

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Joel 2:21-27 | Psalm 126 | 1 Timothy 6:6-10 | Matthew 6:22-33

JOEL 2:21-27

²¹ Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! ²² Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. ²³ O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. ²⁴ The threshing-floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. ²⁵ I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. ²⁶ You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. ²⁷ You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

INTRODUCTION

In February of 1942, C.S. Lewis published a short satirical book called *The Screwtape Letters*. In it, a fictional middle-management-level demon, named Screwtape, writes letters to a young and inexperienced demon, his nephew Wormwood, about how to tempt some nameless man and draw him into despair and eternal damnation. In the fifteenth of his thirty-one letters, Screwtape suggests a strategy of getting the man to focus on the immediate future, rather than the past, present, or even eternity. He writes:

His [that is, God's] ideal is a man who, having worked all day for the good of posterity (if that is his vocation), washes his mind of the whole subject, commits the issue to Heaven, and returns at once to the patience or gratitude demanded by the moment that is passing over him. But we want a man hag-ridden by the Future—haunted by visions of an imminent heaven or hell upon earth... We want a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy now, but always using as mere fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the future every real gift which is offered them in the Present.¹

It's a brilliant little observation. We humans so easily focus on the near future, what we think will make us happy tomorrow or the next day or next year, that we are willing to forget the past, ignore the present, and never even ponder eternity. But the prophet Joel, in his strange little letter, has a different view. Indeed, he suggests that the hope of eternity is found in remembering the great deeds of God in the past and present. Let me say that again, our hope is to be found in remembering our God. Let's take a brief look.

1. CONTEXT

Joel was a prophet. It's hard to say more than that because there are no historical markers in this book bearing his name—which makes him hard to place in time. Scholars tend to think of him as later, probably during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Most of his prophecy up to our

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne), 77-78. Screwtape said just before: "Gratitude looks to the past and love to the present; fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead." Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 76.

passage is quite striking. It tells of the judgment of God against his people for their sin—taking one of its images as that of locusts. Joel suggests that another nation will rise up, at the direction of God, and swarm Israel, just as a plague of locusts might, devouring the land and the crops, causing starvation and death, laying waste.² It will drive God’s people to despair. I’m not sure about you, but I can certainly identify with this state of being. The sin, rebellion, and fallenness of this world certainly wears me out. Whether it is the offensiveness of people, the devastation of disease, the disruption of life in this corrupt existence, the polarization of society, the endlessness of testing, the many and varied disappointments of the news, the loneliness of isolation, it can be exhausting. I don’t think Wormwood has to work that hard anymore. These last 18 months have been an incredible challenge in many ways. And sin—evil, rebellion against God, the darkness of our hearts—lies somewhere in the middle of it. I don’t think my sin caused the pandemic... but it hasn’t helped. It hasn’t made it better. And in Joel, this is why God punishes his people. For their sin. It is God’s righteous judgment. And so, Joel exhorts them to repentance: *“Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar.”*³ It seems sensible. The only response to sin is repentance.

But then, about halfway through the book, it turns. Joel writes: *“Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.”*⁴ Having heard his people cry out in anguish, the Lord responds. And this is where we get to our passage.

2. PROVIDING, PRESERVING, AND PROMISING

It begins with a series of exhortations, first to the land itself and then the animals and finally God’s people: ‘Do not fear, be glad, rejoice.’ Why? It’s there in verse 21: *“For the Lord has done great things!”*⁵ What kind of great things? Well, first, he’s provided. He’s watered the earth. He’s made the ground to produce. He’s filled the earth and always been the source of all we need. Think about that for a minute. It’s so easy for us to take credit. ‘I’ve employed the seven habits of effectiveness, the forty-eight rules of power, the ten steps to success. I’ve engineered my own achievements. I’ve worked hard and I deserve my rewards.’ And, of course, it is good to be wise and work hard. But do not forget it is the Lord who ultimately provides. Verse 26 puts it like this: *“You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.”*⁶ In restoring his people, God has provided and will continue to provide. The Lord *has* dealt wondrously with us. It’s so very clear.

But even more so, he’s not just provided, he’s protected. It’s subtle, but look at the next verse, the final verse in our reading. *“You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other.”*⁷ This is a reference—a remarkable call back to a refrain established in Exodus and repeated throughout the prophets. In Exodus: *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”*⁸ In Zechariah: *“They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.”*⁹ The Lord is our God. He

² Joel 1:4. Cf., Joel 2:25.

³ Joel 1:13.

⁴ Joel 2:18.

⁵ Joel 2:21.

⁶ Joel 2:26.

⁷ Joel 2:27.

⁸ Exod 20:2. Cf., Exod 3:6, 6:7; Ezek 11:20, 14:11, 37:23-27; Jer 7:23, 11:4, 31:1, 31:33; et al.

⁹ Zech 8:8.

has rescued his people from the beginning. He's preserved them, even when they bring his judgment upon themselves, he rescues his people in his infinite mercy.

But also, thirdly, notice that he makes a promise. Twice in the last two verses, God vows: "*And my people shall never again be put to shame.*"¹⁰ This is how we know that he's not just talking about some marginally better immediate future, but all of eternity. For his repentant people, the pain of this mortal and fallen life is but once. Our rescue, by God, is eternal.

4. GOSPEL

Now of course, you might be wondering, when exactly will we be rescued? If the rescue is eternal, but this life is obviously still frustrating, when? Interestingly, the Apostle Peter answers the question, though somewhat indirectly. You see, the very next words in Joel's prophecy (which our reading didn't include), are cited by Peter on the day of Pentecost. There, he claims that Joel's prophecy has been fulfilled and that, in fact, the rescue to which Joel points is the rescue of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹¹ In his death and resurrection, we find our eternal rescue from the power of sin, the consequences of death, and the vexation of life in a fallen world. I pray that you believe this. And if you don't, I urge you to speak to me or Patrick or Mike. Christ Jesus died for us that we might live eternally with him. Ours is to believe. And then, how can we not rejoice, be glad, and praise the name of the Lord forever?

CONCLUSION

In very practical terms, I would urge to place your hope in remembering our God. In these dark and lonely days, in these depressing and disappointing days, in these frustrating and simply exhausting days, remember the Lord. He has always provided for his people. He has always rescued his people. And even when we deserved his wrath, he had mercy on his people. I don't know what the near future will bring. But I do know this: We don't have to live in fear. We don't have to live with anxiety. We don't have to worry about what tomorrow brings.¹² We don't have to entertain the doubts that Screwtape and Wormwood would put upon us. For God keeps his promises.¹³ And for that, we can be thankful.

Let me pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for saving us through the death and resurrection of your Son. May our hope be ever tied to remembering your many and great mercies. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁰ Joel 2:26-27.

¹¹ See Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:17-24.

¹² See Matt 6:25-33.

¹³ Consider our verse from the jazz concert, Gen 28:15: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Even at this early point in history, God established himself as one who keeps his promises.