

A Chronicle of Redemption

Chapter 30: Repenting of Sin and Returning to God

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CHAPTER 30: REPENTING OF SIN AND RETURNING TO GOD **Joel**

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, then I invite you to open with me to the book of Joel. Feel free to use the table of contents there in your Bible if you need to. Find the little book of Joel, three chapters long, right after Hosea. Throughout history, there have been times among God's people when there has been an acute, keen, humble, even emotional sensitivity to sin. We look at Ezra. At one point he is so overwhelmed by his sin and the sin of God's people that he falls on his face and is weeping. He's unable to even lift his head before God.

You look in the book of Nehemiah, and you see a time when God's people were simply listening to the Word being read, and that's all it took. They heard His Word. They were convicted of sin, and all of the people fell down on their faces weeping over their sin. Then, you look in church history and have read about times when, in the context of a worship gathering, conviction of sin would just simultaneously sweep across an entire congregation, and people would fall on their faces and their knees, weeping, grieving over sin; times where God would revive His people in a fresh way that was a clear demonstration of the power of His Spirit.

So, we see those times, and then we see times in history where God's people have been desensitized to sin, in some senses, dull to sin. Participating in religious activity but never stopping, pausing to grasp the depth of sin and to mourn over it, where sin is treated casually and worship is treated routinely, and as I look at the state of the contemporary church, I don't want to just keep it that general. As pastor, I want to say that as I look at the state of The Church at Brook Hills, I see us much closer to the latter than the former.

A dangerous religious dullness to sin; desensitivity even. We can sit for hours in front of the TV or movie listening to God's name in vain, and it doesn't even register with us. We can gossip and call it just normal. In church, we can let our minds wander on the Internet and in our imagination in lust and impurity and think, "Well, that's just the way men are in our day." Our marriages and our divorce rate in the church matches that of the culture, and we run after greed and status and success and money just like everyone else around us. We need to wake up. I pray that God will wake us up to weep over sin, to grieve over offense against God, to hate sin, to run from it. I want to be part of a people, in my own life and in our lives in the days ahead, where sin is not treated casually.

Cornelius Plantinga wrote a classic book on sin in which he said,

The awareness of sin, a deep awareness of disobedience and painful confession of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin. They feared it. They fled from it. They grieved over it. God's people agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper might wonder if he could still participate in communion. A woman who, for years, envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might wonder if this sin threatened her very salvation. [He

continued], that shadow has dimmed. Nowadays the accusation, 'You have sinned' is often said with a grin and with a tone that signals an inside joke. At one time, this accusation still had the power to jolt people.

I want us to be a faith family that is jolted by sin. Even that which seems the smallest of sin, that it would so grieve our hearts that we would be broken over it. I want to be a part of a revival among God's people where we see His holiness in fresh ways, and we see our sin in grievous ways.

I was reading this last week Martin Lloyd-Jones. He said,

Go and read the history of revivals again. Watch the individuals at the beginning. This is invariably the first thing that happens to them. They begin to see what a terrible, appalling thing sin is in the sight of God. They temporarily even forget the state of the church and forget their own anguish. It is the thought of sin in the sight of God, how terrible it must be. Never has there been a revival but that some of the people, especially at the beginning, have had such visions of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin that they have scarcely known what to do with themselves.

God, give us a vision of your holiness and our sinfulness. God make us a people who are overwhelmed by the horror and the severity of our sin, and at the same time, overwhelmed by the mercy of our Savior in the process. Pour out your Spirit and power among us in a way that is unexplainable to the community and the city around us.

This is why I wanted to call us to fast today. It is what we have read this last week in the book of Joel. We don't know a lot about who Joel is or when Joel prophesied. There's a lot of debate, but we do know this: He prophesied in a time when the people of God were asleep in their sensitivity to sin, and their sin did not bother them, and God was bringing judgment upon them. He brought an invasion of locusts who filled the land and swallowed up every plant, every vine, every tree, every fruit, everything green in the land, gone. Utter desolation, and what Joel says is this is a picture of judgment from God, but it is a picture of much greater judgment that is coming.

The Day of the Lord...

He talks about the day of the Lord. I want you to circle it with me. Five times in the book of Joel, the prophet Joel mentions the "*day of the LORD*." Joel 1:15, "*Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near...*" circle it there, "*...and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.*"

You get to Joel 2:1, "*Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near...*" Verse 11, "*The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?*" Then, you get to the end of Joel 2:31: "*The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.*" Then, you get to Joel 3:14, and Joel says, "*Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.*"

A day of destruction for the resistant.

Now, this is not the only place in the Bible we see the day of the Lord mentioned. We see it all over the Bible, and particularly in the prophets, and sometimes the prophets are referring to a present judgment from God, like a locust invasion, but always they're pressing in to a deeper picture; a picture of more severe, catastrophic judgment that is going to come in the future, and the picture is two-fold. It will be a day of destruction for the resistant. For those who resist God and remain in sin, this is a day of utter, horrifying destruction. The imagery in this book is thick with these locusts. These locusts being a picture of the judgment of God that is coming, judgment upon God's people.

You look in Joel, in the first two chapters, the focus is on the nation of Judah, the people of God, and the judgment they would experience...they were experiencing even in this locust plague. Then, you get to Joel 3, and you see judgment upon all peoples. In Joel 3, it says that the Lord will gather together all nations. Look at Joel 3:12, *"Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat..."* Jehoshaphat literally means, "The Lord will judge." So, come to the valley where the Lord will judge. *"For there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great."*

Listen to verse 14, *"Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision."* There's a lot of evangelistic-type events where preachers have used this verse to talk about how you're in the valley of decision this morning or tonight, and you need to decide for Christ. That is not at all what this passage is saying. This passage is talking about a day when multitudes, masses, from the ends of the earth and all nations will be gathered together in a valley, and the decision will not be theirs to make anymore. They have decided to resist God, and the valley here is the valley of God's verdict upon those who have resisted Him, and it will involve destruction.

Eternal destruction for every man and woman in this room. Know that if you choose to resist God, and resist His mercy and His holiness and rebel against Him, there will be a day when you will be brought to a valley of decision, and the decision will not be yours anymore. The decision on that day will be a holy God who is set to bring judgment upon sin and sinners alike for all of eternity.

A day of salvation for the repentant.

So, this day of the Lord will be a day of destruction for the resistant, but then it will also be a day of salvation for the repentant. You keep going down to Joel 3:16, it says, *"The LORD roars from Zion, utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel."* Those who repent of sin and turn to God, trust in God, He will be a refuge for them.

You look back at Joel 2:31-32. It says when this happens on the day of the Lord, *"everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."* They will be, literally, safe, and so the whole book of Joel is a call to repentance. It's God speaking through Joel, calling the people to repentance through a fast. Look at Joel 1:14. You see this twice. Joel 1:14. *"Consecrate a fast..."* This is God speaking through Joel. *"Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD."*

Then, you get over to Joel 2:15, and you see the same thing. Joel 2:15, God says, *"Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing*

infants." Involve everybody in this fast. *"Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber."* Entire people of God called to fast.

A Day of Fasting...

That's why we, as a faith family, are fasting today. In case you didn't get the memo from last week, and you had breakfast...well, we all don't like you, but now you know. You've got lunch and dinner, and maybe breakfast tomorrow to make up for it. No. Here's the deal: day of fasting. This is where we need to realize that there are, obviously, significant differences between us as the people of God in this room, and the people of God in the book of Joel.

Fasting is an external expression ...

Number one, there is not a locust invasion outside, praise be to God. It's hot, and it's humid, but it's green, not desolation. Second difference is this is the old covenant people of God, and God relates to us in Christ through a new covenant, and so there are some differences that are here that are important, but principles, practices, truths are very applicable, particularly when it comes to fasting because all throughout Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, fasting is an external expression among the people of God of an internal reality. Fasting is abstaining from physical food for a spiritual purpose.

Now, we have to be careful with fasting or any other spiritual discipline...prayer, Bible study, giving...not to disconnect the external expression from the internal reality. It's why, when you get to verse 13...and we're going to talk about this just in a second...but God says to His people, *"Rend your hearts and not your garments..."* The custom in this day was when you were overwhelmed with distress in a particularly serious or grievous situation, that you would literally tear, rip your garments as the sign of that inner distress. However, what had happened was a religious people had taken the external expression and disconnected it from the internal reality. They would do this, but there was really no change of heart that was going on, and so God is calling the people to fast, but not just to abstain from food. There's something deeper here. This is a heart issue. It's about what's going on in our heart.

Now, that doesn't mean we just say, "Okay. If it's a heart issue then I'm grabbing a burger on the way home for lunch." That's not the conclusion we make. These outward expressions are good things...praying, studying the Bible, giving, fasting are really good things as long as they are connected to our hearts.

More than we need a meal ...

So, the picture is, in fasting, and particularly the kind of fast we see in the book of Joel, and we're talking about today and walking through as a faith family today, fasting for repentance of sin and returning to the Lord. What we are saying is, "More than we need a meal, we need God's mercy in our sin." That we as a people would come aside today and say, "In our sin, we have grieved over it, and we weep over our sin, and more than we need a meal, we need the mercy of God."

More than our stomachs long for the pleasure of food ...

To want God...more than our stomachs long for the pleasure of food, our souls long for the presence of God. More than we are hungry for food today, we're saying, "We're hungry for God. More than our stomachs crave food, our souls crave God." We want to see God in His power and His presence among us as His people in new and fresh ways, and in coming aside

from food today, instead of eating, we're falling on our faces and saying, "God, we need your mercy in our sin. We want to experience your presence and your power." That's the fast I'm calling us to today.

We repent ...

What Joel says and what we're saying today is that we need to repent. We repent. This is what...the crux of this book is Joel 2:12-14, *"Yet even now," declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart...'"* Hear these words from God as if they are words from God directly to us as a community of faith today. *"Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?"*

Return, repent. What does this involve? It involves confession. Repentance involves acknowledgment of sin and agreement with God about sin. To acknowledge specifically, "This is where I and we have not loved and worshipped and trusted and obeyed you, God." To come aside and to agree with God about our sin; to see our sin, not as the culture or the church or how we compare to others; to see our sin as God sees our sin. Now, there is no more room for seeing small or big. Everything is an infinite offense before Him.

Then, to move into contrition: brokenness before God over sin, a sorrow for sin, a weeping over sin. Just listen to the words that are used throughout this book: "weep," "wail," "lament," "lament," "wail." Even hear what we just read, *"Fasting, with weeping, with mourning."* How long has it been since we, as a people...have we ever since, individuals and families together, wept over the depth of our sin, been so struck. This rend your hearts picture in verse 13 is, literally, an internal anguish that causes us to weep over sin. John Stott said, "The truth is that there are such things as Christian tears, and too few of us ever weep them." To be broken over sin, leading to conversion: turning to God from sin. "Return," "return", mentioned once in verse 12, once in verse 13. Literally, it's a change of direction, a transformation of life.

God relents ...

Repentance involves all of these things, and as we repent, God relents. *"Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."*

The whole picture we see, all throughout the book of Joel, the reason God sent Joel to them is because He desires to redeem the repentant. He doesn't leave us in our sin. He desires to redeem us, and so He calls us. He has brought us to this place today in this community of faith in our sin to be brought back. He has not left us alone to wander in it. He has brought us to this place providentially to hear Him say, "Repent." What does it mean for God to relent? It means He rescues us from our sin.

We don't have time to look at all of this in-depth, but Joel 2:18-20. What you'll see is God saying, "I'm going to remove these foreign armies from you that are invading." The picture is those foreign armies are invading because they are evidence of God's judgment. God has sent them as evidence of His judgment, and so when He rescues them, who is God rescuing them from? Ultimately, God is rescuing them from Himself, from the judgment He is pouring out in sin. We need to be rescued from the payment of our sin, and God says, "I rescue you."

Second, God restores us. You keep reading, Joel 2:21-26, you will see this picture of a land that was once desolate, now becomes fruitful, and everything that was brown becomes green. God, it says at the end of verse 26, "will deal wondrously with you." He will restore you. He will heal your hurts and bring salve to your sin-sick souls.

Then, ultimately, the great picture is found in verse 27. God rescues us, He restores us, and God resides with us. Verse 27, climax, *"You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never be again put to shame."* "I will be in your midst." You know why this is so important? This is the essence of salvation. Reconciled to the presence of God.

Remember back to the very beginning of this year...Genesis 3, sin enters the world...what was the immediate and disastrous effect of sin? Separation from the presence of God, cast out of the presence of God. What man once enjoyed in unhindered beauty and communion with God was ripped apart by sin, and everything we've read since then is all the effect of men and women being separated from the presence of God. It's what we read all throughout the rest of the Bible until finally, at the end of this year, we will get to a picture of God once again with His people in a new heaven and a new earth and sin gone. Man and God together. Redemption is about being reconciled to the presence of God. Salvation is about being brought to the presence of God.

Now, that is not the way salvation is sold in our day. Among the church, salvation is sold as, "Come to God to get stuff. Come to God to get forgiveness. Come to God to get heaven. Come to God to get your best life. Come to God to get prosperity and success. Come to God to get safety in abundance, and health and wealth. Come to God and get all these things." No. We do not come to God to get stuff. We come to God to get God.

He is the one we need, and He is the one we want, and you can't have your best life without God. You can't have anything good without God. Everything flows from God. He is the fountain from which life and everything flows, and so we want Him. In fasting, we're saying, "We want you, God. Apart from you we can do nothing." We put aside even the basic daily necessity of food and say, "More than our bodies are sustained by food, our souls are sustained by you." What separates us from experiencing the satisfaction of the presence of God? Sin. So repent.

Get rid of sin; repent of sin, not because you got caught and not because it hurts you this way and this way and this way in this life. Repent and grieve and weep over sin because it keeps you from God, and from the beauty and the joy and the delight and the wonder and the satisfaction that are found in God. That's what leads to godly sorrow and weeping over sin. Not when we say, "Well, this is going to happen or this is the effect of it." No. It separates us from God.

God says, "When you repent, I will be with you." The way this plays out...we don't have time to dive into it all as we look toward the New Testament...but Joel is pointing us to some realities. Joel is pointing us to the reality that, "How will God reside with us?" Well, He will come to us in His Son. Write these down: Romans 10:12-13. Paul, Romans 10:12-13 quotes from Joel 2:32, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* However, what's interesting is in Romans 10, he has just finished saying that Christ is Lord, and everyone who calls the name of the Lord...Lord is Christ, and so the picture is God has come to us in Christ. God in the flesh. He has gone to a cross. Christ on the cross. He has died to cover over our sins with His blood, risen from the grave in victory over sin, so that all who trust in Him can, yes, be forgiven of sin, but ultimately be reconciled to God. So, Christ is the only means by which we can be reconciled to God because He came. Everyone

who calls on the name of the Lord, on the name of Christ, will be saved, will be safe in the presence of God, but that's not all.

As if that were not good enough, second, He will live in us through His Spirit. Acts 2:17-21, Pentecost. Jesus has ascended into heaven, He sends down His Spirit upon His people. His people start speaking in all kinds of different languages with tongues of fire. Everybody around them is like, "Are these guys drunk?" Peter says, "They're not drunk. It's only 9:00 in the morning." Hopefully, the disciples would not have been toasted at 9:00 in the evening either, but regardless, they're not drunk. There's something going on here.

Peter says, "You want to know what's going on?", and he quotes from Joel 2:28-29, *"It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men see visions. Even on the male and female servant in those days I will pour out my Spirit."* Talk about God residing among His people. Every man or woman in this room who has trusted in Christ for your salvation, the very presence of God lives in you.

His Spirit dwells in you. So, Paul says, 1 Corinthians 6, "Flee. Run from sin. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." How can you become comfortable with sin when the Spirit of God is in you? Run from it. You have the Spirit of the living God dwelling in you. Weep over anything that would rob you from the joy that is found in the Spirit of God dwelling in you, and ultimately, in the end, He will forever protect us in His stronghold.

You look at the end of Joel, and what Joel 3:16 says is that there is coming a day when the Lord will roar from heaven, and He will bring an end to all sin, and He will bring His judgment upon all sinners, but the Lord will be a refuge to His people, and a stronghold to the people of Israel. To all who have taken their refuge in Christ with the Spirit in you, you can be confident of this: You will never be shaken from the stronghold of your God, and for all of eternity He will keep you, and there's coming a day when you will be free from sin and experience His presence in all of His fullness. So, weep and mourn and wail and grieve over and confess and repent of sin in anticipation of that.

So, that is what I want to invite us to do. I want to invite you to take out that blank sheet you received when you came in. It's got lines on it. I want us to start individually. Over the next few moments...and this is the whole point of what we've just looked at. This is not just a tack on at the end. This is where it's all headed to. Over the next few moments, I want to invite you on this piece of paper for God to repent, to write out a prayer of confession and contrition and conversion. Repentance to acknowledge specific areas of sin in your life.

You alone know what the situation is in your heart and life at this moment where you've not trusted and worshipped and loved and obeyed God. Search your hearts; rend your hearts to write that out, and as you do, to grieve over that, to express your desire to turn from that. I want to invite you to do that. If you are here, and you have never repented of sin before, then let this be the first moment and the most important moment when you, for the first time in your life, see and agree with God about sin in your heart, and see that He has loved you enough to send His Son to die to cover over your sins, so that you could be rescued from it, and you could be restored to Him, and reconciled to Him.

So, as you write this out, trust, for the first time in your heart, Christ to cover over your sin and bring you into a relationship with God. This is what salvation is about, and the people of God who know this salvation, to see your sin. All the more to see it with the horror for which it is, and to confess and to grieve over it.

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