

Repent, for the Lord is Merciful

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[0 : 0 0] Pray because these are not easy words and we need to pray that God will not only give us understanding but also that he will change us in the light of his word.

Our Heavenly Father, you speak to us in the words of scripture, words of comfort but today words of sharp rebuke and we pray that today you will open our ears, our eyes, our hearts and our minds to receive your word, to be informed and reformed and transformed by it and we pray this for your mercy's sake.

Amen. You can always tell in a film when something bad is about to happen, when danger is lurking near because the music in the background gives it away.

The music has that sense of danger, alert, it puts you on edge. Whether it's moving into a minor key or the increase of volume of music or the increased intensity or perhaps discordant music.

Maybe the violins come out and sort of shake us to our core, alerting us to the fact that danger is lurking near. Well that's in effect what Joel chapter 2 is like.

[1 : 1 9] This is alerting us that danger is near. It's a little bit like something like Moses' Deers' era from his Requiem Mass.

Music to sort of get us awake, to shake us, to say something is lurking. Be on alert. This is a clarion call because the danger is real.

Now let's face it, we need calls to alert us to danger. If you think about it, when you're driving down the road, we need lights flashing and bells ringing to tell us that a train may be crossing any second in front of us across the road.

We need caution signs on the roads, smoke detectors in our houses, or heart monitors in hospitals, or red lights, or total fire van alerts, or terrorist warnings.

Whatever it is, we need warning signs and symbols to make us alert to a danger that is real. And spiritually speaking, it is even more the case.

[2 : 2 3] Too many of us, not only non-Christians, but Christians as well, live in a sort of spiritual stupor. A bit like what we saw in Joel 1 last week.

Dull to the danger signs from God. Too often we confuse our spiritual assurance in a relationship with God with complacency and presumption.

Certainly ancient Israel was like that in the time of the prophet Joel. Joel's task as a prophet was the urgent wake-up call to the nation of Israel, God's people.

He's calling Israel to be not what our Prime Minister wants us to be, alert but not alarmed. He's calling ancient Israel to be alert and alarmed because the danger is real, it's at their doorstep, it is imminent.

And there is little chance of evading the danger. And in chapter 2, the intensity steps up from chapter 1. Lots of the things that we saw last week, we find here again in chapter 2.

[3 : 28] But we've moved up a bit of a key, we've increased the volume, increased the intensity of what's being said here. In a sense, chapter 2 begins, and I'm sure if Joel was speaking in the 20th or 21st centuries and not in, who knows what it was, BC, he'd probably have a slightly different opening verse.

Instead of blow the trumpet in Zion, he'd be saying, sound the air raid siren. Because that's what's being called for here. The air raid siren that'll make you jump out of bed in an instant, with the hairs on your back sort of up, in nervous anxiety about whether you're going to be attacked and how soon and whether you'll escape.

The air raid siren that is urging you to run to safety, to find some refuge that might be safe. That's the urgency of the opening of chapter 2. Blow the trumpet, not just to have a nice little fanfare, come to the temple for your praises, but blow the trumpet because the enemy approaches.

Sound the alarm on my holy mountain, is the next line of verse 1. It's as though God himself is on the wall of the city of Jerusalem, that's what Zion is, and looking out and spying the enemy approaching.

And so he's saying, sound the alarm, ring the trumpet, bring on the air raid sirens, or its ancient equivalents. In fact, let all the inhabitants of the land tremble.

[4 : 54] This is an urgent wake-up call to the people of God, to the people of Jerusalem, the people of Judah, and the people of Israel. God is urging them to be alert and alarmed.

Why? Is it just the locust plague that we saw last week? Lots of them, millions of them, though there may be. It's a bit more than that.

The locust plague is certainly the initial context that we've seen last week that is confronting the ancient people of God. But behind the locust plague lies something much more serious, much more dangerous, much more alarming, for the day of the Lord is coming.

It is near, is how verse 1 ends. This is not what Israel expected. As we saw last week, the day of the Lord was their long-awaited expectation of salvation and joy and vindication.

Their enemies defeated, and the people of God lifted up and showered with blessings and prosperity and security and peace. But no, the prophets turned it all on its head. In fact, God has turned it all on its head.

[6 : 06] They've presumed upon it. They've been complacent spiritually, and they've failed to understand what the day of the Lord really is. And so for them, they've placed themselves at enmity with God, in effect.

And so the day of the Lord will not be a day of joy and salvation and vindication, but a day of desolation, a day of defeat, a day of destruction, a day of doom. And these opening two chapters of Joel are like that heavy, ominous drumbeat of doom as the day of the Lord approaches near.

A day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. Like blackness spread upon the mountains, a great and powerful army comes. There's never been, their life has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

Now, this is it, the day of the Lord approaching. More than just an army of locusts, more than even an enemy invasion of another nation, is the day of the Lord himself.

And this day of the Lord is full of foreboding. A striking contrast is painted in the next verse. Instead of the Garden of Eden and all its associations of paradise and peace and bliss and prosperity and plenty.

[7 : 24] From the promised land of paradise to an abandonment of wilderness. From abundance to abandonment, we might say. Verse 3 says that fire devours in front of them.

Not just a bushfire. Most probably the association of fire is the judgment of God, as so often it is. A symbol or metaphor for God's judgment in the Old Testament. And behind them a flame burns.

Before them the land is like the Garden of Eden, but after them a desolate wilderness. And then, most ominously of all, at the end of verse 3, and nothing escapes them.

In fact, literally it says nothing at all escapes them. There is no rescue, no relief, no safety. I remember watching, I think early last year, the film *The Pianist*, in which the lead actor won the Academy Award last year, I think.

It's the story of a Polish Jew, a pianist, who is on the run, in a sense, from the Warsaw ghetto in World War II and survives World War II despite all the threats that keep confronting him.

[8 : 30] And through the film, as though it looks as though he's finally reached safety, that door closes. As it looks as though he might reach safety here, that door closes in a sense. And the film is a sort of unrelenting fear, unrelenting run escaping from the enemy.

Which, surprisingly, he does. But here in Joel, there's the unrelenting fear of the enemy, but there is no relief and no rescue. And just like at the end of that film, I remember feeling almost exhausted with my heart pounding because it had been so unrelenting.

That's the sense that we're to convey out of Joel chapters 1 and 2. The heart beating faster as the threat is more and more ominous on the landscape of ancient Israel, the people of God.

What follows in verses 4 and 5 is like a sound and sight show or light show. Firstly, the appearance, what they see in verse 4, the locust threat, perhaps the enemy invasion, whatever it is, it has the appearance of horses and like war horses they charge.

In fact, locusts are often likened to horses and the word for locusts in I think both Italian and German is a word related to horse. So there is fear here. But not only what is seen, but then what is heard in verse 5.

[9 : 47] As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains. Like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle. That's what they hear and what they see.

A frightening and terrifying sight indeed. As verse 6 tells us, the response of the people to this. Before them, peoples are in anguish. It's as though they're tearing their hair out with anxiety and worry about where on earth they will find safety and refuge.

And their faces grow pale. You know that pale, stunned look as somebody is confronted by sheer terror, fear and fright.

That's what this is describing for the people of God. More than the people of God. Verse 6 tells us that it's the response of the peoples, plural. So it's not just limited to the people of Jerusalem or the people of God.

But this is a bigger day than that. The day of the Lord coming to end this world's history. What follows then is a description maybe of the locusts, maybe of an enemy invasion, certainly of the day of the Lord, that shows it to be unrelenting.

[11 : 01] To be relentless and ruthless. That is these locusts, these armies, this day of the Lord approaching inexorably, marching on target to Jerusalem.

They are marching with parade ground precision. Nothing stands in their way. Nothing thwarts their approach and their conquest of the people of God and the city.

And so Jerusalem that was so often regarded as inviolable is indeed highly vulnerable. As verses 7 and 8 and 9 say.

Like warriors they charge. Like soldiers they scale the wall. Each keeps to its own course. They do not swerve from their paths. They do not jostle one another.

Each keeps to its own track. They burst through the weapons and are not halted. They leap upon the city. They run upon the walls. They climb up into the houses. They enter through the windows like a thief.

[11 : 57] There is no escape. There is no defence that will be successful here. The people of God will fall. Of that there is no doubt in this description.

It is a terrifying picture. And then to lift it onto an even higher plane. Verse 10 puts it into a terms of cosmic convulsions. Verse 10.

The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened and the stars withdraw their shining. Language that is often applied to the end of history in the Bible.

Applied to this day of the Lord. Because it's God coming. And the earth and the heavens will shake. That's how serious this event is. And then the final nail in the coffin so to speak is verse 11.

The Lord utters his voice. Why centuries before the people of Israel had heard the Lord's voice at Mount Sinai. Words of relationship with the people of Israel.

[12 : 57] Words giving their laws and stating that he was a redeeming God in Exodus 19 and 20. And the people then were terrified of the voice of the Lord. Who can hear the voice of the Lord and live?

And so they took steps back. They asked Moses to speak to God alone and then to relate to them so afraid of God's voice. And that was in the context of peace. Here it's in the context of God against his people.

And so for the Lord to utter his voice would have been terrifying indeed. As verse 11 says. The Lord utters his voice at the head of his army.

The locusts that approach are a sign of the army of God that will come. If there's an enemy nation invading Israel. It's a sign that God himself is coming to invade them. Against them.

It is God's army that approaches. For it is the day of the Lord that approaches. How vast is his host. Numberless are those who obey his command. Truly the day of the Lord is great.

[13 : 57] Terrible indeed. Who can endure it? Verse 11 asks. And the expected answer is. No one.

No one can endure the day of the Lord. No one can stand on that day. As God in all his splendor and might comes. There's no escape.

No relief. No hope. Imagine if Joel's book ends there. That would be it. Be all over.

The Bible would be over. The world would be over. We wouldn't be here. If that is the final word. Who can endure the day of the Lord? No one can. But then. Unexpectedly.

And undeservedly. Yet even now. Says the Lord. Return to me. Verse 12. A whisper of hope.

[14 : 57] A glimmer of a future. There is no defense that will withstand the Lord. There is no relief or rescue. His people are thoroughly doomed.

And yet out of the blue. Unexpectedly and undeservedly. God speaks. The only time in the book of Joel.

That Joel says. Says the Lord is here. And what words to hear. For without these words. This is a book of unmitigating doom. But the Lord speaks.

And says yet even now. At this last minute. On the precipice of extinction. For the people of God. As the Lord's army approaches.

As the city is about to fall. God speaks. Yet even now. Return to me. So often we presume upon the mercy of God.

[15 : 55] We take it for granted. We disregard God with complacency. And spiritual blindness. And deafness. And a spiritual stupor about us.

We sin and think we can do so with impunity. But we live in a fool's paradise. We're often so blind to the signs. The warning signs. That God gives us. These verses ought to make us tremble.

For God's mercy. To make us flee to him. And fling ourselves on him. For his mercy. You see it's not a call.

For a mechanical repentance. When the Lord says return to me. Literally is the idea of repenting there. It's not just with fasting.

And weeping and mourning. As though we can put on some grand display. Of parade of piety or something. And somehow convince God. That we're very religious. And we really deserve his mercy.

[16 : 50] And his help. Not at all. Verse 13 makes that clear. Rend your hearts. And not your clothing. That is God wants an internal change.

Not just an increase in our religious practices and devotions. But he wants our hearts to be torn apart. So that they are open to him. And receptive of his word.

This is not some perfunctory performance of penitence. But God wants real and rigorous repentance here. From his people. To take seriously their confession of sin.

To turn away from their sins. And turn back to God. Spiritually. Inwardly. And not just some external show. Of religiosity. Of religiosity. The incentive to do this.

As verse 13 says. For God is gracious and merciful. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He relents from punishing. Are those words familiar to you?

[17 : 50] They ought to be. They're words that occur in the scriptures several times. And they ought to have been familiar to the audience of Joel initially. Joel's not making up something new here.

This is not a new truth about God. For way back in the early days of the people of Israel. Back in the time of Moses as their leader. Before they'd even entered the land. As though they were halfway from Egypt to the promised land.

At Mount Sinai having been given the laws. What happened there? The people of God turned away from God. In an act of gross idolatry. The darkest hour of Israel's history to this point perhaps.

And there they bowed down and worshipped a golden calf that they'd made. And God determined to destroy them. But relented only because Moses interceded for them in prayer.

And the outcome was the statement that we read here in verse 13. God is gracious and merciful. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[18 : 50] He relents from punishing. That's the summary at the end of Exodus 32 to 34 in effect. What God is really like. And the audience of Joel ought to have known that.

But they didn't. In fact they ought to have known their scriptures much better than they did. Because they ought to have seen the warning signs in the locust plague are coming. In the desolation that it wrought.

In the advance of enemy armies. It's all there in the early parts of the scriptures that we have in the first five books of the Bible. And that they would surely have had at that stage. But no.

They're full of spiritual lethargy and stupor. They didn't know their scriptures. That was their big mistake. Their big fault. And we fall into the same trap so often. The same sort of dark hour approaches the people of Joel's day as it approached at Mount Sinai.

When they committed such idolatry. Their extinction was imminent. But God who is slow to anger. Who is gracious and merciful.

[19 : 55] Relented of his punishment. And here the same thing is offered to the people of Israel. Fling yourself on the mercy of God.

That's all you can do. Don't presume upon it. Joel is saying. Verse 14 asks the question. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent.

We can't presume upon God's mercy. We can't control God's mercy. But the only thing that we can do is to throw ourselves at the feet of God. And plead for mercy. The warning for us.

Is that we must not fall into the dullness that the people of God did. We don't know their specific sins here. We've not been told that. Only the punishment that is due them. And is on the way.

But clearly their mistakes. Stem from. Their disdain for the words of God to them in the scriptures. They ought to have seen in a locust plague.

[20 : 56] Exactly the punishment of God for their sins. Because that was what the Old Testament scriptures in Leviticus and Deuteronomy made so clear. But they seem so ignorant. And they ought to have known that they should turn to God for mercy.

Because again in the book of Exodus early on. And in other places for them. That was so clear. But they didn't. When you don't know your scriptures well.

You don't know God well. And the danger signs are all around you spiritually. To be alert to the dangers. God's given us the scriptures.

To rebuke us. To correct us. To train us in righteousness. And yet so often. It gathers dust on a top shelf. Rarely opened.

Rarely read. And even rarer. Heeded. So Joel reiterates his clarion call. In verse 15.

[21 : 57] Repeating what he said in chapter 1. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. And there are no exemptions here. You can't stay home because you're sick.

You can't stay home because you're frail. You can't stay home because you've got a little baby. You can't stay home because it's your wedding day. And you're going to consummate your marriage. There is no exemption here. As verse 16 makes clear.

Gather the people. Sanctify the congregation. Assemble the aged. Gather the children. Even infants at the breast. They're not exempt either. And let the bridegroom leave his room. And the bride her canopy.

Now normally for ancient Israel. If you just got married. You were given a year off serving in the army. This is more important. Because God's army is on the march. And every single Israelite is called here.

Without exemption. The frail. The babies. The newly marrieds. No exemptions. That's how serious this issue is. No one is spared. And they are to come.

[22 : 54] And the priests are to intercede. As verse 17 says. Between the vestibule and the altar. That is in the temple of Jerusalem. Where the priests would stand. Mediating between the people and God. Let the priests. The ministers of the Lord.

Weep. Weep with lament. Weep with grief. Weep with sorrow for sin. And let them say. Spare your people.

Oh Lord. Often our prayers for forgiveness. Indeed most of our prayers generally. Are really quite selfish. We pray for ourselves.

Some relief from pain. Some freedom from strife or trouble. Because we want a comfortable life. A slightly easier life. Our motivations are so often.

Selfish in our prayers. And even when we pray our prayers of confession. Maybe our motivation there is selfish. That we just want to ease the feelings of guilt. Or whatever. So often in the scriptures.

[23 : 54] We are given both models of prayer. And people. And instructions for prayer. And they show them. To be thoroughly God centered. Not selfish or self centered. Thus is it here to.

This prayer. This pleading for mercy. It's not so that Israel can have a nice life. Not for their benefit at all in fact. See what the priests are to pray. Spare your people oh Lord.

And do not make your heritage. That is your people. A mockery. Not because they want the people to escape being ridiculed. But because as it says. Goes on to say in verse 17. A byword among the nations.

Why should it be said among the peoples. Where is their God? You see if the people of Israel were destroyed at this point. And did not receive the mercy of God. Then God would be mocked.

God would be ridiculed. When the people of God fail. God is mocked. In our own society isn't it true. That because of the weakness. And the division of Christian people.

[24 : 54] And Christian churches. God is mocked. He's laughed at. He's ridiculed. How can you say there's a God. When look at the churches. They fight. They bully. They do bad things. They abuse people. They're weak.

They're small. They're falling down. They're selling their buildings. Oh it might be shameful a bit to their Christian. But it's the reputation of God that is at stake. It's the honour of God that is at stake.

And when we fail. God is mocked. By our world. And that's the motivation in this prayer. God we plead for mercy.

Because otherwise. People will laugh at you. And say where are you? You see if Israel fell to another nation. That nation's God would say.

Our gods are better than yours. And people would believe them. Where would be the evidence otherwise? This is thoroughly God centred in its prayer. Here is the instruction.

[25 : 51] Moses already has given the example back at that golden calf incident. For what Joel tells the priest to pray is in substance what Moses himself prayed. That God would spare his people Israel. Though they deserve to be destroyed at Mount Sinai hundreds of years before Joel.

For the sake of the honour of his name among the nations. And that's what we're instructed to pray by Jesus isn't it surely? The opening lines of the Lord's prayer. Hallowed be your name.

Not for our own benefit. For our own comfort should we pray. But for the honour. The hallowing. Of the name of God in our world. Yes it may be nice for us to receive forgiveness of sins.

It's a great benefit and a joy that is ours. As Christian people. But even more so. It is glorious to God. It honours God.

When people are forgiven. The resolution of the dilemma that Joel expresses here. And God speaks to us through Joel. Is a day of the Lord that in a sense we live in the middle of.

[26 : 57] The day of the Lord firstly when Jesus came. And as he hung on a cross. Demonstrated even more clearly than here. That the Lord is gracious and merciful.

Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. For that's why Jesus died. As the offer of mercy for sin undeserved. But we also await his return.

The culmination of the day of the Lord. When he will come to judge the living and the dead. All peoples of all places of all times. Before the judgment throne of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who can endure that day. Who will stand on that day. Only those. Who flung themselves.

To the foot of the cross. For the mercy of God. Don't fool yourself. God's mercy cannot be presumed upon and taken for granted. Jesus was as insistent in his warnings of that final day.

[27 : 57] As Joel is. Watch. Be alert. Be ready for that day will come like a thief in the night. When you least expect it. Be on your guard.

Watch for that day. For when the son of man comes. Will he find faith? Watch.