

Sermon Starter: God's Call to Fall

Scripture: Book of Joel

For weeks I have studied and meditated upon the book of Joel, which is 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 in book form. There are certainly parallels to be made between what Joel describes and what America is facing today. Swarms of locusts devoured the produce of the land leaving the people unable to even provide the grain and drink offerings. While no longer an agrarian society, we are seeing the vulnerability of our market based economy. The Dow Industrial Average, a key market indicator, had declined nearly 50% over the previous six months. In recent weeks the market has seen positive gains, but will it continue? Like ancient Israel, we find ourselves in a critical situation that is not unlike what we find in 2 Chronicles 7:13 and the book of Joel. Consequently, the prescription for the Hebrew people we find in 2 Chronicles 7:14 and in the book of Joel contains enduring principles that, if we would follow them, could produce positive change in our churches and in our nation.

I invite you to look with me at God's call to fall from the book of Joel, and basically there are four points I want to make: The Hurt, The Heart, The How, and The Hope.

1. The Hurt:

The prophet Joel opens his discourse with the people by asking a rhetorical question that reveals the depth of the hurt the people were experiencing as a result of their rejection of God and His ways. "Has anything like this [destruction] happened in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?" (Joel 1:2). The answer was "No". They were experiencing a unique plague that was the result of the Lord's judgment upon them. The result of these four waves of locust, whether literal or figurative, was economic devastation for this agrarian society (1:4). This brought an economic meltdown.

It would appear that the economy had been doing well because Joel calls for the drunkards to sober up and weep and for the drinkers of wine to wail because their supply was cut off (1:5). The picture is a people who had become intoxicated with the blessings of God to the point that they no longer acknowledge the source of their blessings. The result was a cessation of the grain and drink offerings (1:9-12). This is of particular interest.

There is no indication that the burnt offerings ceased, which were the offerings made to atone for their sin. The blood offerings did not involve the contribution of man; it was the animal whose blood was spilled for the remission of sin. The grain offering, was different, it involved man. It was a sacrificial offering, since grain was limited in supply. And the type of flour was to be fine, which required work on the part of the one making the sacrifice. Additionally, the grain offering was where the priests found their provision (Lev. 2:2-3). The grain offering was also worship of God acknowledging dependence upon Him for their physical needs and their spiritual guidance. They were going through the motions with their religious practices to God, but their heart was not toward Him (Joel 2:12-13). It is interesting that all of creation suffered as a result of their sin, even to the point that the “flocks of sheep suffer punishment.”

2. The Heart:

Having stated and restated their desperate and hopeless situation Joel turns toward a hopeful solution – **a change of heart** – a call to repentance. Until the final judgment, there is never a situation in which God leaves us without hope, without promise, without possibility of turning back the judgment of God (2 Chron 7:14, Acts 8:22).

But it is up to the people to return to God’s mercy and forgiveness and away from the path that leads to judgment. Joel now gives a word of hope from the Lord. “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning. So rend your heart and not your garments, return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm” (Joel 2:12-13). This return to God begins with personal repentance. In our hearts we must be sorry for our sins and the fact that we have offended God (Psalm 51:4 – “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight...”)

What does a repentant heart look like?

- A repentant and remorseful heart **does not rationalize** personal sin away by comparing it to what may appear to be the more vile sin in others, but rather it realizes the contribution it has made to the corporate guilt, A repentant and remorseful heart assumes responsibility.
- A repentant and remorseful heart **is humbled before God**, manifesting the remorse through fasting, weeping and mourning. Joel cautions that this is not to be just an outward ritual or show; rather it is to be an act of the heart (Matt 6:5-7).

3. The How

Joel moves on to “the how” of returning to the Lord. Scripture bears witness to the fact that it is the humble who will experience the grace and mercy of God (Prov. 3:34; James 4:10; 1 Pet 5:5). Joel calls for the people to **humble** themselves through a universal fast and sacred assembly on behalf of the nation that has gone terribly astray. This call from the prophet is for God’s people to take the initiative, just as they are called to do in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

While the governmental structure is much difference between Israel and our form of government, there are principles here that we can learn from and, if we desire the blessings and prosperity of God, can apply. This call went out, not from the government, but from the church, not from politicians, but from the priests. The priests were to lead the way by weeping at the altar of God. They could no longer offer the grain and drink offerings to the Lord, so in their place was the offering of tears. With hearts wounded by their sin and alienation from God they were to go before the altar **on bended knee**.

Here is what they were to say to the Lord, it was scripted for them by God through Joel; “**Spare Your people, O Lord, and do not give Your heritage to reproach, that the nation should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples (nations) ‘where is their God?’**” It was all about God, it was not about the people, as important as people and our needs are before God, it is about Him and His reputation. If we want God’s attention we must appeal to Him about His reputation. This is how Abraham approached God on behalf of Sodom; “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen 18:25). It is how Moses interceded for the fledgling nation of Israel (Deut. 9:26-28): “Lest the land from which You brought us should say, ‘Because the

Lord was not able to bring them to the land which He promised them, and because He hated them, He has brought them out to kill them in the wilderness.””

4. The Hope

God’s zeal to punish will be turned into a zealous display of mercy, protection and provision (3:18-27). Man’s relationship with God has implications for all of creation. Not only were the people of Israel suffering but so were the animals and the crops. If the people will yield to the call of God to repent, the benefits of that obedience will accrue to the land (v 21), the “beast of the field” and plant life (v 22) as well. The promise here is not only to end the destruction that is taking place, but restore what the “locust has eaten” (v 25). This is a passage of great hope and encouragement. Here are a people who are so bad off that they cannot even offer the grain and drink offerings to God, which is something they prided themselves in, because they had no grain or wine. The very necessities of life were gone. That entire situation would be turned around to the point that they “shall eat plenty and be satisfied” and their entire country stabilized by the presence of God, if they would simply repent and turn back to God.

Talk about a deal you can’t refuse! This promise was not isolated to Israel in the day of Joel, it was the same offered to the people in Solomon’s day (2 Chronicle 7:14). This is a promise based upon the character of God and it is extended to us today, which is nowhere more clearly seen than in His offer of forgiveness to all humanity through His Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

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