

Ash Wednesday 2025

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[0 : 00] My name is Jacob Vandiver. It's good to be with you this evening. If you will, turn in your Bible back to the reading from Joel chapter 2. We're going to be looking at verses 1 to 13.

It's on page 761 of the Bible in front of you. Like Jordan said, tonight marks the beginning of Lent. Lent is an orientation period when we intentionally allow God's Word to prepare us for Easter.

So that we would more fully appreciate and understand the beauty of God's grace to us in Christ Jesus. And our text for tonight, Joel chapter 2, does this beautifully.

The book of Joel takes us to the depths of judgment so that we can better see the glorious light of redemption. The Vancouver sun is never so bright as when it's been rainy for two months straight. So just a bit of context as we begin. Joel was a prophet. And he's giving this message after a natural disaster in Israel. There had been a plague of locusts.

[1 : 11] And everything was destroyed. And the people were suffering terribly. And Joel says that this destruction, it was the judgment of God on Israel for their sin.

So Joel is calling out to Israel, wake up, acknowledge your sin, and return to the Lord. Because this devastation, as bad as it is, is only a shadow of the judgment to come when the Lord returns to judge the world.

And chapter 2, our passage for tonight, describes vividly in detail the judgment that is to come. And this warning is intense.

It's terrible. It's even scary. But remember, even this warning is a mercy from God. God is not like a frustrated father who's threatening his children.

Like, stop drawing on the walls with Sharpie or there's going to be consequences. I hear that's a thing. I don't know anything about that.

[2 : 27] Rather, God is like a stable and firm father who, out of love, wants to warn his children about the dangers of taking the wrong path.

So let's hear these warnings with that in mind, shall we? Joel's message has two parts. First, he says, Be warned, the day of the Lord's judgment is coming.

The world as it is now will not carry on forever. But there is a day coming when the Lord will make his presence fully known among us. And in his presence, all the works of humanity will be laid open before him.

And he will condemn sin. And he will commend righteousness. And it will be a great and terrible day. And yet, out of God's sheer goodness, he offers us an invitation to be saved from that judgment to come and to enjoy a peaceful relationship with him forever.

So Joel gives us this warning and this invitation. So that's going to be the structure of the sermon. A warning and an invitation. First, the warning.

[3 : 50] Joel says that God's judgment will come like a powerful army bearing down on the people. And in verses 2 to 9, we see this.

And we see that this army of the Lord's judgment is moving closer and closer and closer. because God's judgment is like a relentless penetrating force that goes straight to our souls.

So they start out sort of far away. Verse 2. The army is like a blackness spread upon the mountains. This would be if you were like standing at Trimble Park on a clear day.

And when you look out at the mountains of the North Shore, they are blackened because they're covered with soldiers preparing to attack the city.

It's ominous. It's terrifying. In verse 3, it says that as they begin to move, a fire goes out before them and behind them.

[4 : 54] And you can hear the sound of the flames crunching and cracking and devouring everything in their path as they come toward you. Verse 4. They're like war horses, which are

terrifying because they'll trample over anything that gets in their path.

Verse 5. You can hear the crackling noise of the flames as they devour anything that happens to be left over. And anyone who sees this is in anguish.

Verse 6. That word means to writhe in pain. It's the same word that's used for a woman's pain in childbirth.

The sight of this coming army is painful because of the anxiety of the judgment to come. But maybe even more that it's painful because we know that the judgment is just.

It's that writhing pain of angst and regret that you feel when you're suffering because of your own neglect or your own bad decisions.

[6 : 05] And you see this vividly in verses 7 to 9. The judgment is now closing in. It's relentless and penetrating. It says the armies charge.

They scale the walls. They march in perfect formation. They do not swerve. They do not jostle. They are perfectly efficient. And any defense that we put up, they just burst right through them. They leap up and run on the walls of the city because they're nothing to them. And when they get through all the defenses, they finally invade our houses, our most intimate places. And they don't come in through the front door, but they climb in through the windows like thieves. God's judgment pierces to our souls.

It gets beyond all our defenses, and it exposes everything that we have hidden away. And God's judgment is not just a personal thing between me and God.

[7 : 10] It shakes the very foundations of the world. Verse 10. The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened.

And the stars stop shining. It's a judgment that's both personal and cosmic. And there's no doubt, verse 11, that this is the Lord's doing.

It's his voice. It's his army. It's his camp. And it's his word that propels them. The day of the Lord is great and very awesome.

That means massive and fearful. Who can endure it? And the answer is no one.

No one can stand before the judgment of the living God. God. How's everybody doing? Still with me?

[8 : 15] Listen, I know that this kind of thing is not easy to hear. These things offend our modern sensibilities. There will be people who disbelieve, who think this is backward and bigoted and below us enlightened modern people.

So it's helpful to remember that God's wrath is not because he is evil. God's wrath is a function of his goodness.

Because God is not just the most righteous and holy thing among all the other things in the universe. God is righteousness. He is holiness.

He is truth. truth. So God's wrath is what happens when any unrighteousness or any defilement or any lies come into contact with the burning purity of his presence.

Sin cannot stand in the presence of the living God. And friends, this is good news because it means that evil will not go on forever.

[9 : 28] God loves us enough to hate evil. But maybe you don't struggle to believe this.

Maybe your struggle is that you don't care. That was Israel's problem. They were quietly inebriated and numb to this reality.

And if that's you, Joel's warning is for you. He is saying, wake up, return to the Lord and live a life of sober expectation of that day to come.

Pursue holiness and godliness in everything that you do because apathy is not an option. but maybe you don't struggle to believe.

Maybe you don't struggle with apathy. Maybe you feel condemned by Joel chapter 2. Maybe it's because of that persistent sin in your life that just won't die.

[10 : 38] Maybe it's because you're exhausted at how slow your sanctification is. Maybe it's because you doubt your salvation. And friend, if that's you, then verse 12 is for you.

It says, yet even now, declares the Lord. Yet even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.

The Lord is saying, if you just return to me, you'll never, ever, be condemned. Forsake that sin that brings judgment and come to me and live.

This is the word of the Lord. God calls us to repentance because he loves us and our repentance is always met with grace.

And just as I finish, I want us to see what this passage has to say about true repentance. repentance. It's a good thing to consider, I think, at the beginning of Lent.

[11 : 52] Two things. The Lord says, return to me with all your heart. The heart in Hebrew is the center of the whole person.

It's your emotions, your mind, your will, your soul, your hopes, and dreams, your desires, everything. everything. And God says, turn to me and give me everything that you have. Because God doesn't want anything from you. He wants you, all of you, every part of your life. The second thing is verse 13. It says, rend your heart and not your garments. Rend means to tear. And tearing your clothes was a way of showing grief about something, which is not always a bad thing.

But here, God is saying, don't make a big show about your repentance. Rather, quietly and genuinely pour out your heart to me. Tear open your heart to the Lord.

[13 : 02] Because we're tempted to do pious religious things to look good in front of other people. Jesus told us about this. He said, be careful not to practice your piety before other people in order to impress them.

Because if you do, you will get no reward from your Father in heaven. But God responds to repentance that comes from an honest and open heart.

He hears you. So this Lent, by all means, do the spiritual practices. They can be so helpful. But consider your heart.

Why are you doing them? Because God wants the real thing. And true repentance will always, always, always be met with forgiveness and love.

Because God is gracious, merciful, patient, and abounding in steadfast love. And he hears our prayers of repentance and faith, and he responds with grace every time.

[14 : 11] Later in this prophecy, Joel will tell us that as vivid and terrible as the day of the Lord will be, no one ever needs to be condemned on that day.

Because anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. This is the wonderful grace that we receive in Christ Jesus.

And it's what we look forward to celebrating at Easter. Because in Christ we enjoy the full presence of God. because Jesus covers us with his righteousness so that the fires of God's judgment on that day will no longer be fires of destruction but fires of purification.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. And on that final day those who have put their trust in Jesus will not suffer condemnation but our hearts will be purified and we will see the Lord face to face.

Amen.