

## **A REPENTANT PEOPLE** **Joel 2:12-17**

It was recently revealed that Lance Armstrong, the 7-time Tour de France winner, took banned substances in order to enhance his cycling performance. As a sports fan, the revelation was sad, but not all that surprising. Rumors had been swirling for years that Armstrong was doping. But in January, Armstrong did an extensive interview with Oprah Winfrey in which he confessed and apologized for his actions. Well, he sort of apologized. If you watched the interview, you probably noticed that Armstrong's apology wasn't really an apology at all. It was more like an extended exercise in blame-shifting and self-justification. He never actually acknowledged that he purposefully cheated and therefore deserved his punishment. He wasn't really sorry; he wasn't really repentant over what he had done.

Lance Armstrong is no exception. Most of the time, when a public figure offers an apology, it is not really much of an apology. I think this reveals that as a culture, we are not very good at being sorry. We don't really understand what it means to be repentant for wrongs done. Most of the time, we are simply repentant because we got caught. Or, we try to subtly shift the blame to anyone but ourselves. Those sad public apologies, like Lance Armstrong or Tiger Woods or the latest politician caught in a scandal, only reveal how much we misunderstand what it means to be truly sorry, what it means to be truly repentant.

I would say that this is even a problem to some extent in the church. Repentance is key component of the Christian life. But for such an important biblical concept, we don't do a very good job of talking about repentance or teaching on what repentance looks like. This is to our detriment. Why? Because repentance is key to understanding the Bible as a whole, and even the gospel itself. What was Jesus' first sermon? Repent and believe the good news, for the kingdom of God is at hand. As believers, if we want to be faithful followers of Christ, we need to understand what it means to be repentant.

This is where our passage from the book of Joel can help us. As we come to Joel 2:12-17, we encounter some extended teaching from Joel to the nation, teaching that focused on what it meant for the people to be truly repentant. As we study this morning, we can listen to Joel's words to the people of his own day, and we can learn more what it means to be a truly repentant people.

As we begin this morning, it is important to remind ourselves of what we saw in last week's passage. In chapter 1, Joel described a locust invasion that devastated the entire nation. Everything

related to normal life had been disrupted, and the existence of the nation was in doubt. In chapter 2.1-11, Joel connected that locust invasion with the day of the LORD, which is the great, final day of judgment. The point was to warn the people that the judgment to come on the last day will be much greater than disaster in the here and now. And Joel insisted that this day of the LORD was imminent. Just as the locusts were here now, destroying the nation, so also will the day of the LORD soon arrive. So, we could summarize last week's message like this – disaster now points ahead, as a warning, to the day of the LORD.

In midst of this description of the day of the LORD, Joel called the people to respond. He urged them to turn to the LORD, to cry to God in complete desperation. In other words, he called the people to repent. The description of the devastation was entirely in service to this call for repentance. God's warning of judgment was intended to lead his people to repentance. And that brings us to our message this morning, where we see three truths concerning what it means to be a truly repentant people.

### **MARKS OF TRUE REPENTANCE**

First truth – *Joel gives us God's vision of true repentance.* Note Joel's words in verses 12-15.

*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, 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? Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly (Joel 2:12-15)*

As we look at these verses, we note five characteristics of true repentance. Let's look briefly at each one. First, repentance is marked by urgency. In verse 12, the LORD himself calls the people, saying, "Yet even now, return to me." When should the people return to the LORD? Now, at this moment. The need is so urgent that later in the passage, Joel calls the people to put off the normal, pressing demands of life in order to pursue repentance. In verse 16, nursing infants and newlyweds are called to join in the community's service of repentance. Normally, these two classes of people would be excused from regular civic and religious duties, either because they cannot participate or because they have more pressing demands. But in Joel's mind, the need for repentance is so urgent that those normal considerations are to be ignored. Everyone, even people who cannot participate or people who have legitimate reasons to miss out, should come together in the pursuit of repentance. This is urgent business with the LORD. When the need to repent becomes clear, we should not delay! Nothing is more urgent in life than a broken

relationship with God. Everything else should take second place to this consideration. So, repentance is marked by urgency.

Second mark – repentance involves deliberate action to turn from sin and turn to God. In Joel's day, the people had turned away from God. We don't know specifically how, but we can be assured that it involved some sort of break in their relationship with God. In order to repent, they must turn away from the break and return to him. They must demonstrate in tangible ways that they are leaving behind that old way of life in order to pursue life with God according to his covenant. This is one of the reasons for the deliberate purposeful action described in verses 15-16. The people should demonstrate in tangible, deliberate ways that they are returning to God. That old stuff is gone; we are now returning to the LORD as evidenced by our determined action. This is the basic thrust of repentance – to turn away from the sin that broke the relationship and to turn again to God, with deliberate purposeful, action.

Third mark – repentance must be heartfelt. In verses 12-13, God describes what kind of repentance he requires – heartfelt repentance. Throughout the prophets, few things are despised more than hypocritical, outward rituals that mask a lack of heartfelt commitment. The prophet Amos even records the shocking statement that God hates these empty rituals. Yes, hates. The reason for the hatred is that heartless ritual makes a mockery of God. When we simply put on a show of repentance, that is saying that we do not think sin is a big deal, that we do not think God is a big deal, that we do not think a broken relationship with him is a big deal. We think we can paper over these offenses with a mere outward showing. This is an affront to God on so many levels, and that is why God demands our hearts.

But note that after the call to repent with the heart, God calls the people to fast, weep, and mourn. Those are outward, external actions. But I thought God wanted inward, heartfelt repentance. Isn't this contradictory on some level? Actually, no. God is describing the proper movement of our relationship to him. Our relationship to God should begin at the heart and then flow to the outward expressions. In other words, the inner realities should drive the outward expressions. Is it wrong to fast, weep, and mourn? Absolutely not! But it is wrong to conjure up those outward expressions without any inward reality that supports them.

So, how do we get heartfelt repentance? Reflect on the broken relationship from God's perspective. See your sin, as much as you can, the way God sees it – as an affront to his holiness.

Heartless, outward rituals are really the symptoms of a small view of God and an inflated view of ourselves. When we see God as he is and when we see ourselves as we are, then we will be driven to heartfelt repentance, because we will be utterly convinced that heartless, outward rituals will never suffice.

Fourth – repentance is marked by brokenness. Throughout these first two chapters, Joel urges the people to lament, mourn, weep, and fast. Why such displays of brokenness? Because such actions are appropriate in light of what has occurred. Remember, Israel was God's bride, his covenant people. He was a husband to them, and they committed spiritual adultery by breaking his covenant. They cheated on God, in other words. That is what happened in Joel's day, even if we don't know the details. And in light of that spiritual adultery, brokenness is appropriate. Something good has been violated. Something sacred has been broken. There should be brokenness.

We do not really like to think about the role of brokenness in our relationship with God. This is one of the weaknesses of the American church. We don't really have the words or the forms of worship that help us demonstrate brokenness. I heard a pastor once ask, "Are there no songs for broken, sad people?" God's words here in Joel 2 are a good, needed reminder for us. At times, brokenness and mourning are necessary components of our life with God. When there is a need for repentance, it is good and appropriate to wail and weep. It is healthy to be broken. We shouldn't stay there forever, but in the moment when repentance is needed, we should be appropriately broken.

Final mark of true repentance – it is marked by humility before God. In verse 14, Joel writes this rhetorical question, "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?" This verse makes it sound like God's response to his people's repentance is up in the air. He may or may not respond with restoration.

So, what does this mean? Joel is trying to capture the humility of repentance. When all is said and done, the repentant person has nothing to stand on but God's grace. When the brokenness has been expressed and deliberate action has been taken, all we have left is to say, "We cast ourselves on you God, and we entrust ourselves to your character and grace." Remember, God is the sovereign one. Our repentance is not some mechanism that we can use to twist his arm. We are the creature; he is the

creator. Therefore, even our repentance should be marked by humility, by this acknowledgement that at the end of the day, we have nothing to stand on but God's grace.

So, true repentance is marked by urgency, by deliberate action to turn toward God; it is heartfelt and appropriately broken; and it is humble before the LORD. This is Joel's presentation of true repentance. I encourage you, if you get nothing else from this message, hear this plea – think through your life and identify where the LORD is calling you to repent. Then, take some purposeful time to sit and reflect on these characteristics of true repentance. Apply them to that area of your life. How can you pursue true repentance in that area? Maybe it is in the way you treat your spouse or your children? Maybe it is the way you interact with your co-workers? Maybe it is simply that you have been living life without reference to God for too long? Whatever it is, identify it, confess it to the LORD, and then ask him to help you pursue true repentance. Then, take the really courageous step and share that with someone else – your spouse, a friend. Share it with someone and ask for their prayers and encouragement. Let Joel's words have their intended effect, and pursue true repentance in whatever area the LORD reveals to you.

### **HOW IS REPENTANCE POSSIBLE?**

That brings us to our second truth this morning – *God's character makes repentance possible*. Let's read the second part of verse 13 again.

*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 (Joel 2:13b)*

In verse 12, we encounter God's call to repent. But at this point, there is a question we must answer. How is repentance even possible? If the day of the LORD is what it is, then what makes repentance a viable option? How can God's people have hope that repentance will result in their restoration? The answer comes from God's own character. It is God's character that makes repentance possible. God's covenant faithfulness is the ground of repentance. Our hope cannot be that we will be repentant enough, and thus make our repentance effective. This is because we are fundamentally an unfaithful people. Just like the people in Joel's day, we are and will be unfaithful to God. So, repentance must be grounded in something other than us. The solution is to ground repentance in the character of God. The people may fail to keep their end of the covenant, but God will not fail. He is not faithless like the people. He is faithful.

Joel's description of God in verse 13 is meant to highlight God's faithfulness. Verse 13 gives us God's covenant name. This phrase goes all the way back to Mt. Sinai. Remember, after God made his covenant with Israel, it took the people less than 40 days to break the covenant. While Moses was still on the mountain, the people made a golden calf and began to worship it. After the LORD sent Moses to break up the idolatry, Moses went back into the presence of the LORD to plead for the people's lives. As Moses prepared to intercede for the people, God himself descended and passed before Moses. As he did so, God declared himself as "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation."

The purpose of God's self-revelation to Moses was to highlight God's faithfulness. He had chosen Israel, and even if they were faithless, he would remain faithful. Why? Because faithfulness is the expression of his gracious, merciful character that abounds with steadfast love. This description of God became central to Israel's life, and it usually shows up in the OT in the context of the faithful God restoring his faithless people.

Joel, then, includes these words as a reminder of God's faithfulness. Why can God's people repent? What makes this response possible? The faithfulness of God. His name, revealed at Sinai, is the same today. He remains the faithful, covenant keeping God of his people. This should give us hope! Even when we do not repent as we should (which is often!), we can trust in the faithfulness of God. His restoration of his people is ultimately rooted in his own character, not his people's ability to repent. Repentance is our declaration that we entrust ourselves to this faithful God. It is not our means of manipulating him. There is not some program of repentance that we have to follow in order to do it right. Rather, it is God's own faithfulness that ensures repentance is even possible.

Even more importantly, it is God's faithfulness that calls us to repent. We do not pursue repentance out of duty or ungodly fear. We pursue repentance because of God's abounding steadfast love. It is God's grace and mercy that is the ultimate inducement to repentance. His judgment makes us aware of the need for repentance, and his grace and mercy appeal to us to repent. So, hear me this morning. Maybe you know there is an area of sin in your life where you need to repent, but maybe you

feel too weak or too afraid to do so. Maybe this call to repentance even feels heavy, too heavy a burden for your already weary soul to carry. Hear Joel's words this morning. Repentance is not grounded in you – your ability, your strength, or your skill in repenting the right way. Repentance is grounded in the faithfulness of God. He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not delight in the death of the wicked; he takes no pleasure from judgment. He is willing and ready to restore and forgive, if you will come to him in repentance. Let this vision of the faithful, covenant-keeping God be what spurs you on in repentance. Why should you forsake that sin and turn again to God? Because he is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Repentance puts you on the path to be restored to this God, this faithful, covenant-keeping God who abounds in steadfast love. So, come to him, even in your weariness and brokenness. Come to him because he is gracious and merciful.

**“FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR NAME!”**

And that brings us to the final truth from today's message – *God's people should plead with boldness.*

Let's read verse 17.

*Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD weep and say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, “Where is their God?” (Joel 2:17)*

In verse 17, Joel gives more specifics on how the nation should repent. The priests should lead the people in a service of prayer in the Temple. There, they should plead with God for restoration and deliverance. But Joel offers a surprising basis for the priests' prayer. He instructs the priests to pray with reference to God's glory, or God's reputation among the nations. They should remind God that his name and glory are attached to them, because they are his covenant people. If they are destroyed, then what will the nations and the surrounding peoples think about God? Joel gives the answer. Those nations will mock God as being unable to save even his own covenant people.

In other words, the priests should remind God of their status as his covenant people and his commitment to his own glory. Wouldn't it be better for God to spare his people so that his name is not defamed and dishonored? This is a bold prayer! But it is not an inappropriate prayer. All Joel is telling the people to do is remind God of the truths that he himself has established. Now, on the most important level, God does not need any reminders. He knows all and at all times.

So, what is the point? It is an expression of faith, from the people to God. It is their way of saying that their ultimate hope lies in God, in who he has revealed himself to be. They do not hope ultimately in themselves. They do not hope ultimately even in their own ability to repent. This is important to understand. Their ultimate hope is God alone, not in themselves, not even in their own supposed strengths.

We should learn to repent and pray with this kind of boldness. It is appropriate to remind God of the things that he has said and done for his people. It is good to appeal to his commitment to his own glory. The OT is full of this kind of thinking. Read Exodus or Ezekiel and see what I mean. So, we can and should pray bold prayers: "Father, cause me to grow so that you will get more glory from my life. Restore me, even though I don't deserve it. Will those who are cast off praise you? Restore me! God, bring a mighty work of the Spirit to this church, so that you will be shown to be the living God. Father, use us to spread your gospel all over Midtown so that you will be shown to be the God who saves!" Imagine a church full of believers who prayed those kind of bold, heartfelt prayers.

Joel teaches us about true repentance, about what it means to return again to the LORD so that we might be restored. There is much we should learn from Joel's words here in chapter 2. But here at the end of our message, I want to remind us that our ultimate hope for restoration does not lie in our ability to repent. God does not restore us because we take the initiative to return to him. God does not forgive us because we are able to repent perfectly and therefore earn restoration. He restores us ultimately because of his grace. Remember, he took the initiative to come and get us. By sending his own Son to live a perfect life and die a sinner's death, God stepped out to pursue us. He came for us. And now he calls us to repent of our sin and turn to him in him, believing that he did everything necessary to restore and forgive us. So, this morning, remember that God's call to repentance is not a call to clean up your life so that you might be acceptable to him. His call to repent is a call to cast yourself completely on the Savior who did everything necessary to bring sinners like us back to God. Repentance is about turning away from sin and turning to God, casting yourself completely on the grace he has given in Jesus Christ. Let that sweet truth encourage you to come to him in repentance this morning.