

The Lord calls to you, Christians to repent, to turn away from your sins, and to turn towards him, to leave behind the works of darkness, and to turn towards his marvelous light. But I ask you, do we always listen to the call of God? Do we always pay attention to when he calls us to repent? Because repentance is not just a spiritual nagging. It's not like God is just telling us to do something that we haven't been doing and then we'll finally get right with the world. Repentance is a deeply serious thing. The gospel is a deeply serious thing. Because as Paul tells us, now is the day of salvation! Now is the favorable time! Not tomorrow, not someday far off from now, but now while we still have God's mercy, while we still have his grace and favor. Because the day is coming, Christians, when that will not be true anymore, the day when our time of mercy comes to an end. So are we listening when God calls for us to repent?

And the call to repentance does not just come only from the Scriptures, Christians. God is also the God of all things. And because he is the God of all things, he also calls for us to repent through his creation, through the things that happen around us, especially disasters. Because disasters have a way of reminding us how much we depend upon God and how little the things of this world can actually help us. So whether it be tornadoes that come, whether it be plagues that come, whether it be the coronavirus--whatever the truth of that might be--whatever is in the world, Christians, calls for us to return to the Lord our God. And will we pay attention when that call comes? That's what Joel is telling us today. He's telling us that even in the face of disaster, we are called to return to the Lord our God. So if you have your Bibles with you, I would encourage you to open up to Joel chapter 1, or to follow along in the insert which has been provided for you, because I want to make reference to it from time to time.

Beginning with verse one, where it says that the word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel. Now, this message that Joel proclaims here was sent to a particular people in a particular time for a particular purpose, but we don't know what all of those details are. We don't know when Joel lived. We don't know when he wrote his book. We don't even know when this disaster occurred. But that doesn't mean that this is somehow not true. It actually emphasizes the truth of it for us, because Joel is not just speaking to that particular time and that particular people. Joel is speaking to every time and every people, whatever the disaster might be, to return to the Lord our God, and to trust in him.

But the particular disaster that Joel is referring to here occurs in verse four, where he's talking about all of these different kinds of locusts, all of these different kinds of grasshoppers. Now, we've all dealt with grasshoppers. We know the kind of destruction that grasshoppers can cause, and we know what it's like even to have a great number of them descend upon us. I mean, in this part of the world even, we've had these kinds of plagues before. Back in the 30s during the Great Depression, I remember stories being told to me of great clouds of grasshoppers descending upon Eastern Montana and other parts of the upper Great Plains. These great clouds that would block out the sun and make it so you couldn't see anything. And when they descended upon the land, they ate everything in sight. And even more recently, when I was growing up as a child up in eastern Montana, we had a drought that went on for several years. And during the time of that drought, we also had an unusually high number of grasshoppers. And I distinctly remember one time as a child walking through grass and watching those grasshoppers radiate out from me in a circle. We had so many of them. It was like a great cloud just around me of hundreds and hundreds of bugs. But the destruction that that many insects can cause is proverbial. It's going to wipe out everything in its path, which is exactly what is happening here to Israel. The first group, the first horde of grasshoppers comes into the land, eats everything that it wants, and after it leaves another one comes, and then another one, and another one, so that all that is left behind them is dirt. All that's left behind them is just plain nothing. And you can imagine the kind of distress that that caused for Israel, because this isn't a time of pesticides and ways of dealing with

grasshoppers. This is a time where this kind of plague meant you probably wouldn't have anything to eat for the coming year. So they are facing a very real and very physical danger from all of this food having been destroyed.

That's also why in verses six and seven, the grasshoppers are described as being like a great army, like an army that has come into the land and has plundered everything before it, with teeth like a lion destroying everything in its path. So the call then to repent comes to all of us, as we see here in verse five. Joel doesn't begin his call to repentance with the highest parts of society. He's not talking to just kings and priests, as if they were the only ones that needed to hear this message. Joel begins with the very worst of society, the very lowest, the sinners, calling them to repentance, showing in that way that this is not just for the rich and it's not just for the poor, but for all people, including us today.

But there is more here going on for Israel than simply a physical danger, as we notice in verse nine, talking about the grain offering and the drink offering being cut off from the house of the Lord. For Israel to lose the grain and the grapes so they couldn't produce wine meant that they were being cut off from worshiping the Lord. They had to have grain, and they had to have wine in order to offer up thanksgiving to the Lord. So for these things to be gone means that their danger is not simply physical. Their danger is also spiritual. God in a sense is removing himself from them. They are being cut off from the Lord. And that's why their grief is so intense, because in verse eight where it says lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth, it's like crying like a young woman, a young bride who has lost her husband the day before they got married. That kind of grief, that intensity of grief is what Israel feels now, because they recognize that they are losing much through this plague. They are also being cut off from the Lord. So they cry out to him to have mercy on them.

But I ask you Christians, do we always feel the same intensity of grief over sin? Do we even feel it at all? When disaster comes upon us in the world, how do we respond to it? When we have a crop failure, for example, do we turn to the Lord our God in prayer and in fasting and in repentance, calling on him to have mercy? Or do we just simply go down to the insurance office and collect our check and say, "Well, at least I got my money back?" When we face disease, do we turn to the Lord our God in prayer, in repentance, and asking him to show us mercy? Or do we simply go to the doctor looking for some earthly cure? And when we suffer loss through fire or tornadoes or floods or whatever the case might be, do we turn to the Lord our God in prayer, in repentance, asking for his mercy? Or do we simply turn to earthly helps? Not that those things are bad in themselves, Christians. God has given us many good things. But do we remember the Lord when he calls to us to turn away from sin and to repent? Or do we shut our ears to his call?

Because if we shut our ears to his call in creation, if we shut our ears to his call in disaster, how we hear his call in the Scriptures? Because we can't shut our ears to God's voice in one part of our lives and imagine that we are going to hear him in every other part too. God calls for us to repent, and that call is serious. That call is for us now. This is why Joel in verse fifteen says, "Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes." The day of God's judgment, Christians, is fast approaching. Are we ready for it? Are we going to hear his call when it comes?

Because what greater call do we have, Christians, than the call of the cross itself, the call to repentance in Jesus Christ? Because Jesus shows us the immediacy, the urgency of the Gospel. This is not something that we can put off forever. God calls to us today in his Son Jesus Christ, calling on us to turn away from our sins and to turn towards him, because there is no other name than Jesus Christ by which we may be saved. As in verse nineteen, Joel says, "To you, O Lord, I call." Call on him, dear Christians. Call on him who calls to you today. Call on him who will save you. Because all earthly

things will pass away, and all earthly helps will come to nothing, but the Lord our God will be our help forever. He is the one who calls to you to repent, to repent and be saved.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.