

# "The Heart of God"

*Joel 2:1-17*

If you and I were to watch too much news – and we can in today's world – we would be inundated with constant bad news that's happening in the world. We could even think if we're not careful, that there is nothing good in the world. Is there nothing good going on in the world? Of course there is. There is all kinds of good going on in our world that never makes the news. This tells us that our news is skewed and biased. It really shouldn't be called news because the words news is supposed to mean all that's going on North, East, West and South!

The real problem with news is it is one-sided; it is man's perspective of what's going on in the world. There is no divine perspective given. We're never told how God was working in certain parts of the world. So if we're constantly watching the news we're subtly being trained to judge everything by sight and not by faith. That's why the Bible is so important. Without the Bible we can never fully understand what's going on in our world. Without God's perspective we have an incomplete picture and can make inaccurate assessments of our world.

God called and sent prophets to go to the people of God and show them His perspective of what was going on in their life and around them. Sometimes – like in the book of Daniel – God actually explains who the next world powers will be and what will happen as a result. And God used the prophets to warn His people what the end of this world will be like. Why? So we can chart out the major events and what to watch for? Sure, what we can know we can plan for. But that's not the real reason God gives us snapshots of future events. And here in Joel Ch. 2 God shows why He warns us about the way the world will conclude – to show us His heart.

In Ch. 1 God explained to Israel His perspective of the news in their day. Israel experienced a terrible, horrific, devastating plague of locusts that wiped out their entire food crop. We saw from God's perspective last week that God told Israel back when Moses received the law in Deut. 28 that if Israel persisted in their rebellion against God, He would devastate their land with a locust plague. And if that didn't cause them to repent, then He would send a nation whose language they did not know and expel them from their land.

If we're not careful, we can misjudge God and say He is harsh and unbending. The truth is He gave this first warning in roughly 1300 BC and Joel prophesied around 800 BC. It will be 722 BC before Assyria takes the northern part of Israel away and another 117 years before Babylon comes to take the rest of Israel away. Yes, God does judge but He waits a long time before He does. So we see the heart of God here.

Joel 2 begins with a new warning. The literal locust plague was a forerunner to the potential for exile to a foreign land. So now God uses Joel to describe a future locust like army coming that will be a different kind of desolation. But the key to 2:1-17 is found in v. 13-14,

*<sup>13</sup> Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. <sup>14</sup> Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.*

So yes, if this were a newscast we would simply report that in 2:1-11 God warns us that He is coming in judgment. But when we see this from God's perspective then we see that . . .

## **God Graciously warns us that He Will Discipline** **(2:1-11)**

God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love. Grace means He gives His people what they don't deserve. Israel's continual disobedience of God's Word didn't warrant another warning – they were already written down. But in His grace He warns them again through the prophet Joel. The locust plague was a wake-up call. There's something more coming.

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand— <sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.*

The word for trumpet is shofar. The shofar was blown for numerous reasons but here it was to warn of an enemy approaching. The Day of the Lord is when God steps in and brings judgment. The Day of the Lord language often is a mixture of near future as well as ultimate future warning because like the locust plague, each time God steps in and disciplines His people is a reminder of the final Day of the Lord when God will judge Israel for their rebellion against Him and judge the nations for their oppression against Him and Israel. The Day of the Lord also includes God's ultimate blessing on Israel when Jesus Christ returns to this earth and establishes His rule from Jerusalem.

That day is always "close at hand" because we never know when God's final Day of the Lord judgment will come. Joel describes an army that will be as broad as a sunrise. That ultimate day will be unique. In Dan. 12:1 we read

*"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then.*

*But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.*

Jesus Himself said of this day in Matt. 24:12,

*<sup>21</sup>For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. <sup>22</sup>If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.*

And that's another sign of God's grace. If God had not already established according to Daniel 9 that that time would be limited to 7 years, then yes the world would be victorious over Israel and the people of God. But God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Vv.3-9 describe the swiftness and strength of this army. Nothing will seem to stop them. Their destructiveness will be as vast as a forest fire. In vv.10-11 God is clearly speaking of the ultimate future Day of the Lord when we read,

*<sup>10</sup>Before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened and the stars no longer shine. <sup>11</sup>The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?*

Prior to Jesus' return the sun, moon and stars will go dark. That has never happened. People have tried to explain these away as eclipses in the past or 'blood moons' but none of those things explain fully the total lack of light. Jesus mentions this in Matt. 24:29-31 as well. But there's something else here that we need to see and that is that God calls this future invading army against His people as "His army" (v.11). God calls them His army because they are doing His refining work. In the book of Isaiah God predicts a ruler named Cyrus will do His work. In Is. 45:1-4

*"This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: <sup>2</sup>I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. <sup>3</sup>I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. <sup>4</sup>For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me.*

God sets up kings and deposes them (Dan. 2:21). God turns the hearts of kings (Prov. 21:1). God guides the decisions the nations make so that His will can be accomplished for Israel and the church. That's the news we never hear on TV but that's really how it should be told.

So the Israel of Joel's day was warned about a coming army that they would eventually face- Babylon – while we are warned about an even greater Day of the Lord yet to come that will precede Jesus' return. And God is gracious enough to tell us ahead of time. A good Father warns His children about potential dangers so that they will avoid getting hurt. God does the same for us. So in vv.11-12 God appeals to His people,

*<sup>12</sup>“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” <sup>13</sup>Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. <sup>14</sup>Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.*

God warns us because He's a God of compassion.

## **God Compassionately Desires that We Change Before it Happens (2:12-14)**

“Even now” gives the impression the approaching army is just over the hill “return to me”. Remember God is talking to His people. ‘Return’ implies you were once there and now have drifted away. Return to the Lord Your God. This isn't a salvation message, this is repent of your sins people of God before God brings His discipline on you.

Joel quotes God's words given to Moses in Ex. 32:12. This was after Israel sinned by making a golden calf to worship while Moses was on the mountain getting the commandments from God. Moses interceded on Israel's behalf asking that God would “relent and do not bring disaster on His people”. And God relented.

“Who knows” signifies God can relent but He may not. The king of Nineveh said this very thing about Israel's God when Jonah preached to them about their wickedness, and God relented. But God may not; He is God. If all we had to do was pray a simple prayer that always worked then we would be manipulating God. That's the way some Christians think unfortunately. “But we all prayed for healing!” or “We prayed our kids would always follow God”. We can't use prayer to manipulate God to do what we want. Prayer doesn't guarantee God will change but it may make God delay His hand of discipline or judgment.

God wants us to change our hearts; not just show we're sorry (rending of the garments). God wants to bless us but on His terms not ours. He delays discipline because He has compassion on us and is long suffering, which is what patience means. In vv.15-17 we hear again the warning,

*<sup>15</sup> Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. <sup>16</sup> Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. <sup>17</sup> Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"*

But here's where we get God's purpose for us in difficult times.

## **God Patiently Delays its Coming so People Will Pray Together (2:15-17)**

Here's where we truly see God's heart. The whole purpose of the warning is to draw God's people together to repent and pray. Everyone is to drop everything and unite in prayer to God. Israel had sinned and so they must fast and pray and have a sacred assembly; a time of confession and forgiveness. Because what happens when God's people come together and pray? Listen to God's words to Solomon in 2 Chron. 7, especially v.13

*<sup>11</sup> When Solomon had finished the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the LORD and in his own palace, <sup>12</sup> the LORD appeared to him at night and said: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices. <sup>13</sup> "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, <sup>14</sup> if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

How many times have we recited verse 14 without knowing the context of v.13? This prayer was specifically for the kind of situation Israel found themselves in and they needed to come together and confess their sins together. If you've ever gathered together in a meeting like that the Spirit works in ways you can't describe. As one person prays and confesses their sin the Spirit reveals things to you and you are confronted with your sin and confess them too. When God's people gather together for prayer and fasting for confession the Spirit moves in the hearts of God's people often in ways we wouldn't see on our own. This is what God wants to hear; hearts rent open and sins confessed and people's relationships restored. Because we never sin alone; our sin is against God yes, but it's never only against God; it's against one another.

There's another reason God wants His people to come together and pray

*<sup>17</sup> Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object*

*of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"*

God wants His people to see how they have made God look bad. He wants them to pray that God would be exalted and glorified. God will sometimes let His Name temporarily be dishonoured in order to discipline His people but He knows ultimately He will restore them and honour His Name once again.

When we study bible prophecy if we're not careful we can sometimes get caught up in only one side of things; trying to figure out facts and timing and who the major players are. We can almost treat it just like news, a one-sided version of what's going on. But here in Joel Ch. 2 Joel predicts God's prophetic discipline for Israel but also shows God's heart. What is God's purpose in it all? God wants to show His people He's a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love (hesed = covenant faithfulness). He wants to relent from sending calamity and delays as much as possible until He has no choice.

We're pretty good at making sure our cars run well so we change the oil regularly and inspect the tires and when we notice unusual sounds we get it checked out. Similarly with our bodies. We have regular checkups or if something's not quite right we get it looked at. But what about our souls? Do we check in with God regularly and pray David's prayer from Ps. 139:23-24,

*<sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. <sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

God requires from us clean hands and a pure heart. We need to go to Him consistently and ask Him to show us how our words have hurt someone, how our thought processes have caused those words to come out. Or how we have acted in ways that don't honour God.

Joel 2 reveals the heart of God even in discipline. God desires repentance and right hearts. He loves to forgive and restore. He wants to bless us and use us to honour His Name.

*James 4:7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

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