

Joel 2:18-27 (1984 NIV)
Standing on God's Promises

Joel 2

18 Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people.

19 The LORD will reply to them: "I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.

20 I will drive the northern army far from you, pushing it into a parched and barren land, with its front columns going into the eastern sea and those in the rear into the western sea. And its stench will go up; its smell will rise." Surely he has done great things.

21 Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things.

22 Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches.

23 Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.

24 The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

25 "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you.

26 You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed.

27 Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed."

Introduction

After the horrendous acts of terrorism on 11 Sep 2001, the nation of America was filled with shock, grief and anger. Many emotive words had been used in reaction to what had happened—words like *war*, *crusade*, *revenge* and *retaliation*.

I recall that I was just back home from teaching evening school at SBC when I first heard the news on TV. In fact, I was a little tired that evening and was expecting myself to sleep early and well that night on 11 Sep.

When I first saw the TV image of a tall building spewing huge clouds of black smoke, I thought it was just another high-rise fire. Then I saw this

plane flying straight towards the burning tower; saw it crashed into another tower behind and burst into a huge fireball. It was then that I felt my tiredness suddenly left me, and I sat myself down to slowly allow the horror before my eyes to sink in. I then realised that this was no mere accident but really terrorism.

When I saw the first tower collapsed, I knew that the magnitude of devastation was going to be horrendous—not only to physical buildings, but more importantly, to innocent human lives. I was expecting myself to sleep easy and well that night. But after watching this horror unfolding before my eyes, I could hardly sleep that night. I felt very troubled by this blatant disregard for the dignity and sanctity of human lives.

But in the face of massive devastation like what happened on 9/11 that led to many crying for revenge and retaliation, what was God telling people then (and us today)? Perhaps, the late Billy Graham said it well when he spoke at the national day of prayer and remembrance on 14 Sep 2001—he called on people to remember and return to God.

In the Book of Joel which we will be looking at this morning, a great devastation was also suffered by the Israelites. The whole land was stripped bare by the attacks of locusts. People were fearful, and perhaps, even angry. But through the prophet Joel, God was calling them not to stay terrified or angry, but to remember and to return to their God.

Let me now give an overview of the Book of Joel (only three chapters).

- First, we read that disaster had stricken the southern kingdom of Judah in the form of a cloud of locusts (it was the days of the divided kingdom with Israel in the north and Judah in the south). The fields in Judah were stripped bare, and the prophet Joel seized the opportunity to proclaim God's message. This invasion of locusts is seen as a foreshadowing of the coming day of the Lord. In light of this, the book warns of approaching judgment, calls the people to repentance, and gives God's people hope of the coming day of salvation that will follow.
- Second, the name Joel means *Yahweh is God*. And the prophet Joel identifies himself as the Son of Pethuel (1:1). He was a clear, concise and uncompromising preacher of repentance. The book alludes to the strong influence of the priesthood. Hence, it is believed that Joel was ministering during the period when Joash was placed upon the throne at the age of seven and Jehoiada the priest functioned as the real ruler (2 Kgs 11 and 12). This period (probably around 835 BC) seems to fit the text of Joel since the priesthood appears strong and there is no mention of a king.
- Third, the Book of Joel can be divided into two major sections—the day of the Lord in retrospect (ch 1); and the day of the Lord in prospect (chs 2 and 3). This short book develops the crucial theme of the

coming of the Lord. It is a time of awesome judgment upon people and nations that have rebelled against God. Conversely, it is also a time of blessing on those who have trusted in Him. The theme of disaster runs throughout the book—locusts, famine, fires, invading armies, and celestial phenomena. Promises of hope are interspersed with pronouncements of coming judgment.

This morning, I call your attention to Joel 2:18-27. Through the prophet Joel, God calls His people to repent and return to Him. And in the event that they repent and return, God gives His people at least two promises to stand on. The first is ...

I. The Promise of Sustenance Grace (vv. 18-20, 24, 26-27).

Verse 18 tells us that this sustenance is rooted in God's jealousy for His land and pity on His people. Usually, when we think of the word *jealousy*, we think of some destructive attitude and vindictive action of a jilted lover. *Jealousy* is not a very positive word in our understanding.

All of us have feelings of jealousy from time to time, I believe:

- Jealousy is there when we think we have worked harder and better than the other person, but when promotion comes, that other person gets promoted, not us.
- Jealousy is there when we think we are doing better than the family next door, but one day when we are in the car park, we see that family driving off in a much better car than ours.
- Jealousy is there when we think our children are smarter than those of our friends, but when the exam results are announced, we find our children scoring much lower grades than those of our friends.

The cause for jealousy is the assumption that we are better, and hence, deserve better/more than the others. It is generally viewed as something negative in a person.

So, what does it mean in Joel 2:18 that God will be jealous for His land? One way to understand what this means is to search the context for clues. You will notice even in your English translation that the Book of Joel is written in a special literary style—i.e. not in paragraphs as if narrating a story, but in stanza format (e.g. compare Joel 2 with Jonah 1). The format in Joel is in the form of Hebrew poetry. And one way to understand such poetry is to see how the meaning of one line is enhanced by the next line.

This means that the term “will be jealous” in the first line of Joel 2:18 is explained by the term “take pity” in the second line of the same verse. What does it mean to “take pity”? One basic meaning of this term is to “have compassion”. This word is also used in the story when the baby Moses was

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found by Pharaoh's daughter. Under the threat of death, he was hidden in a basket among the reeds along the bank of the River Nile. The baby was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, and Ex 2:6 tells us that "she felt sorry for him". The term "felt sorry" is that same term translated as "take pity" in Joel 2:18. It was this compassion that caused Pharaoh's daughter to disobey the evil decree of her father to kill all new-born male Hebrew babies; to save the life of the baby Moses, and even to adopt him as her own.

In Joel 2:18, it refers to the compassion of God to do the right thing for His people. And if this understanding is to help enhance the meaning of God's jealousy in the first line of v. 18, what we can say then is that this jealousy of God is not something negative or destructive. Rather, it points to God's zeal to do the right thing for His land, just as He is compassionate in doing the right thing for His people. In other words, the jealousy of God here for His land is His zeal to see His land get right again. It is this divine jealousy/zeal that compels God to seek to preserve and restore His land as the place of His dwelling and expression of His glory.

Indeed, if the people would repent and return to Him, God promised that He would send to them "grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully" (vv. 19, 24). These products were the staple food of the people in those days. Because of the invasion of locusts and the resulting barrenness, the people had been deprived of their basic food for a long time. So, it is not as if they had been enjoying plenty and when they repented, God blessed them with even more. What we are seeing here were people who had been impoverished and had hardly anything to sustain themselves physically.

But when they repented and returned to God, v. 19 tells us they would have "enough to satisfy themselves fully", and again in v. 26 that they would "have plenty to eat, until they are full". Indeed, in God's economy, abundance is in terms of satisfaction, not wastefulness. No one will have less than enough—i.e. neither too little nor too much, and no one will feel neglected or deprived.

You remember how God supplied the Hebrew people with manna from heaven when they were in the desert. It was in abundance (the manna rained from heaven), yet if anyone tried to gather more than a day's supply, the surplus would turn rotten (Ex 16). And what this teaches us is that God promises to supply in abundance for all—i.e. it is plentiful in the sense that there is enough and even more than enough to meet our need, but not our greed.

And in this way, God Himself is glorified. He is glorified in that others cannot mock His people that they are not cared for by Him—His people are provided for even if they do not seem to be prosperous. God's glory is reflected in the evidence of His provision, not in the opulence of our ostentation. That's why God could say through Joel in v. 19 that His people will never be "an object of scorn to the nations" and in vv. 26-27 that "never again will His people be shamed".

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In times of devastation, the call for us is like that to the Hebrew people in Joel's time in v. 27—i.e. a call to return to God and rediscover that He is still in our midst; that He is still God; that we are to trust and obey in no other but only in Him.

To the taunting cry of others who challenge us, "Where is your God?" we are not to reply with fear, revenge or retaliation in our heart. Rather, it may be a time to remember and rely on His sustenance and rediscover that He is still with us and for us.

Verse 20 tells of God driving out "the northern army". Some say that this is a reference to the Babylonian/Assyrian invasion. Others suggest that this refers to the locust swarm that had devastated the land because in v. 25, this swarm is said to be a "great army". Whatever it was, God promised to push it "into a parched and barren land, with its front columns going into the eastern sea and those in the rear into the western sea. And its stench will go up; its smell will rise". What this means is that God promised to remove this national threat as far away as it was necessary. The very thing that devastated the land and people of God would itself be totally destroyed by God. God is in charge and He reverses the tide of events—what a promise of God protecting and sustaining us by securing our boundaries!

But I want to let you know that God does not always promise to secure our land and existence with such direct interventions. What He does want us to do constantly and consistently is to guard His boundaries for us as His people. Put in another way, God has already set up His boundaries for us within these we are to live and move. It is our responsibility to guard these boundaries set up by God. And one boundary sign that God has for us reads—"Guard your need for the holy God, not for human greatness."

Israel under the rule of David and Solomon had been a great nation of people. The land was their beautiful land "flowing with milk and honey". God had been good to them. But you know when people reach a certain measure of greatness, somehow the yearning for God wanes. After all, who needs God when one can easily depend on him/herself. And that's why we read what we read today in our text—the Hebrews were a people mocked by others and not a people of greatness admired by others; their beautiful land of plenty had become a broken land of barrenness. Why? It is because they had been seeking human greatness rather than the holy God.

Yes, guard our need for God rather than our need for greatness—this is God's boundary sign for us to heed; it was so then, it is so even today. Friends, we all do well to personally guard God's boundaries for us instead of asking God to bail us out every time we breach those lines. You know why? It is because often times, those who breach these boundaries are not the invading outsiders, but really our own selves. God is calling each of us to guard our next step. So, what boundaries have we overstepped these days?

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The way to watch over such a boundary is to guard our strength and to be ready for what may come. Never think that we are so strong that nothing can topple us; never be so sure that we fail to check the motivation of our heart. Why? Because an unguarded strength and an unprepared heart produce a doubly weakened person who is most vulnerable when he thinks he's strong.

During the days of the Soviet Union, the Russians were reputed to have developed the most effective anti-aircraft system in the world. Powerful radars would probe the air above major Soviet cities, and missiles would bring down an enemy aircraft at any altitude. Moscow and the famous Red Square were supposedly guarded by the best air-defence system in the world.

But one day in June 1989, a young German boy named Mathias Rust piloted a small rented single-engine airplane from Denmark, flew right into Soviet airspace and landed in the Red Square. Before the police could come and take him away, he managed to greet some surprised people in the area, and even signed a few autographs. This young lad was elated, the Soviet government was embarrassed, a couple of generals were sacked, and the world laughed in amusement.

Indeed, the greatest enemy is not the one who breaches God's boundaries for us from outside, but the one who breaches them from within—i.e. the complacency in us that tempts us to believe that we are too strong to be vulnerable. So, beware of what we think as our "impenetrable airspace".

(<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/temptation.htm>)

An unguarded strength and a complacent heart make a doubly weakened person when he thinks he is so great that he can temper with the boundaries of God for him. But when the boundary line is breached and we lay in devastation, we take heart today that God promises to sustain our existence and security when we return to Him.

A second promise from God when we return to Him is ...

II. The Promise of Restorative Grace (vv. 21-27).

Make no mistake about it, the devastation we read in our text today is more than a little misfortune. It is a catastrophe. So massive in scale that everything had been victimised—the land, animals, and people. But when the people choose to return to their God, notice that the call is to be glad; to rejoice and not to be afraid (vv. 21-23).

Everything is exhorted not to be afraid; to be glad and to rejoice—the land, the wild animals, and the people. Why? It is because God has done great things in response to the people's return to Him.

God is doing His work of regaining the lost years resulting from the devastation by the locusts. The pastures will become green again, the trees and vines will bear their full yield (v22), the rains will come down again (not in drips and drops, but in abundant showers—v. 23), and the grain, wine and oil will also be full and overflowing (v. 24).

What picture do we see here? Well, we see a picture of recovery from barrenness to fruitfulness. And God has done all these great things. He never does things by half measures—God is generous in His work of regaining our loss when we return to Him.

Even as the people of Zion return to God, He regains for them the lost cycle of rainfall (v. 23). For the Chinese, rain means water and water means money (material blessing). In a sense, it is the case here—the rain comes as a vindication of God's people as they return to Him; as God blessing His people abundantly and regularly with a basic necessity in life. The rain falls at the right time and in appropriate amount.

But perhaps, the one discomfoting thing we learn here is in v. 25 where God declares that the locusts that have brought on so much devastation are “my great army that I sent among you”. At a glance this may seem shocking—how can God do that?! But as we think deeper, this may not be too shocking after all—if people have gone so far off in rebellion against their God, then one way to have their attention and action is to hurt them hard. It is like what C. S. Lewis once said, “Pain is God's megaphone through which He shouts at us.”

But then God does not leave us bleeding to death. In vv. 25-26, He declares, “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten ... you will have plenty to eat, until you are full.” So, here is a God who acknowledges the damage done, and then promises to make ample compensation. He is like a father who canes his wayward son, and after the child has repented, this man then embraces his son in his arms; dries his tears; buys him a creamy rich ice-cream.

And the reason why God chooses this “hard” way is to lead His people back to Himself so that they “will praise the name of the LORD your God” (v. 26). After such a long time of devastation, the phrase “Praise the LORD” must have almost been forgotten in the vocabulary of the people. But I think it is even earlier than that—because while the people were still in their good times, they had already forgotten to praise the LORD. If they did praise anyone then, it would probably be themselves, and it was this self-praise that had led them away from God. That's why God through Joel tells the people in v. 26 that if they should praise again, they will praise not their own name, but the name of the LORD; and they will praise not what they themselves have

done, but what wonders God has worked for them. Indeed, when God so regains their lost years, the people can declare aloud without shame and disgrace that He is in Israel, and that He is their God and there is no other (v. 27). This is what any blessing should bring us to declare—back to our first-love relationship with the LORD. Anything that is less than that is not spiritual restoration but material seduction.

So, we see a picture of God's recovery work here—"repaying" what has been lost; turning barrenness back to fruitfulness. Do you feel barren or fruitful as a Christian today? As you look back your past, have the years been wasted in some ways?

Well, we cannot relive those years. Opportunities may have been lost; God-given responsibilities may have been shirked; faithfulness may have been compromised; we may not have been the person that God wants us to be.

But the good news for us today in spite of what has already been lost or wasted is that by returning to God, those losses can be made up. God says, "I will repay." We cannot relive those lost years or opportunities, but we can have a new start by returning to God as He speaks to us in our own situation. Yes, we cannot relive what has been lost or wasted, but God can restore those losses because He can give better years and opportunities so that we can live fruitful Christian lives again. God repays what we have lost when we return to Him.

In the light of the 911 tragedy, many Americans began to do some soul-searching and return to God; to seek after a holy God rather than human greatness. But you know we don't need such a devastation to happen before we can do that. Today, as the Spirit of God speaks and convicts your heart, respond to Him in your own situation; make your return back to Him today.

We all fail God from time to time. But He is telling us today that there is life after failure simply because He restores what have been wasted away when we return to Him. He wants us to finish our race for Him simply because He gives us a restart after we have fallen. Indeed, God promises to restore what we have lost. He restores because He still believes in us, and so we are to keep running for Him.

Conclusion

Today, we can stand on two promises of the Lord—the promise of His sustenance, and that of His restoration. But before we can claim these, we are called to first return. Let me close with some suggestions as to how we can do that:

- *First, cultivate a deeper dependency on God.* Even in a crisis, ask God to show us where He is in our situation. In this way, we acknowledge that He is present rather than absent in our situation.

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Also, ask what the Lord would want us do in our various situations. In this way, all that we do become our responses to the Lord's leading and enabling, and not mere reflex action on our part.

- *Second, take God at His Word.* We live in uncertain times—people lose jobs, lose their health, even possibly losing their lives. But we must not lose faith and trust in the Word of God. Let the Word be our compass and comfort by letting the Word speak to us each day. Learn to worship and praise God as we meet Him in and through the Word.
- *Third, stand with one another.* God empowers us as we stand together. Return to God is to love God, and loving God through loving one another. In times like these, we cannot rest our certainty in many things—from economy to security. But we can trust in the unfailing grace of God. We are to comfort and encourage one another in God's sustaining and restoring grace as we deal with our past, live in the present, and look to the future. Through our mutual interactions, we reassure one another that God can make things right.

As I close, I want to give you some time to respond to God in silent prayer. What is God speaking to you today about returning to Him in your own situation? Talk with the Lord and use this time of silent, prayerful reflection to settle some personal issues with Him.

I pray that you will experience the peace of His presence and the power of His sustaining and restoring grace after your communion with Him. Amen!