

• *A helpful passage when we feel we are a long way away from God*

Joel is calling upon the people of Israel to turn to the Lord. Joel chapter 1, we remember, describes the locust invasion. In Joel 2:1–11 the prophet used this as a picture of the great judgements of God that take place in history. Now he calls upon the people to get close to God. It is a helpful passage when we feel we are a long way away from God.

1. They are to get close to God Himself

1. They are to get close to God Himself. He does not ask them simply to turn to religion or to change their lives a little.

‘But even now, says the LORD, turn to Me with all your heart,...’ (2:12)

Joel says ‘Turn to God Himself’. They must have dealings with the Lord.

2. They are to take time over this

2. They are to take time over this. This is the point of the reference to fasting. They must come:

‘... with fasting and weeping and mourning’ (2:12)

Fasting is a way of giving time to seeking the Lord. They are to give up the regular activities of life in order to seek the Lord.

3. They are to face the fact of their sins

3. They are to face the fact of their sins. They must come ‘with . . . weeping . . . mourning’. They are to think about what they have done. Does this mean that the Lord needs our tears? No, but the weeping is taking seriously what we have done, seeing the bitterness of it. If we do not face what we have done we are likely to do it again.

The order is important. It is ‘turn ... weep’¹. Not ‘weep . . . turn’. We get back to God and then regret we did not do so sooner. This is a consistent order. We turn to God through Jesus. Jesus is not mentioned by name in the Old Testament, yet from the viewpoint of the New Testament we know that Jesus is the way to God.

¹ 2:12

4. Joel asks for reality not ceremony

4. Joel asks for reality not ceremony. He tells them:

‘Tear your heart and not your garments, and turn to the LORD your God.’ (2:13)

In Israelite public meetings for repentance, one thing that would be done would be the tearing of your clothes as a way of expressing your feelings. There was a danger of using this external ceremony without there being any corresponding reality in one’s heart. Joel says: Don’t let your repentance be a matter of public ceremony. Don’t worry about symbolising repentance. What matters is the real thing not simply some ceremony. Don’t be content with religious ceremonies. Joel knew

that if they tore their garments but nothing was happening in their hearts, it would be of no value at all.

5. They are to trust in God's mercy

5. They are to trust in God's mercy. They are to hold on to the character of God.

'For he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity.' (2:13)

They are to remember what God is like as they go to the Lord in prayer. They hold on to what God's character is known to be. We remember God's mercy and love at such a time. Think of the Syrophenician woman. She held on to Jesus's mercy: 'Even the dogs get some crumbs from under the table'. She was clinging to the mercy of God.

Consider the words used here.

(i) God is 'Gracious'. This is God's free and undeserved graciousness.

(ii) 'Compassionate'. This is feeling moved within because of someone's suffering. God is compassionate. When in trouble you can tell Him how you feel.

(iii) God is 'slow to anger'. God does not act abruptly.

(iv) Great in love. The word means both 'loyalty' and 'love'. God has a special relationship to his people. He does not lightly give up on someone He has a relationship with. This is the ground of the appeal. This is what the Lord is like. God does not act in judgement unless He really has to. Jesus holds on to you. He does not easily give up on you. Maybe you have brought down upon yourself the judgement of God. These things encourage you. God is gracious. He abounds in loyal love.

6. They are to look to God to turn away from His judgements

6. They are to look to God to turn away from His judgements. God 'relents over the evil'. God repents as well as us.

'Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing – grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.' (2:14)

They go to God in confession and expect God to turn away from His chastening. This is why God sent Joel. Joel speaks in order that the calamity might turn away. Why does God warn of judgements? In order that judgement might be averted.

'He may turn and have pity...'. If they will turn to God there might come a great change

7. They are to involve the whole community in this turning to the Lord.

7. They are to involve the whole community in this turning to the Lord.

'Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, sanctify the assembly; (2:15)

*bring together the elders,
gather the children,
those nursing at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her chamber. (2:16)
Let the priests, who minister before the LORD,
weep between the temple porch and the altar.’ (2:17)*

Joel calls upon every section of the community. He is not thinking only of individuals. Individual believers can turn to God in this way but Joel is concerned about more than that. He calls upon everyone, even the children, and the newly married. When a community does turn to the Lord in this way, you have revival. This is what revival is. It is when many people in a community seek God in a new way. They put all other things aside to turn to God. Even if a mother is breast-feeding or a couple are newly married, they must still seek God in this way. The priests must take a lead also.

8. Joel tells them what to pray

8. Joel tells them what to pray:

*‘Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD.
Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword
among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’”’ (2:17)*

They are to plead their relationship to God ‘Spare your people’. They use God’s name: ‘O LORD’. This is the name that God got at the time of the Exodus when he saved Israel ‘by the blood of the lamb’. They are to plead the honour of God’s name. Why should unbelieving people say ‘Where is their God?’ When you deal with God in this way, God hears you. He will heal the land, remove the chastening, pour out His Spirit upon the land. He restores, forgives, heals the wounds of your life. It all takes place because of Jesus. He – as we now know – is the One who makes it possible for us to know God.

	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)</i> books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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