

The Glory of God's Grace

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[0 : 00] The European Reformation started proper on the 31st of October 1517 in the German town of Wittenberg.

Martin Luther posted on the door of All Saints Church there a list of 95 theses or arguments against the abuses of the prevailing Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformation once started could not be stopped and here we are 500 years later proclaiming the same gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ that Luther posted on that church door in Wittenberg all those years ago.

Now the first of Luther's theses read like this. His words. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. By starting this way Luther is reminding us of the gospel of grace.

[1 : 18] That the path to progress in the Christian life rests in learning how to rely more upon Jesus and his grace.

Unless upon ourselves and our inner resources. A child becomes an adult when she learns how to live independently of her parents.

By contrast a young Christian becomes a mature Christian when she learns how to live dependently upon her master's grace.

That is what we call repentance. That is what we call repentance. Turning away from the sufficiency of self and embracing the sufficiency of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

And that's the book of Joel for you. The story of God's grace toward us. A grace that refuses to let us go no matter how far away from him we have gone.

[2 : 21] A grace which brings us back to the repentance of which Luther spoke of in these 95 theses. And has changed the world forever. A grace which brings salvation to everyone who will trust in Jesus.

Now perhaps the grace of God isn't what automatically springs to mind when you're thinking about the prophecy of Joel. That's what it is from beginning to end.

God's grace lovingly gripping his people in order to bring them back to him. He loves us too much.

He is too much of a father to us to ever let us go. Rather he will bring us back to himself to learn once again that leaning upon his grace.

Christ is the only path in life to contentment and to happiness and to fulfillment. Now the name Joel or Yoel means Yahweh is God.

[3 : 32] The Lord is God. We really don't know much about this man other than that he was a prophet in the city of Jerusalem. That's fine.

Just like John the Baptist would rather people remember Jesus than him. So Joel wants to make far more of God than he wants to make of himself.

And in particular Joel or Yoel wants us to listen carefully to this central message of the grace of God. This in reality is the first, the second and the last thesis of Joel.

When our master Jesus Christ said repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. Of learning to turn away from the sufficiency of self in order to embrace the sufficiency of grace in Christ Jesus.

Over the next few Sunday evenings, we're going to dig deep into the mind of God's grace in Joel. Today we're going to look at the book as a whole.

[4 : 43] And then for the following five weeks in the evening, we're going to look at important texts and themes throughout the book. The book itself is divided neatly into three sections.

The first is judgment in chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 2 verse 11. The second is repentance in chapter 2 verse 12 through 17.

Notice its centrality to the book. And then thirdly, salvation in chapter 2 verse 13 to 32.1. My prayer is that just as the European Reformation changed the face of the world forever, So this study will change the face of your faith and move you away from the sufficiency of self to embrace the sufficiency of grace.

That is what we call repentance. The first section then from chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 2 verse 11 deals with judgment.

Judgment. Now for any serious student of the Old Testament, you need to know that the whole Old Testament follows really a rather predictable series of cycles.

[6 : 06] Judgment, repentance, salvation. God's people are unfaithful to him. He sends judgment to bring them to their senses.

God's people repent of their unfaithfulness and return to God. And God saves them from their distress. And then the cycle begins again.

Think of King Manasseh, Hezekiah's son. He was a vicious and wicked man who was unfaithful to God. God judged him by removing him from Jerusalem and placing him into captivity in Babylon.

Judgment. Manasseh repented and returned to God. Repentance. God saved him from Babylon and returned him to Jerusalem.

Salvation. Sometimes because we're all listening to the wrong people and we're deaf to God, God has to shout to get our attention.

[7 : 14] And often God shouts to the hard circumstances he brings into our experience. In these passages in Joel, God is shouting to get our attention.

The people of his day have turned away from God. They're trying to shake themselves free of his grip. But he loves them too much to let them ever go. Like the loving father God is.

He knows that if he lets his grip of them go, they will destroy themselves. There is precedent after all.

The prodigal son wanted to get rid of his father's influence in his life. Look what happened to him. He ended off in a far country feeding pigs.

Well, here in Joel, God shouts to get the attention of his people in two ways. In the first instance from chapter 1 verses 1 through 20, we read this.

[8 : 24] Through the judgment of locusts. And then in chapter 2 verses 1 through 11, the judgment of armies. The judgment, first of all, of locusts in chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 1 verse 20.

I'd be tempted to ask, what's worse? A swarm of midges or a swarm of locusts? Midges are a pest. But locusts are of a different order altogether.

When they swarm, they eat everything in their way. A swarm last year in northern Kenya was made up of 800 million locusts.

They ate their way through enough food to eat 35,000 human beings. One local called Esther Ndavu said, I have gone through a lot of challenges growing up as an orphan.

But the locust invasion is more than a challenge. It is a matter of life and death. Because it's left us hungry and confused.

[9 : 32] The vast swarm of locusts in Joel chapter 1 was composed of what commentators suspect are four stages in the locusts' growth development.

Cutting locusts, swarming locusts, hopping locusts, destroying locusts. And for the people of Judah, this was a matter of life and death.

It should be a particular concern to three groups of people. First, to those who like their wine, the drunkards. The locusts eat the vines from which the wine is produced.

Second, farmers, tillers of the soil because the locusts eat the harvest. And then priests, because the locusts have eaten what should have been grain offerings and drink offerings.

When the locusts die, their decomposing bodies pollute the water supplies, making the hungry cattle sicker still. In the summertime right now, when the midges are driving you absolutely round the twist, you can be tempted to ask the question, Why did God make midges?

[10 : 51] To which Joel answers, to make you thankful that you don't get locusts in Scotland. But this judgment of locusts was the loving cry of God for his people to return to him.

What the response of the people should have been is listed in verse 14. Consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.

The response of any nation to a natural disaster should be to cry out to the Lord. And if the nation should be too spiritually insensitive to cry out to the Lord, then the Christian church should lead by example.

And if the Christian church should be too spiritually insensitive to respond to God's hand in disaster, whether individual Christians should view it as an opportunity for repentance and new reliance upon the grace of God.

But then in chapter 2, verses 1 through 11, we have the judgment of armies. The judgment of armies. It's impossible really to put a date on the book of Joel.

[12 : 11] So it's very difficult with any certainty what army is being described in these verses. It could be the Assyrians, it could be the Babylonians. But what's certain is that it was a fierce and numerous army intent on the destruction of Jerusalem.

It is engaged in what's called today total war, absolute destruction and annihilation. The armies headed up, as we'll see, if you read on, by cavalry and chariots.

The foot soldiers are highly trained to break sieges. They are so numerous that in chapter 2, verse 10, they are described as making the earthquake before them.

The strange thing is that in verse 11 of chapter 2, this army is described as the Lord's army.

In other words, God is using this vast army, the armies of his enemy, to bring judgment upon his people. The question is this.

[13 : 21] Who will the people of God turn to when their backs are up against a wall? Will they turn to the surrounding nations for military help?

Or will they come to their senses and turn to the Lord? Using this army, God is bringing his people to a place of decision.

Will they cry out to him and depend upon him for deliverance? Or will they continue to take matters into their own hands and to make a mess of it all?

We live in a society which is becoming ever more hostile to the Christian gospel. Rather than curse the darkness, perhaps we should view our society as the Lord's army.

God's instrument to bring us as a church to a point of decision. In the face of such opposition, shall we cry out to God and depend upon him for grace and deliverance?

[14 : 29] Or will we take matters into our own hands and make a mess of it all? And so the book of Joel begins with these two judgments.

Judgment of locusts, the judgment of armies. In Joel chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 2 verse 11, God is shouting to get the attention of his people.

They've turned away from him. They are trying to shake themselves free of his grip. But he just loves them way too much to let them go. To ever go. Like the loving father he is, he knows that if he loses his grip of them, they will destroy themselves.

And so he brings them to a place of decision. Trust in pesticides and in human alliances. Or trust in him and in his grace.

Now you know it's not so different for us. If we all but open our eyes and see the world in which we live today. The book of Joel is the story of God's grace to us.

[15 : 40] A grace that even uses personal and national disasters to bring us to our senses. Has that grace brought you to your senses yet?

What personal and national disasters have you experienced such that it's left you with your back up against a wall? Is there anything like that going on in your life right now?

Are you being brought to a place of decision in your life? Where your only two options are to cry out to God and to depend upon him for deliverance.

Or to continue to take matters into your own hands and make a mess of it all? In such a strange and weird place, God is blessing you with a fresh opportunity to learn just how dependable and grace-filled he really is.

Judgment. Judgment. Second. Repentance from verse 12 through 17. Repentance. Chapter 2, verse 12 through 17.

[16 : 56] When our master, the Lord Jesus Christ, said, Repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. So said Martin Luther. Joel 2, verses 12 through 17 is the gracious call of God to his people to return to him in genuine repentance and renewed commitment.

In the space of just a few short verses, Joel captures the heart of the gospel. At the center of this message is the confession of the faith of the people of God.

In chapter 2, verse 13. He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I say that this is the confession of the faith of God's people.

Because for a thousand years prior, from Exodus 34, verse 6, where God had appeared in the burning bush to Mount Sinai, announced to him, The Lord, the Lord God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The people of God have confessed that very faith. Well, the people of God may have changed. They may have strayed far away from God.

[18 : 14] But the God of his people has not changed. He remains as committed to them as he's always been. You may have changed.

You may have strayed far from God. But God has not changed. God remains as committed to you as ever he has been.

Yes, even as he was of the day Jesus died on the cross to take away all your sin. And this God, with all the passion of his loving heavenly fatherhood, calls out to his people, yet even now, Return to me.

Return to me. The fate of Israel rests in its own hands. Crawl to the surrounding nations and make alliances with them.

Or return to God in genuine repentance and renewed commitment. From verses 15 through 17 of chapter 2, that repentance is described.

[19 : 30] It is to be national in its extent. All the people are to be represented. Old and young people. Bridegrooms and priests and people. That repentance.

It is to be urgent in its timing. Whatever else people are doing, they are to down tools and attend these solemn assemblies to confess their sins and return to God.

There are more important things for children to do than to play. And there are more important things for married couples to do than to be intimate with each other. Yes, there are more important things for priests to do than to go about the service of their religion.

They must all at the earliest opportunity reflect on the lessons they're learning through God's judgments and return to him. This repentance is also serious in its shape.

It's not a time for festivity and for celebration. For lightheartedness, laughter and partying. It's a time for solemnity, for weeping and for consecration.

[20 : 38] And it is also to be heartfelt in its sincerity. The passage begins, return to me with all your heart.

Rend your hearts, not your garments. This isn't a repentance for show. It is real, sincere and genuine sorrow followed by renewed commitment to following God.

I'd like to think we get the picture. It's an all-in repentance between us as his people and he as our God.

But more than anything else, this repentance is to be personal in its focus. Personal. Personal. God invites in verse 12 and commands his people saying, return to me.

Return to me. The offense against him was personal. His people turned away from him. This repentance must also be personal. We must turn back to him.

[21 : 55] It's all very well designating days of repentance. Repentance. But it's an altogether more powerful thing to view our repentance in terms of the repair of a broken relationship between us and God.

But that is, in essence, what repentance is. It is the repair of our broken relationship with God, our loving Heavenly Father, through faith in Jesus Christ.

So let me ask you this evening. Have you repairing to do in your relationship with God? Have you repairing to do in your relationship with God?

To use Jesus' words to the church in Ephesus, have you abandoned your first love? Have you forgotten the height from which you have fallen?

Joel says it because Jesus says it. Repent. Do the works you did at first. There's a time to weep tears of joy.

[22 : 59] But there's also a time to weep tears of repentance. And you kind of have one without the other. But for sure the promise is this.

When we return to God, He is so gracious and merciful that He will inevitably forgive us. Though we may have spent a lifetime walking away from Him, yet like the Father in Jesus' parable, He will embrace us in His love and restore us in His grace.

And so as a result of Joel's teaching, we must ask ourselves the serious question this evening. Have I got business to do with God tonight? Do I have tears of repentance to shed tonight?

Have I sins of which I need to repent tonight? Judgment, repentance, and then lastly and briefly, salvation.

Salvation, chapter 2, verse 18, to chapter 3, verse 21. Salvation. By far the greatest portion of the book of Joel is given over to the topic of salvation.

[24 : 11] In these verses, God paints a picture of what will happen if His people return to Him in renewed faith and commitment. You know, this is always the way it is in the Bible.

Mercy always triumphs over judgment. Always. And blessings always overwhelm curses.

Why, given the vision beautiful of Joel 2, verse 18 through 32, would anyone ever keep themselves from repentance?

Why, indeed, would it not return to the Lord and engage in what Luther called an entire life of repentance? Our repentance is not slavery.

It is freedom. It is not darkness. It is light. In these remaining verses of Joel, salvation progresses in three very brief stages.

[25 : 10] Salvation blessings, chapter 2, verse 18 through 27. Salvation promises, chapter 2, verse 28 through 32. And lastly, salvation security in chapter 3.

First of all, salvation blessings, chapter 2, verse 18 through 27. There really is the greatest contrast between these joyful pictures at the end of Joel chapter 2 and the dark judgments of Joel chapter 1.

Whereas in Joel 1, we're told the destruction the locusts will exact upon the land, in Joel 2, we read, the Lord will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten.

Whereas we read of famine and drought in Joel chapter 1, we're told in Joel chapter 2, you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied. Whereas in Joel chapter 1, we read of vine trees drying up, we're told in Joel chapter 2, the fig tree and the vine give their full yield.

I think we get the picture. Whereas before there was only barrenness, now there's fruitfulness. Whereas before there was only sterility, now there is fertility.

[26 : 28] Whereas before there was only poverty, now there is plenty. And what exactly has changed? People have repented of their turning away from God.

They have returned to Him in repentance and recommitment. And then in Ephesians 1, we read of what we have as Christians from our Heavenly Father.

He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. These great blessings of salvation growth and fruitfulness and perseverance, they're all ours as we engage in the daily task of repenting of our sins and returning to Christ for peace, for life, and for health.

Salvation blessings. Then in chapter 2, verse 28 through 32, we have salvation promises. Salvation promises. These verses, if you read them, will sound familiar to you.

[27 : 50] Peter quotes them on the day of Pentecost in the temple in Jerusalem, that day when Christ poured out His Holy Spirit upon the church, that day when 3,000 souls were added to the number of believers in Christ.

There's a sense in which these verses aren't for the people of Joel's day, they're for us today. They speak of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the freeness, the universality of the gospel.

Notice what we read in verse 32 of chapter 2. It shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

In Romans 10, 30, the apostle Paul uses that verse as the foundation for his argument for the oneness of all believers in Christ Jesus, Jew and Gentile.

This is pure gospel from 28 through 32. The pure gospel of Jesus Christ as expounded by the apostles and codified for us in the scriptures of the New Testament.

[29 : 02] This is grace from beginning to end. The undeserved favor of God showered upon His unworthy people. The generosity of a loving heavenly Father upon His repentant children.

Surely we are a privileged people and generation for the promises of Joel 2, 28 through 32 to be fulfilled today.

And then lastly in chapter 3 of Joel, salvation security. Salvation security. What does in Joel 2, 12 through 17, God reverses the curse brought about through the invasion of locusts.

Now in this chapter, God reverses the curse brought upon Judah by the invasion of foreign armies. No longer will Israel be an easy target for foreign armies.

It will be what it was always intended to be. A refuge of safety and security for the people of God. A place of glorious dreams.

[30 : 13] And of hopeful promises. Where the mountains drip forth sweet wine and the hills flow with milk. I'm not sure to what extent this could ever have been expected to be the natural destiny of Israel.

Whether those who first read this prophecy understood it in physical terms or whether they saw it as being a picture of heaven and of the afterlife. For after all, the prophecy ends with the words, the Lord dwells in Zion.

That is the Christian understanding of heaven. The absence of threat and war. The presence of peace and safety. The constant awareness of being in the immediate presence of the Lord of glory.

Although the first readers might have read this in physical terms, we as Christians must read this from the perspective of the New Testament and read it in terms of future glory.

So there you are. That's the book of Joel for you. It's the story of God's grace toward us.

[31 : 25] A grace which will not let us go no matter how far away from him we've gone. A grace which brings salvation to all who will trust in Jesus Christ.

A grace duly bought by Jesus upon the cross which draws us from the insanity of running away from God to the happiness of running toward God.

Always remembering. Always remembering. Of course, as Joel tells us again and again and again that the reason we run toward God is because in his grace God has first run toward us.

Let us pray. Oh Lord, our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the book of Joel.

Perhaps it's a book we've all read, skim read perhaps. If we're being honest, we found it difficult to find in our Bibles.

[32 : 38] It's such a small book. It's a small book. At the end of the Old Testament. And yet, it is such a powerful message. A message of grace.

Of repentance. Of salvation. Father, we think at this time of many who we know who perhaps have wandered far from you.

Who once were among us, who once were among us, but like James said last week, have gone out from among us. Have swerved from the truth. We think of how for many years, we think of how for many years perhaps, they have wandered in fruitless paths.

Lord, bring them back. Will you do a work of grace in their hearts and bring them back. Bring them to a place of repentance. Where they realize the folly and the vanity and the uselessness of making alliances with the armies of foreign nations and using pesticides on locusts.

But rather, to go to the heart of the matter. To trust in you as Lord and Savior. Father, we thank you that in our day and generation, many Christians are standing for you.

[33 : 54] But we realize that politics and the judiciary and argumentation will not win the battle in our society. Ultimately.

It is a work of your spirit and of your grace. We pray that you would send your spirit in revival power. Especially upon our leaders. That those who now have no time for you.

Would have all the time in the world for you. As they come to realize their own inner poverty. And their guilt before you. And their need of Christ Jesus as Savior.

We pray for our evangelism as the church. Not just the Free Church of Scotland. But the whole Christian church in Scotland. We ask that our consistent message would be to point to Jesus.

As did John the Baptist and say, Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world. Lord, we ask for ourselves. That by word and by action.

[34 : 56] We would point to Jesus. That none could know us. Except they knew that we were Christians. And that we had been with Jesus. That there would be something different about us.

Lord, for those who are struggling with whatever physical problems. Or spiritual doubts. Or emotional uncertainties.

We pray that you would appear to them in the glory of your holiness. And the comfort of your fatherly love. That you would show them that you are their father. There's always a place for them in your arms.

Close to your heart. In your home. And Lord, as we wrap up our service tonight. We pray that you would go with us.

Whatever we are. Whatever we're doing. We pray that you would go with us. Do not let us go. Oh Lord. Keep a tight rein on us. Keep a grip on us.

[35 : 58] For if you let us go, we shall only destroy ourselves. But in Christ, we can do all things. Because he strengthens us. We ask all these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.