

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Those are hard words for us to hear. Hard because they are so incredibly clear. There's no mistaking what they mean. There's no trying to explain it away. It declares to us clearly the judgment that stands over all mankind, the judgment which was first spoken over our father Adam: dust you are and to dust you shall return.

And that can be hard for us to deal with, because it is so clear. Because we don't really understand all the time why we need to hear it. It sounds depressing. It sounds bleak. It sounds like the kind of thing that we wouldn't want to think about on a daily basis. And the world certainly feels that way about it, Christians, because the world doesn't want to hear about the judgment of God. The world does not want to hear about death. After all, just go to any newspaper these days or go to any funeral that's not in a church, and you'd be hard-pressed to hear them talk about death plainly. They're always trying to explain it away, always trying to talk about something else. It's just too depressing to the world. They don't want to think about it. But even we as Christians can struggle with that, trying to understand why it's good for us to hear. Wouldn't it be better to talk about something more positive? Wouldn't it be better to talk about something that lifts us up, that seems to build us up? This just doesn't seem to be all that helpful. It seems to be something that's just too dark, just too depressing.

But Christians, this is a good and a godly thing for us to think about. It's good and it's godly and it's helpful, because like many things that may end up seeming dark or depressing, it gives us incredible clarity. Clarity about what is the most important thing in life. Clarity about what we should focus on. And clarity about what we are going towards. Because it teaches us what is our priorities. It teaches us to gauge everything in the light of eternity. So we think about these things, Christians, because it makes it clear that many of the things which we do in the world, which we think are so important, which we think are going to be the most important thing ever, aren't really that important at all. We can see the truth of what they are in the light of eternity and to realize that many of the things with which we spend our time in this life ultimately come to nothing. And thinking about this also makes it clear to us that our sins are never really worth the cost. Yeah, they sure seem enticing. They always seem to be really exciting to us. But when we compare it to the light of eternity, we can see that they're not worth it. That the cost of being separated from God is not worth it if it means a temporary, fleeting pleasure in our sins. It helps us to see that clearly too. But Christians, above all, it helps us to see very clearly the one thing which is truly needful, the one thing which is truly important, and that is our Lord and his righteousness. It teaches us that the most important thing in all of our lives is to know the Lord and to be known by him, to come to him and to be saved. Nothing else in the world compares with that knowledge. And when we focus on the fact that we are dust, it helps us to see that in all of its beautiful clarity. So Christians we think about these things not because they're depressing or because they're morbid, but because they teach us to focus on what is truly needful, to focus on what is truly important, so that we may come to the Lord before time runs out.

Because in our Old Testament reading for today, Israel was also facing a terrible judgment from the Lord. They had fallen into a kind of worldliness, focusing on their pleasures, focusing really on themselves. As we hear in Joel chapter 1 verse 5, God warns them and says, "Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine." They had given into not only drunkenness, but a kind of worldliness, seeking pleasure for the sake of pleasure. And these things led them further and further away from the Lord. And the further and further we get from

the Lord because of our pleasures or because of our sins, the closer and closer we come to destruction. That's what the Lord is warning them against. This way would only lead to their destruction. It would only lead to their death.

And so the Lord warns them that a great judgment is coming upon them, a judgment of the failure of their harvest. A great swarm of grasshoppers was going to come through the land and was going to destroy absolutely everything. They were going to eat all of the crops. They were going to strip bare all of the trees. There would be nothing left. And all of this was coming upon them because of their sins, because they had turned away from the Lord. God was warning them through this judgment that his wrath was coming upon them, that his anger would be swift, and they needed to turn away from this and turn back towards him before it would be too late. As he says in Joel chapter 2 verse 11, "The day of the Lord is great and very awesome. Who can endure it?" Who can stand before the Lord in his wrath? We must turn away from those things which separate us from him. We must turn away from these things and return to the Lord our God. Return before there is no more time.

"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart." There is still time, he is saying to his people. There is still time to come and to receive his forgiveness. There is still time to turn away from those things which had separated them from him, because he is the one who is gracious. He is the one who would forgive their sins. "Return to me with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments." Come back to me, the Lord is saying, in sincere repentance. Come back to me with a true contrition. Not a fake one like you've had up to this point, but one which is truly confessing your sins. "Because the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster." God would restore them again, because God is gracious and God is faithful to his promises. And it was the clarity of that declaration, the clarity of that judgment that led Israel to turn back to her Lord, to turn away from those things which had kept them away from him, to leave them behind and to follow after him, because they knew that God is always ready to forgive. God is always ready to welcome us back. God is always ready to make us his children all over again.

Christians, we also have disaster looming over our heads, the disaster we've been talking about. That we are dust and to dust we shall return. We have been separated from the Lord our God by our sins. Have we become enamored with the world, seeking after those things which ultimately do not profit? Listen to what Paul has to say in Galatians chapter 5: "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Paul isn't joking when he says these things. He's not saying, "I'm saying this, but I really mean something else." There is a very real danger when we focus on our sins, when we become so enamored with the world that we are led away from the Lord our God. It will ultimately mean that we will be separated from him forever.

God is calling to us to turn away from those sins, to turn away from our sinful anger, to turn away from our sinful impurities, to turn away from our sinful lusts, to turn away from these things and to come back to him, to return to the Lord our God, because there is still time, Christians. While it is still today, God is calling to us to come back and to repent of those sins, to

turn away from them forever. Because, as the Lord says: "'Yet even now,' declares the Lord, '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,'" Christians, "'for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster.'" He calls to us, because he is always ready to forgive us. He is always ready to hear us, to bring us back to himself, and to restore us again. God has called us out of those sins which plague us, to turn away from them and leave them behind forever. And we can do it because he has made us to be a new creation in his Son Jesus Christ. God has forgiven you because of Jesus. God has called you to himself through his Son and through his Spirit. And God will forgive you your sins this day, Christians, because he is gracious, and he loves you, and he is ready to forgive you. As John tells us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Call on him, Christians. Call on him who has pity on you. Call on him who is ready to forgive you. Call on him, and you will be saved.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, forgive us our sins for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, and restore us again to you, so that we may follow after you in holiness and righteousness all of our days; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.