

An early warning system can be so valuable, can't it? For example warning against a missile attack, a cyclone or an approaching tsunami. By revelation in his Word, the Bible, God always gives an early warning. It is a mark of his love that he warns the nations what awaits them in the future.

When Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser quoted George Bernard Shaw, saying, "Life wasn't meant to be easy", the Australian electorate did not elect him again because we simply can't take too much reality. His statement was too real, and we don't want to hear reality from our leaders. God never allows us to escape from reality. For those who look to religion for an escape from the realities of life, the God of the Bible will constantly disappoint. The scandal of his revelation is that it tells us realistically how things are and what we can expect in the future. God's early warning system is in operation. Are you paying attention?

In one short book of 3 chapters, the prophet Joel gives us the big picture of God's purpose and plan. He shows us the old covenant in operation (1:1-2:27), he foreshadows the new covenant (2:28-32) and takes us to the end of history - to the great and final day of the Lord involving, as it does, judgment for the nations and salvation for the people of God (3:1-21).

The name Joel means "Yahweh is God". Nothing else is known about him and it is difficult to precisely date his prophecy, although it is probably around the mid 8th century BC. The immediate concern was a plague of locusts which was widespread and was having a devastating effect on the land of Judah. Joel used this catastrophe to call the people of God to repent, declare a fast and call on the name of the Lord (1:13-19). Whatever the natural causes of the locust plague, Joel saw it as part of the judgment of God on his people and called upon them to respond by calling out to God in repentance. He goes on in the second chapter to describe the invasion of locusts even more vividly, as if they were a mighty army: numberless and devastating - and the Lord thundered at the head of his army of locusts (2:11). Again Joel calls on the people of Judah to return to God with all their hearts, with fasting and weeping and mourning (2:12-13).

Joel doesn't identify the nature of the people's sin. The people of God are probably in a drowsy, apathetic state - they are going through the motions but have lost their love for Yahweh. God will not allow them to languish in such a state, nor will he allow his people today to continue as "neither hot nor cold" (Revelation 3:16). And so he calls them to come, to return to him. He will pursue and confront them in their half-heartedness. Their repentance is the condition of their restoration, but not the cause of it. "Who knows?", says Joel, "He (God) may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing" (2:14a). They shouldn't trust in their repentance for salvation, but in God alone who can restore them. It is God's grace alone that saves and restores - we cannot rely on our own works, even works of repentance.

So Joel includes two descriptions of God's judgment, and two calls to repent and return. God's people in Judah are like the people of Israel at Mount Sinai who had made a golden calf to worship. God's word to Moses at that time had been: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:5-7). So Joel reminds the people of God's gracious character: "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. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing - grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God" (2:13-14).

God's response to the people's penitence is set out in the second half of chapter 2 (vv. 18-27). Out of jealousy for his land, ruined as it is, and out of pity for his people, God will replenish all they have lost to the locusts: "Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God.....He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten....." (2:23-25). They will never be shamed again and will know that Yahweh is their God: "Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed" (2:27).

All that Joel has so far described is a reminder of God's faithfulness to his covenant. As God had said to the people of Israel through Moses just before they entered the Promised Land: "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess" (Deuteronomy 30:15-16). Yahweh graciously redeemed his people from Egypt, and then he gave them the law as the means by which they were to live before him as his redeemed people. God reminded them as he gave them the law, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deuteronomy 5:6). So now, by sending the locust plague, God was keeping covenant with his people. He had promised to bless their obedience and to curse their disobedience. Even though this promise was 800 years old by the time of Joel, God was being true to his threat to curse. But even here he was merciful - he would curse them, but had no pleasure in carrying out the curse. Thus in the opening section of the book (1:1-2:27), Joel describes the curse of the old covenant working out in the lives of God's people, Judah.

In the second part of his prophecy (2:28-32), Joel says that the day is coming when God will bring about a whole new covenant with his people. God will pour out his Spirit on all his people, irrespective of their age (young or old), gender (men and women) or social standing (masters or servants). The Spirit will give them revelation through prophecy, dreams and visions. This revelation will be associated with days of opportunity - "now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2b) - whereby everyone who responds to God's revelation by calling on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13). Such an offer of salvation is set in the immediate context of the coming Day of Judgment. The "And afterward" at the beginning of Joel 2:28 is actually over 700 years later than Joel's time. For Peter interprets what happens in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost following Jesus' ascension ("All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them" - Acts 2:4) as the fulfilment of this event and uses Joel's key promise, "....everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls" (2:32). Peter made Joel's prophecy the springboard for his gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:21-36). Such revelation in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost involved the explanation of Christ's death (Acts 2:23), his resurrection (Acts 2:24) and his rule (Acts 2:33-36). This new covenant would, as Joel prophesied, be established "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (2:31). Indeed, these days of the Spirit and of the opportunity of salvation began on that Day of Pentecost and continue today. This new covenant, which supersedes the old covenant and is superior to it, includes God's pardoning his people's sin and then, in the person of the Holy Spirit, coming to live in his people's lives. Peter provided an excellent summary of the blessings of this new covenant when he exhorted the crowd on the Day of Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Like the old covenant the new covenant is based on God's grace, but now by his once and for all sacrifice, Jesus Christ has won forgiveness for our sin. His perfect righteousness is credited to us, so that in every way he is our substitute (Romans

3:24-25). And so, in the new covenant God keeps both his side of the contract, and our side of it. Our God is indeed mighty to save!

The third chapter of the book of Joel then takes us to the final day - the great and terrible day of the Lord, the day of Christ's return as King and Judge. What does God tell us about that day through the prophet, Joel? It will be a Day of Judgment for the nations who have neglected to heed God's revelation. The nations will be judged for their treatment of God's people: "I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land. They cast lots for my people and traded boys for prostitutes; they sold girls for wine that they might drink" (3:2-3). God will repay them for what they have done. There is solidarity between God and his people - to reject God's people is to reject God. God will enter into warfare with the nations and they are warned to prepare for war. But such preparation is futile for the "Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble" (3:16a).

On the other hand, God's salvation of his people stands out in stark contrast to this judgment - just as the brilliance of a diamond set against the black velvet background brings out the brilliance of its lustre. Joel tells us in the second half of v.16 of chapter 3 that "the Lord will be a refuge for his people," a stronghold for them in that awful day. His salvation will consist of provision - as we see in vv.17-18 of Joel 3: "Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy, never again will foreigners invade her. In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the Lord's house and will water the valley of acacias". And his salvation will also consist of sin being pardoned (3:21). How is that possible? It is not that the sins of God's people are necessarily any less than those of the surrounding nations. Joel's prophecy was occasioned by a locust plague in Judah that was a warning by God of an even greater judgment to come - precisely on Judah. Judah was not innocent. Nor is the church of Jesus Christ - we are all guilty sinners. If we are saved, it will be, not because of our guiltlessness (which doesn't exist), but because of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who on the cross of Calvary bore the guilt and suffered the consequences of our sin for us.

The Bible tells us that the wrath of God is as a consuming fire. Nevertheless, it need not touch those who are covered by the Lord Jesus Christ. There is refuge in him! The full wrath of God is revealed at two points in history: at the final judgment and at the cross of Christ, where it has already been poured out for those who trust in Jesus. If you wait until the final judgment, you will face the full fury of God's wrath alone and be condemned by Jesus. If you take refuge in Christ, he has faced your judgment for you. As Paul reminds us in Romans chapter 8, ".....there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus".

This "final day" perspective of the prophet Joel is summed up by Paul in the passage we read from 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10. God is just and so will pay back, on the Day of the Lord, at Christ's return, those who trouble his people. Christ will be revealed as King of Kings with his mighty angels to punish those who have refused to obey the gospel and to call on his name. For them it will be the end of all that is worthwhile in life and they will be "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" forever. But also this Day of Judgment will be a day in which God's people will be vindicated. The key for God's people, for us as Christians, is not to be excluded from God's pardon and provision by unbelief. How do we show our belief? By repenting and returning to the Lord our God.

As Joel speaks of repentance in 2:12-13, his emphasis is on the heart. He wants a true repentance and not merely a formal one. True, Joel does speak of outward expressions: "fasting and weeping and mourning". Outward expressions of an inward state are both

right and valuable. But what Joel is against is outward expression that does not correspond with reality, for God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Therefore the people of God are to rend their hearts, not their garments. God wants us to be "heartbroken" over sin. Only that will actually turn us from sin and enable us to find God's favour again.

What does repentance of this kind look like? First, it involves confession of the specific sins we have committed. Until we confess sins specifically, we are not really repenting. The second element in true repentance is contrition, that is, genuine sorrow for sin. David says in Psalm 51: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (v.17). Contrition is deeper than regret. We may all regret something we have done but still not sorrow over it. Judas regretted his sin of betraying Jesus to such a degree that he returned the blood money given to him by the priests and then committed suicide. But he did not repent of his sin and so suffered for it. God desires that we sense our guilt and weep within for what our sins have done to defile ourselves, hurt and even destroy our neighbour and dishonour Christ. The final element of repentance is conversion, the point Joel most emphasizes, using the word "return": "Return to the Lord your God". You have turned away from God and now need to turn back. This is the essential meaning of repentance which comes from a Latin word that refers to a change of mind, a change so basic that a person's life is altered. In a Sunday school class one day a young boy said that repentance was being sorry for your sins. But a young girl added that it was being sorry enough to quit. She was right, wasn't she? Repentance is essentially an about-face.

We are living in the gospel age - these are days of opportunity. Call on the name of the Lord Jesus; obey the gospel; rend your hearts, not just your garments; return to the Lord who is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Today is the day of opportunity - so do not harden your hearts by the unbelieving rejection of God's gospel. Be ready for Christ's return and the Day of Judgment so that it will indeed be a day of salvation and of rejoicing.

Amen

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