

# ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

August 7, 2022 | Seeking Repentance, Finding Reconciliation (Joel)

## PREPARATION

### GETTING READY

How would you define repentance?

Read Joel.

Pray that this lesson in Joel helps you see the judgment and mercy of God in a new way.

## THIS WEEK

### KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Israel was facing judgment, but if they repented, God would reconcile them to Himself.

### THEOLOGY APPLIED

God is always willing to forgive us if we are repentant.

### MEDITATE

*“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” (Joel 2:12–13).*

## GETTING STARTED

*+This section will introduce the main theme of Joel, helping to set the context for the remainder of the lesson.*

Q: *Why would a locust invasion be a sign of God's wrath?*

Q: *Why would it be harder for modern audiences to understand the fear of a locust invasion?*

It was like a shadow covering the earth, but there were no clouds overhead. This is a description of the cataclysmic plague of locusts that is the backdrop of the book of Joel. It can be hard for modern audiences to appreciate how frightful a locust invasion was for ancient peoples. Most of us are far removed from the production of our food. Gardening is a hobby. If our garden is eaten by bugs, we are sad that it did not work out and then go to the store to buy what we need. But ancient peoples knew that the difference between a good crop and a poor crop was the difference between life and death.

The locust invasion described in the book of Joel was the worst in living memory. The locusts covered every field, leaving nothing behind. Israel was already enduring a devastating drought and consuming fires (Joel 1:19–20). Now a massive swarm of locusts threatened to devour what little crops remained. In the midst of it all, the prophet Joel declared this to be only a hint of the devastation to come if Israel persisted in her sin. The locust invasion was not a random occurrence. It was a judgment sent by God upon a sinful and rebellious people. If they continued to sin, the armies of locusts would be replaced by invading armies seeking to destroy Israel and claim the land for themselves. They had only one hope. If they repented of their sin, God would relent and bless rather than condemn them. The locusts were only a harbinger of things to come if Israel refused to seek God in repentance.

Q: *What is the difference between repentance and being sorry?*

Q: *How is repentance different from regret?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Joel featured the theme of repentance in his prophecy. If the people would repent, God was ready to be reconciled with them. Understanding repentance, then, is crucial for understanding Joel. Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin and a determination to not continue in it but to walk in obedience to God. It is important to understand the theological character of repentance and how it is distinguished from more familiar concepts. For example, if you were to say “sorry” to someone, you are acknowledging the wrongness of

your actions, as you would in repentance, but “sorry” does not imply you need to change the course of your life. “Sorry” acknowledges a mistake that caused some harm to the other person. But after the matter is resolved, you plan to continue along as before, just with more consideration of others. “Repentance,” on the other hand, is part of a theological narrative that assumes the existence of a holy God to whom we are accountable. It assumes our sin and our need for God’s forgiveness. Words such as “sorry” and “regret” do not contain these theological underpinnings.

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Joel contains three chapters. The first part of each chapter contains a warning of approaching judgment, either for Israel (chapters 1 and 2) or the nations (chapter 3). The second part of each chapter calls for repentance and anticipates a restoration and reconciliation of Israel. This lesson traces several key theological themes for understanding Joel’s message.

1. THE SOVEREIGN AND POWERFUL GOD
2. THE WRATHFUL GOD
3. THE GRACIOUS GOD
4. THE RESTORING GOD
5. THE SPIRIT OF GOD

## GOING DEEPER

*+This section explores each of the theological themes above, which illustrate the need for and the blessing of repentance.*

### 1. THE SOVEREIGN AND POWERFUL GOD

**Q:** *How do the locust invasions illustrate God’s power [Joel 2:25]?*

**Q:** *How is God’s control over the nations apparent in Joel [Joel 3:1-16]?*

Everything that happened in the book of Joel can be traced back to God's power to rule over His creation. The drought and fires occurred because God withheld rain, but if the people repented, God would send the rain needed for abundant crops (Joel 2:23–24). The locust armies that destroyed Israel were sent by Him as a warning to repent (Joel 2:25). God decides the destiny of the nations (Joel 3:1–16). We may be tempted to see these things as mere chance, but Joel emphasized God's control over all the seemingly random occurrences in creation. Even the heavens can be manipulated for His purposes. He can darken the sun and turn the moon to blood as a sign of His coming judgment (Joel 2:31). If Israel just repented, God would do wondrous works among them and protect them from shame (Joel 2:26–27).

**Q:** *How does God's work in the seemingly random events of life give you the confidence needed to live in holiness and endure in faithfulness?*

**Q:** *How would you approach life differently if God had no control over His creation?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – From our perspective, the world often seems random. Major global events develop from the whims of governments and dictators. They seemingly could have made different decisions just as easily. Day-to-day occurrences are completely unpredictable. We do our best to make plans, but they are always subject to change and rarely take shape the way we anticipate. It is easy for us to think we experience life this way because this is the way life is, but Joel, and the rest of the Bible, emphasizes God's hand in directing every part of His creation. Things may seem random to us, but nothing is random to God. He is in control of the unexpected job offer you receive. He is in control of the unexpected cancer diagnosis you don't want. This should give us immense comfort and confidence in His purposes as long as we realize one thing. God's goal for your life is not maximum comfort and freedom from difficult challenges. God's goal is to conform you into the image of Jesus Christ, whether through blessings or trials. Just as God used a locust plague to push Israel to repentance, it is possible that the biggest challenges you face are intended by God to push you further into trusting Him for your sanctification. Although we cannot always see God's purposes clearly, we can know He is in control of our lives to transform us into the image of Jesus.

## 2. THE WRATHFUL GOD

Q: *What is the “day of the Lord” that is coming near [Joel 2:1]?*

Q: *How are the locust swarms an instrument of God’s wrath?*

God’s wrath and His grace are the two themes at the center of the book of Joel. Everything else wraps around them. The locust swarms are an obvious sign of God’s wrath. The invasion is first described in Joel 1:2–12. The swarms had invaded and destroyed Israel’s crops. It appears that this swarm was unusual in that it contained four types of locusts (Joel 1:4), making it particularly severe. This first description focuses on its severity. Nothing connects the locust invasion with God’s wrath until the call to repentance in Joel 1:13–20, but that call reveals that the locusts were a warning of an even greater judgment to come.

The second description of the locusts is from Joel 2:1–11, and it immediately links the locusts with God’s coming wrath by referencing “the day of the Lord” (Joel 2:1). This expression is frequent in the Minor Prophets and alludes to a day of terrible destruction. Since we are in Christ, we typically think of God’s coming with hope, but God’s coming will be a day of agony and sorrow for those who have rebelled against God. Joel also speaks of the wrath of God against nations (Joel 3:1–16). Israel faced God’s wrath because they broke God’s covenant, but non-covenant peoples will face God’s wrath as well.

Q: *What can Christians learn from the wrath of God in Scripture?*

Q: *Why is God’s wrath an important attribute?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Most people prefer to think of God’s love or grace instead of His wrath, but all of God’s attributes are interconnected. If an attribute such as wrath is denied or neglected, our appreciation for all of God’s attributes will suffer. We cannot appreciate God’s holiness apart from understanding the justice of His wrath upon that which is not holy. We cannot appreciate God’s grace apart from understanding that His grace saves us from His wrath. God’s wrath shows us that He takes sin seriously, so we must also take sin seriously. We should never think sin is not a big deal or that some sins are “little.” God’s wrath against sin keeps us from ever presuming upon His grace. We can never think it is okay to sin because we are

covered by the blood of Jesus. Such an attitude mocks the agony Christ endured on the cross. God's wrath is a crucial attribute for understanding who God is and the basics of what it means to believe in Him.

### 3. THE GRACIOUS GOD

- ❓ *Where else are the statements in Joel 2:13 found (with few alterations)?*
- ❓ *God was in the midst of judging the people with a locust plague, but He was ready to forgive them “even now” (Joel 2:12). What does this reveal about the nature of God’s grace?*

Since God's wrath is real, God's grace is precious. Even as Joel emphasized the coming wrath of God, he also drew attention to the grace God makes available upon repentance. Each passage of judgment is followed by a plea for repentance and an affirmation that God's grace is available to those who repent. Even as God dispensed judgment in the form of the locust plague, He was prepared “even now” to receive the Israelites in repentance (Joel 2:12).

The most remarkable statement of God's grace comes at Joel 2:13. This passage contains a series of statements frequently repeated throughout the Old Testament, appearing first in Exodus 34:6–7. Moses was renewing the covenant between God and Israel after Israel quickly fell into sin following their commitment to the previous covenant. The passage goes on to describe the certainty of God's wrath upon the guilty. But Joel omitted this element of the statement. He was not denying or ignoring what Exodus says about God's judgment but was holding up the possibility of God's grace for those who repented of sin (Joel 2:14). Joel wanted his audience to know it is in God's character to show grace to repentant sinners.

- ❓ *How does Joel 2:13 present a view of God that is different from what many people anticipate from the Old Testament?*
- ❓ *Although the locust plague was underway, the people could still repent and receive relief. When is it too late for people to repent of sin?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Many people describe God in the Old Testament as a God of wrath, but this is an incomplete picture of how the Old Testament reveals God’s character. The Old Testament does frequently warn of His judgment, but it also reveals His concern and grace for those who call upon Him. No one is beyond God’s grace. The Israelites were already enduring God’s judgment through the locust plague, but He was prepared to show His grace in the midst of it. We should never think of ourselves or anyone else as being beyond God’s grace.

❓: *Why did Joel tell the people to “rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13)?*

❓: *Joel described the absence of the grain and drink offerings in Joel 1:9. Why was God angry at the people if they were still making these offerings?*

Although Joel yearned for the people to repent and receive God’s grace, he warned them not to mistake outward signs of religious devotion without authentic repentance. “Rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13). In the Old Testament, tearing one’s clothes was a sign of deep turmoil and distress. Such actions were a fitting sign of repentance, but Joel knew the people had become adept at performing outward signs without the accompanying inward conviction. Such outward signs are useless without an underlying change of heart.

There are other signs in Joel that the people had become adept at outward signs of religiosity but without the accompanying heartfelt affection for God. In Joel 1:9, Joel said the grains and produce needed for the grain and drink offerings were consumed by the locusts. The people had persisted in making sacrifices to God, but even in keeping the sacrifices, they were failing to keep the covenant. Making sacrifices did not save the people from the locusts. Their sacrifices had become empty symbols because they were not accompanied by hearts committed to God. Such behavior reveals the callousness of sin.

❓: *Why are people prone to emphasize visible displays of affection for God even when their hearts do not truly seek obedience?*

❓: *How do you show outward signs of repentance and devotion to God? How could these outward signs become a cover for the absence of inward repentance?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Just like the Israelites, it is easy for us to put confidence in our outward displays of religiosity even while the needed inward change remains absent. It is not even that we are trying to deceive others while we know the truth of our unrepentance. We are willingly deceiving ourselves! At the day of the Lord, many will point to their religious practices and external performances as evidence of their internal commitment only to realize they have been deceiving themselves (Matthew 7:21–23). There is no way to test the authenticity of outward actions. But you can examine the condition of your own heart. As you do so, it is important to keep the gospel of grace in mind. None of your outward actions earn your salvation. Everything you do outwardly must come from a heart that already knows it is forgiven. It is also crucial for you to ask God to reveal areas of unrepentance in your heart. We cannot even examine the condition of our own hearts apart from His grace.

#### 4. THE RESTORING GOD

Q: *How did creation (the locusts and beyond) work against Israel in the book of Joel?*

Q: *How did Israel's repentance change this?*

In Genesis 1–2, God created both humanity and the natural world and gave humanity dominion over the natural world. In Genesis 3, humanity's sin not only created separation with God but also created hostility between humanity and the natural world. In Joel, we see the outworking of this hostility. Israel was continuing in sin, and nature worked against Israel as a judgment for their sins. The locust plague was the immediate concern, but the devastation the locusts brought upon the land further illustrates how creation had become hostile toward Israel. The fruit trees were striped and barren (Joel 1:7, 12) and the fields were destroyed (Joel 1:10). The destruction obliterated Israel's food supply and the means by which they worshipped God. They were not able to make the regular grain and drink offerings required in the Pentateuch (Joel 1:9). Joel imagined the land of Israel as a vast wasteland unfit for habitation or worship (Joel 1:19–20).

But this was not the end of Joel's message. If Israel repented, God might relent from the disaster He had brought upon the land and from His judgment of Israel. God would not merely cease the devastation. He would restore the land to its former productivity. He would leave the people's grain and drink offerings for worship (Joel 2:14). The land would regain all its prior productivity and more (Joel 3:18). Even what was lost in the years of the locust invasion would be returned (Joel 2:25). What Israel had lost due to the judgment of their sin they could regain when God restored their land after their repentance.



Q: *How does Joel's vision of restoration provide hope in a sinful world?*

Q: *God did not merely relent from Israel's punishment. He restored their land. What implications does this have for our redemption?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Joel concludes with the people of God dwelling in God's land forever. The pain and despair brought by the locust plague were no longer remembered and even undone. This is an Old Testament picture of what eternity with God will be. He will restore humanity to what He created them to be. The effects of sin will be undone. There will be nothing sin has taken away in this world that will not be replaced a thousand times greater in the next. God's people will no longer live in fear of His judgment but will live in obedience to His will.

#### 4. THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Q: *Where is Joel 2:28-32 quoted in the New Testament?*

Q: *How is the pouring out of the Holy Spirit linked to repentance?*

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came on certain individuals to perform specific tasks, such as when Bezalel constructed the Tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5). Moses longed for a day when all of God's people would be given the Holy Spirit (Numbers 11:29), but that day did not come during the Old Testament times. Joel anticipated the arrival of the day when God's Spirit would rest on every person who follows Him (Joel 2:28). This day will be a prelude to the "great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Joel 2:31). During this time, those who have received the Spirit and called upon the name of God will be saved (Joel 2:32). Peter quoted Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:17-21 to explain what happened at Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples received the Holy Spirit. They did not receive the Holy Spirit temporarily but permanently. Pentecost is the fulfillment of what Joel prophesied. Paul also quoted Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:12-13 to show that in salvation there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Since the Spirit is poured out on all flesh, Paul reasoned that both Jews and Gentiles can receive saving faith.

Q: *How does receiving the Holy Spirit change how believers under the new covenant relate to God versus those under the old covenant?*

Q: *How does the Holy Spirit promote unity within the church?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Since new covenant believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they are able to recognize the love of God to a far greater degree than those under the old covenant. The love of God leads new covenant believers to a greater obedience because their obedience is based upon a full revelation of Jesus Christ as Savior (Romans 5:5). The Holy Spirit helps us submit to God’s Word, exercise our gifts for the church, and worship Him with whole-hearted devotion.

## NEXT STEPS

This lesson has examined key theological themes in the book of Joel. Repentance is closely tied to each one. It is crucial for believers to consider areas of their lives that are in need of repentance. Persisting in unconfessed sin stifles spiritual growth and obedience. Take some time this week to reflect on actions or attitudes from which you need to repent. Confess these sins to God and ask Him to draw you into closer obedience to Him.

## PRAY

*+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.*

*-Father, you hold all things in your hands. Nothing takes you by surprise. Nothing is too hard for you.*

*-Lord, help me to understand your wrath. Help me to have an appropriate fear of it. Help me to rejoice in the Savior who took your wrath upon Himself for my sake.*

*-God, help me see when I mistake outward signs of religious devotion for an inward change of heart. Change my heart so that all that I do flows from a heart that seeks to know you more.*

*-God, I confess my sins to you. Help me to repent so I may be conformed to the image and likeness of your Son.*

