

God's Got News for His Half-Hearted People

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Date: 03 June 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, please do have a seat. And if you've got a Bible there, or if you're one of scrollers, as I like to call them, then turn to Joel chapter two. This is where we're going to be this morning, the first 17 verses.

While you're doing that, let me just welcome everyone to church this morning. How great to see you all. Thank you so much to everyone who's participated so far in our service. And it's wonderful to meet so many visitors as well this morning, who've traveled from all over parts of the world to be in Edinburgh and with us today.

And I hope you've enjoyed the weather. It's always like this. Always like this, I tell you. You have got the best of Scotland this week. So I hope you guys have enjoyed your time with us. This is Joel chapter two, and we're just going to get, Alistair's already prayed, so we're just going to get stuck in straight from verse one.

These hard-hitting verses that the people of Judah need to hear, but have so much to teach us about our God this morning. So this is from verse one. Blow the trumpet in Zion.

Sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.

[1 : 12] Like dawn spreading across the mountains, a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times, nor ever will be in ages to come. Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes.

Before them the land is like the Garden of Eden, behind them a desert waste, and nothing escapes them. They have the appearance of horses, they gallop along like cavalry, with a noise like that of chariots, they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming a stubble, consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle.

At the sight of them nations are in anguish. Every face turns pale. They charge like warriors, they scale walls like soldiers, they all march in line, not swerving from their course.

They do not jostle each other, each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defences without breaking ranks, they rush upon the city, they run along the wall, they climb into the houses like thieves, they enter through the windows.

Before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The Lord thunders at the head of his army.

[2 : 26] His forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the Lord is great, and is dreadful, who can endure it?

Even now declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.

Rend your hearts 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 relent and leave behind a blessing. Grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.

Gather the people, consecrate the assembly, bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests who minister before the Lord weep between the portico and the altar.

[3 : 30] Let them say, spare your people, 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?

Amen. This is the word of our great God this morning and he will bless it to us. I became a Christian when I was 18 years old, something like that. And my mom and dad took me to church growing up.

I grew up in Christian circles, but Christianity meant nothing to me growing up. So my life, I like to say, it was a lot more about goals than it was about God, if you catch my drift. But I remember I had this one friend called Fiona.

And Fiona was part of our group of friends. And I remember the time of her life that God saved her. He just opened her eyes to the truth about who his son Jesus was. And we're together with our group of friends as she announces to us one day, hey guys, I'm going to get baptized. Because I want the world to know that I follow this man called Jesus Christ. And I'm thinking, Fiona, what are you doing? What are you doing? I just didn't understand it.

[4 : 33] But I tell you what, I looked into Fiona's life and I saw something compellingly different in her. She was acting differently.

She was talking differently. And she wasn't perfect. But do you know what? She wasn't the same as what she used to be. And I looked in and I saw that there was a light on in her heart that wasn't on the mind.

I saw that there was a bigger reality that was true for her that wasn't true for me. And I longed to have what she had. And I looked as an outsider into her life.

I looked at what was going on in her heart as God was transforming her. And my reaction, my gut instinct was, I think her God is real. Isn't it amazing?

I wonder if some of us here have got testimonies stories like that about how we came to know Jesus Christ for ourselves. Isn't it amazing how God uses his people as he transforms them, as he rescues them, as he puts lights on in their hearts, that as they shine as stars for him in a world that is dark, that God uses them to draw people outside to himself.

[5 : 41] I think as you read the Bible story, that's always the way it was meant to be as God does his work in his people. But that's not happening with Joel's generation of God's people.

Look at verse 17 of chapter 2. The nations, the people around about their neighbours, as they look at this generation of God's people and everything that's going on in Judah, here is what either they conclude or they will conclude.

There is a God. No, no, no. Where is their God? Now, why are they saying that? Well, two reasons really quickly. Here's the first one, because of how God's people are living. Instead of standing out for the Lord, they are blending in with the world.

They're worshipping their gods. They're just following their ways. They're adopting their values.

They are deliberately and blatantly ignoring the instructions and commands that God has given them as he has said, that's how you are to live as my rescued people, my ransomed people.

And secondly, as a result of what they are, because of their blatant disregard for the Lord, because of what they are experiencing. That's where we need to tap into our Bible story here.

[6 : 49] Remember, this is God's people. This people that he'd set his heart upon, he'd rescued from Egypt, he'd brought them to Mount Sinai under the leadership of Moses, and he'd made a covenant with them.

This binding promise sealed with the strapline that I will be your God and you will be my people. And it was to be a relationship filled with mutual delight as they delighted in God and God delighted in them.

And together, they showcased to the world God's glory. And the nations would look in and they would declare that truly Israel's God is the God of all gods.

The heart of their lives as God's people was to be this. The mantra that we find in Deuteronomy 6 verse 4, you can check it out later, that the Lord your God, O Israel, here is to be one.

God is to be number one in their lives. And he would not share the throne of their hearts with any pretenders of the nations round about them. He wanted his people's wholehearted devotion.

[7 : 54] And God gave his people a choice. Again, you can check it out later, Deuteronomy 28. If you go on with me, I will bless you. But if you turn away from me, I will curse you.

Those were the terms of this old covenant arrangement that God had with his people. You read the story all the way through. God's people, they make their choice. They turn away from the Lord.

And because of their disobedience, here they are in Joel's time in the land, experiencing those covenant curses in the form of this locust plague. Now we heard that last week from Alistair.

This is an event that this generation are never going to forget. This is an event when the locusts came that this generation would have to pass on down the generations because there was lessons to be learned from what has just happened.

God's people have wandered far away from the Lord. And they have settled for a pick and mix, half-hearted, empty shell of a religious life.

[8 : 54] And because of the people's sin, because of the curses they are experiencing, God's people are de-glorifying him in the sight of the surrounding nations. Because they look in and they see everything that's going on in Judah and they think, well, Israel's God can't be up to that much.

Because they're being humiliated. He can't be that great. To see, instead of seeing and marvelling like I did with my friend from the outside, the nations are looking in at this generation and they are doubting and they are mocking.

And I think, friends, as we journey through these verses this morning, God is going to challenge us as to the true devotion of our hearts as we stand here. Like that experience, I had it a few weeks ago when you drop your car off for its MOT and you hand the mechanic the keys and you go to pick it up a few hours later and they produce for you the report.

And you never get that back and the report says, do you know what? See if you just gave that a wee clean. See if you gave that just a wee spray paint. See if you brought one of those pine cone to your freshers and just stuck it on your dashboard. That would be great.

Because that would be a lot cheaper, wouldn't it? It's not what they do. The mechanic's job is not to look at what's going on in the outside. Mechanic's job is to get to the heart of what's going on in the inside.

[10 : 19] The job is to get to the heart of the car. And here, as we hear God through Joel speak to this generation of his people, God is going to challenge us to think about what is really going on in the inside.

Joel. Do you know what his name means? Learned it a couple of weeks ago. The Lord is God. This is what his name means. Love that. Picture Joel walking around Jerusalem the first day into the marketplace.

There he is. People looking at him. Oh, there's that guy called Joel. Do you mean the Lord is God? Yeah, that's him. Oh, he's a prophet. Oh, I wonder what he's going to say to us. The Lord is God. Yahweh is Lord. God comes back in the next day. Oh, there's that guy called Joel again. Didn't like his message yesterday. Did you? No, didn't like his message yesterday. Far too in my face.

I wonder if he's got a different message for us today. The Lord is God. He does not have a different message. This is what God is saying to this generation of his people. He's raised up this prophet and he's speaking to them that the confession of their lips and the reality of their lives are completely different.

[11 : 33] And God has raised up Joel as a megaphone to his people to convict them of their sin and to call them back to a life of covenant faithfulness to the Lord who has rescued them and loves them.

God's got news for his half-hearted people. Key verse is verse 13. Look at it there if you've got it with me.

This is the heartbeat of these verses this morning and this is the heart, I think, you could argue of the whole entire book. Look what it says, verse 13. See God's heart here.

Feel it. Return to me. Do you feel it? Return to me. Come back to me. Repent. Turn around. Don't run over there.

Run to me. There's nowhere else to go. Return to me. And in these verses, God's got some bad news for his people.

[12 : 28] And in these verses, God's got some good news for his people. As he speaks to Joel, we're just going to journey through these two bits of news in these verses. Here's the bad news. Verses 1 to 11.

God says, see if we keep on going the way we're going, that he's going to judge us. So this people, remember how costly this must have been for Joel to speak into this generation.

It's costly to speak for the truth, isn't it? Here, they have just experienced the devastating locust plague. Joel sounds the alarm and he says, if we don't learn the lessons, if we don't turn back to the Lord, there's a greater day of judgment that's coming upon us.

Now, let's just journey through these verses. Let me pick out a few things to help us see what's going on. Notice the where of verse 1. Where is this alarm to be sounded? In Zion.

In Jerusalem. So God's judgment, if they do not turn, is going to come to the very capital city of this nation. Now, that's important to see because so complacent were the people in this day that they

thought Jerusalem was untouchable.

[13:35] Surely God would not judge Jerusalem. Surely, would he? He would, says Joel. God will judge other places, but will he judge Jerusalem?

Of course he will. Just because you're in Jerusalem does not mean that you are right with God. I see the what of verse 2. An army even greater than that of the locusts will come upon them.

Now, whether this is referring to a future locust plague, whether this is referring to a future physical army who are being portrayed as locusts, people differ on that one. But whatever it is, this terrifying future day of the Lord because of the people's sin is not something that you want to be in the wrong end of.

See the how of verses 3 to 10? What will the army do? Glance at the verbs. They will gallop, leap, consume, charge, march, plunge, rush, run, climb.

Do you get the picture? Total devastation from this army. And see the who of verse 11. Who's behind this? Who is at the front of this army?

[14:45] The Lord. This is his army that he is using to accomplish his sovereign purposes.

And lastly, see the why. Why would God do this to his people? Because they are spiritually all over the place. Saying God, and get into what they're doing here, saying God, we want your stuff, we want your blessings, we just don't want you.

taking his covenant love for granted, presuming on his kindness, abusing his grace, this people have offered to God a half-hearted religiosity.

And they think God is okay with that. But God will not be mocked. God will not be mocked.

Someone once asked J.C. Ryle, the former bishop of Liverpool, Mr. Ryle, what is a true Christian? And he responded, a Christian is a person whose faith is not a mere Sunday quote, but rather, it's a compelling principle that governs every single day of their lives.

[15:51] These people are offering to God their Sunday best. During the week, we can live wherever we want. The Lord wants his people's whole hearts. And if they keep on going with their half-hearts, then they will have to face that chilling thought at the end of verse 11.

The day when God comes to judge his people. Darkness. I mean, the language here is so striking. Darkness, symbolizing God's judgment, will fall on God's people.

And it will be dreadful. Rhetorical question at the end, who can endure it? Who can endure it? Answer, no one. No one can endure this.

Do you feel the weight of these verses? The weight. God says, your sin is a big deal. So where does it leave this people? As they come face to face with the God who made them, with guilty hands, with nowhere to run, what can they do?

Well, do you see, when it comes to being right with their covenant God, as they look at their hand of cards, they've only got one card they can play. And that card is not marked ace.

[17:07] That card is marked grace. That's the only card they've got to play. This is the only place they can run. Grace. God's grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin.

Heard somebody recently talk about how they explain grace to their little children. Imagine that somebody hit you in the face and you hit them back. That would be justice. Imagine if somebody hit you in the face and you didn't hit them back and you said, I forgive you, that would be mercy. Imagine if somebody hit you in the face, you didn't hit them back, you said, I forgive you, and you took them out for an ice cream. That would be grace. Getting something so much outrageously better than you deserve.

Do you see how the only hope that God's people have is not in themselves, it's in who this God is. the only hope that they have is to turn again to the Lord in faith, trusting that He is who He says He is, trusting that He is gracious, trusting that He will make a way for them to be right with Him again. He will make a way for their sin to be dealt with and that He will treat them so outrageously better than they deserve. Friends, you see the gospel in Joel chapter 2.

[18:29] It's all they have. It's all we have. It's the way it's always been. That God is, as we come on to see, He is the giver of good news.

Here's the good news, verses 12 to 17. God says, if we return to Him, then grace is a possibility for us. See verse 12. What will God say if His people return?

It's about time? No. Drop and give me 20? No. What will they say? Even now?

Do you feel it? As if to say, there is time. Return to me, says God. Return to me. Come back to me. With fasting and weeping and mourning.

It's not your clothes that I want you to rip and break. It's your hearts. Because what your sin is doing. Verse 13. Rend your hearts and not your garments.

[19 : 30] Do you see God's heart here? For His people. I don't want your religious acts. I want you. I don't want your religious attendance.

I want your whole life. I don't want your religious stuff. I want your heart. Why? Because He is gracious.

Look at the description on the screen. This is who this God is. He is gracious. He is compassionate. He is slow to anger. He is abounding.

Get that word in your heads. Abounding in steadfast love. And He relents from sending calamity. If His people would turn back to Him just as He is being faithful to His word to curse them for their disobedience, He will be faithful to His promise to turn and to hear His people's cries for grace. And as you see God's heart here, I wonder if your mind is gone where my mind went this week. You can't help but think of the prodigal son. The son who had no right, no right to come back to his father after everything that he'd done.

[20 : 37] And yet what does the father do when he gets the first sniff, the first glance of a son that has turned and has said, I'm not going that way. I'm going that way. I'm heading for my father at home.

What does he do? He runs to embrace Him. Now I remember growing up thinking that the God of the Old Testament was a big, bad, scary God. The God of the New Testament was a big, loving God.

And I had to count my lucky stars that I didn't live in the Old Testament. I lived in the New Testament. He was like Jekyll and Hyde. But how wrong was I? This God, the three in one, is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

God says to His people here, return to me. All of us, sounds Joel, are to turn back to Him. Verse 16, look at this. Whole of the people. Gather the people, the elders, the children, the mothers, the bride and groom.

But we're on our honeymoon. I don't care. This is where you need to be. Seek in the face of the Lord your God. And the priests, lead us with tears in your eyes.

[21 : 36] Do you notice that? This is a deep work of repentance that's going on here. Lead us at the temple in this national repentance ceremony. Verse 17, do not let your inheritance, as if to say, Lord, did you remember your covenant promises to us, your people?

Although we deserve disgrace, do not let us be disgraced by you in the eyes of the watching world. Why? Because you are gracious. That's who you are. Here's the question you might be asking this morning as you stand here.

How do you know God is gracious? How do you know? Well, we know because ultimately, standing where we do in history, that God sent his son.

John chapter one, Jesus, how does he describe him in his epilogue? His opening, opening gambit about Jesus full of grace and truth. The person of Jesus, God in the flesh, grace has a face.

That's what John is saying. As Jesus hangs there on the cross, as he goes to deal with our sin, what is it that the passersby say of him? His darkness is falling all around him.

[22 : 45] What did he say? Matthew records it in chapter 27 of his gospel. People mocked him. Surely his God will come to save him. As if to say, where is his God?

To see, he takes our disgrace, the disgrace that his people deserved, and he gives us his grace. And in so doing, he ushers us into this new covenant relationship with his people, established on better truths by his shed blood and his broken body.

In Jesus, his people will never face ultimate disgrace because Jesus, our king, took it for us. And what do we get in return? Forgiveness, newness of life, peace, and ultimately, God himself.

as the three-in-one comes to live in the hearts of his people through the Holy Spirit. See, the gift of the gospel is not material things, it's not an easy life, and it's certainly not a private jet before you ask.

The gift of the gospel is God himself. We get God. This is the good news of the gospel. For all those who would put their trust in Jesus, God.

[23 : 55] For all those who would throw themselves and nothing of themselves in all of God's grace, God is here. God's got news for his half-hearted people. He's got bad news.

If you keep on going the way that you're going, he will judge us. And he's got good news. If we return to him, then he might be gracious to us.

Friends, as we work towards a close, what are we going to do with this? Well, to quote Matt Redman, as we read this, as God's new covenant people, friends, we need to come back to the heart of worship.

And we need to fall on our knees and declare, it's all about you. It is all about you, Jesus. I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it. When it's all about you, it's all about you, Jesus.

As we feel God's heart to his people, return to me. Do you know why Matt and his church wrote that song? Because as a church, their lives together, stuff was just getting in the way.

[25 : 00] Stuff was just getting in the way in terms of their love for the Lord and their devotion to him. And let me ask you, are you here this morning and in your life, stuff is just getting in the way? Is there unchecked and unspoken serious sin in your heart, growing arms and legs in your life, it's killing you because it's clogging up your spiritual arteries?

Hear what God is saying this morning to his people. Return to me. Don't look to yourself. Come to me. Return to me. Come to the cross. Come to my son and know that I am a God full of grace and steadfast love.

As we close, let me take you back to my friend Fiona. Let us think about that. What do people in our lives on the outside, as they look into us, friends, what do they see?

Do they see a people who are half-hearted? Do they look in and they see a people and they think, where is their God? Or do they look in and they say, do you know what?

Maybe God is real. You know, I'll never forget the day when Fiona, not long after she'd become a Christian, she, we're chatting outside, I can't remember where we are, we're chatting outside and she looks at me and she says, Graham, where are you at in all of this?

[26 : 13] Where are you at? What's going on? We'd never had that chat before. All of a sudden, she starts asking those kind of questions. Where are you at in all of this? I don't care what's going on on the outside, I don't care about that, what's going on on the inside.

And God, by his grace, was just poking, poking at me, poking at my heart, getting me to think, where am I at? What is going on in my life? Where am I at before this, God?

Let me just ask you, just as we close, just to think about that in your own life. Friends, where are you at in all of this? Not what's going on on the outside, what's going on on the inside.

Let's pray. Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name, make known among the nations what he has done.

Father God, thank you for Joel chapter 2. And would you help us by your spirit this week to be a people who know and who tell the outrageous grace that you show to sinful people.

[27 : 23] And we see it so wonderfully at the cross of Christ. So Lord, help us to be lights that shine for you in a dark world, we ask.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.