There is no greater rejoicing than the rejoicing of a repenting sinner.

And we are told in the scripture that there is great joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

[46 : 07] And where does your thankfulness take you?

The words of someone who understood something of the need that we have as sinners who often stray and who forget that God is merciful.

When we think of the experience of the experience of Judas who went out into the night, he did not comprehend or understand the willingness of God to receive the penitent sinner.

He did not. He did not. He did not. He did not. He did not have it or show it. But a Christian believer must know that God is a God of mercy and a God of grace.

I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten. And you shall eat in plenty and shall be satisfied.

[47 : 20] And praise the name of the Lord your God that has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never be ashamed. And is that not the case?

Who of the Lord's people cannot speak of his abundant grace? How ready and how often he shows his mercy towards undeserving sinners such as we are.

May we learn from that and that we may not have so much of the need to come with tears of sorrow to the God of grace.

May bless to us these thoughts. Let us pray. Forgive our many transgressions. There are so many that we do not number them for our shame.

Help us to acknowledge them in your presence. Thankful that we can plead the merits of Christ. And that we can seek grace to be rid of these sins that are an offence to you.

[48 : 39] And to live our lives in dependence upon you. Looking into Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Continue with us, watching over us.

Blessing us in the name of Christ. And now may grace, mercy and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you all. Now and always.

Amen.