

Where Do You Run?

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Date: 27 May 2018

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[0 : 00] Let me add my welcome to Grahams. My name is Alistair. I have the privilege of being on staff here at Brunsfield and it is great to have you with us, whether you've been here for years or if this is your first time. And I have the privilege this morning of starting our, or doing our first sermon in the short series on the book of Joel.

Now, Joel is in the Old Testament, in probably one of the least read or least understood parts of the Bible. So why bother studying it together? Well, as a church, we believe the Bible is the Word of God and therefore everything that is in it is important.

Even though some of the Old Testament might be difficult and seem quite strange at points, all of it is profitable for our learning. And so where does the book of Joel come in the Old Testament?

It's one of the 12 minor prophets, so the last 12 books of the Old Testament. And some of the big themes that we're going to be thinking about over the next few Sunday mornings together are themes like God's justice and God's love.

God's faithfulness and God's grace and the day of the Lord. So what's happened so far in the Old Testament? Well, the most important thing in the Old Testament is God's covenant.

[1 : 17] The covenant that he made with his people, meaning that God chose the nation of Israel and entered into a relationship with them. He promised to love and protect and provide for them.

And they were to be his representatives on earth, his witnesses of his glory and majesty, pointing all other people to God so that they would worship him. And as part of God's covenant, he gave them laws that they were to follow so that they could see their sinfulness and their need to be made right with God.

And time and time again, as you'll know, if you've read the Old Testament, Israel rebel, they fail. But God is always, always faithful.

He does not go back on his promises. God sends people time and time again to the people of Israel to warn them of their sin and call them back into a relationship with him.

These people are called prophets. And Joel, as we'll see this morning, is one of those prophets sent by God to call Israel back to himself. In the book of Joel, God is saying to the nation of Israel, return to me.

[2 : 29] That's what God is saying. And you'll notice in a moment when we read the book of Joel, we aren't actually told when the book was written. But we do know that the book was written to the people of Israel.

And there's a likelihood based on some of the details in the book that it was written before Israel were exiled to Babylon. And in a sense, the timing and date of the writing of the book doesn't actually matter.

Because the principles that Joel teaches are timeless. The book of Joel is just as relevant today for Edinburgh, for Brunsfield in 2018 as it was for Israel back then.

So that's just a little bit about the book as a whole to help us see the context. But what about Joel chapter one? Over the years, I'm sure there have been many dates and times that have stuck in your mind.

You have the good kind like birthdays or maybe a wedding anniversary or the birth of a child or family holidays. But these dates only affect us as people, only us personally.

[3 : 39] But then you have the big days that affect the whole world, don't you? And some of these events, you might actually remember where you were when you heard the news. So for some people, times and places of gun violence are etched in their memories because they lost loved ones.

For others, maybe it was that car that went into a crowd of people which changed their lives forever. Or for the UK last year, when a bomb went off in a packed out arena.

That is not a date we'll be forgetting anytime soon. Or maybe on September the 11th in 2001, when the news was full of videos of the World Trade Center of Fire.

That was a day that changed the world. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives on 9-11. And as we look back on that event some 17 years ago, most of us will probably still remember where we were when we heard the news.

Tim Keller, who was a pastor in a church in New York at the time of the bombing, said that he could remember the scenes vividly. He could almost feel the needs of the people as they were looking for answers, looking for guidance of how to live in this new, changed world.

[4 : 59] 9-11 happened on a Tuesday morning. And on the Sunday morning, Tim Keller's church ballooned from having roughly 2,800 people on a Sunday to having 5,400 people that day.

Why did that happen? Well, because when something bad happens, everybody runs somewhere. Some people run to God.

Some people to family. To routines. To small pleasures and comforts. But the truth is, we all run somewhere. Where do you run?

Today in Joel chapter 1, we're going to see a life-changing event that happens for the people of Israel. Where are they going to run?

And where do you run when something happens which shakes your world and you feel that everything is crumbling around you? Where do you run? I'm going to invite Lynn to come and read Joel chapter 1 to us.

[6 : 01] And keep that question in the back of your mind and think, where did Israel run? Thank you very much, Lynn.

Let's pray before we think about this passage. Heavenly Father, when we read such a difficult passage, we come before you and acknowledge our weakness.

And Lord, we ask that you would convict us, you challenge us, and you comfort us as we come to your word. In Jesus' name, amen.

So the people of Israel have just suffered an invasion of locusts. This army of insects has destroyed their land. This is a life-changing event for everybody.

And where do they run? Where do they run? And the first thing this chapter says to the people of Israel is, wake up and weep in verses 1 to 12.

[7 : 03] Wake up and weep. In verses 2 to 4, we're told of this terrible disaster that came upon the people of Israel. And in verse 4, you'll see a mention of different locusts.

The land was covered, had been taken over by a devastating plague that is on a path of destruction. The language used draws our attention to the sheer volume of these locusts, doesn't it?

The idea that there are so many that they cover the ground. Here's a picture taken in Libya in 2012. And this was a locust swarm, not yet a plague.

So a locust plague is where multiple swarms come together. Imagine, when you see that picture, how the people of Israel felt. They open the door and see this huge fog of flying insects devouring every single thing in their path.

Not a centimetre of grass is left. Not an inch of crop. Everything is devoured. In verse 6, this plague is described as a nation or as a mighty army.

[8 : 11] And you see the devastation in verse 7. They laid waste to the vines, ruined the fig trees. They even stripped the trees of their bark. Everything was devoured and they left branches white.

So this is not just a few insects that we're talking about. But this is a life-changing event. And the people of Israel are not to forget it. God is telling them to consider why this locust plague has come.

And why it is all happening. Everybody's being called to attention. Everybody's being told to wake up to the devastation that is affecting their land.

And they have to tell this story of destruction to their children, their grandchildren and their great-great-grandchildren. God says that every person born into the nation of Israel needs to hear of this destruction.

Why? Why tell such a terrible story? Because it is their own sin that is causing this calamity. The people of Israel need to remember this situation and the seriousness of it.

[9 : 19] Because it is their own sin that has caused this. Their disobedience to God has resulted in His judgment being sent upon them in the form of a plague of locusts. And you see that because later on in chapter 1 they're told that they need to repent.

And if they do, God will take them back. And later on in chapter 2 verse 25, you can look that up later. God says that He sent the locust plague. So the call is wake up.

Look at the situation. Look at your sin. Look at how far you have gone. And weep. The words wake up and weep in verse 5 are directed at people who are trying to escape their situation.

By running not to God, but to alcohol. And God is saying and calling them to wake up from their slumber and realize their depravity.

I'm sure you've all been in a building when the fire alarm goes off. You hear that loud noise and you stop. You don't care whether it's a real fire or whether it's a drill.

[10 : 27] You head straight for the fire exit and wait for the all clear. Joel is like a fire alarm. He's getting everybody's attention. You see that? He's calling the elders in verse 2.

The drunkards in verse 5. Farmers and vine growers in verse 11. And all who live in the land in verse 2. Wake up, people. Look around and consider the spiritual significance of this locust invasion.

The people need to wake up because their disobedience to God. The God who chose them. The God who saved them. The God who has brought them this far. The God who has loved them unconditionally.

Their disobedience to this God has caused this plague. And because of this locust invasion, they cannot fulfill their own covenant promises. In the Old Testament covenant, the Israelites were to give sacrifices to God.

To show that they need to be made right with him. And two of them are mentioned in verse 9. So not only were the Israelites in this terrible situation because they'd sinned. But they couldn't be made right with God because of their sin.

[11 : 36] Their sinfulness is causing the divide between them and God to get bigger and bigger and bigger. Surely this isn't the way the people of God should be acting. They're supposed to be rejoicing in their God.

But verse 12 says their joy has withered away. Now the language in this passage is very emotional. You can't read it without feeling the sting for the people of Israel.

Language of weeping and wailing. Mourning and crying. Despair and a complete lack of joy. Why did all this happen? It happened because the people of Israel had become comfortable.

They didn't keep an eye on their spiritual well-being. They'd become comfortable with their sin. And their hearts are being pulled away from God. They had the Lord.

They had God's revelation of who he was. It should never have come this far, Israel. And God is sending the plague to wake them up and call them back to himself.

[12 : 42] To realize their sin and to weep. Don't we find it all too comfortable or all too easy to become comfortable with our sin?

I know I do. That small slip up here and there suddenly becomes more and more frequent. And then after a while we are crushed under the weight of our sin.

Where do you run to? When life becomes difficult. When something happens that shakes your world and reveals your sinful heart. Where do you run?

Do you run to God or do you run away from God? As Christians our desire should always be to run to God. To seek refuge in the God who loves us.

Who cares for us. The God who calls us back to himself regardless of what we've done. And he doesn't just offer us a grunt of acknowledgement as we come through the door. But he opens us with welcome arms.

[13 : 46] Israel is coming under the judgment of God for their disobedience to the covenant. But we live under the new covenant. So there are some differences. Today in the new covenant we are not judged by God.

But God clearly shows his anger and his discontent with our sin by leaving us to suffer the consequences. So we can't look at every single problem in our lives and say that God is sending judgment to wake us up.

But we also shouldn't look at all our problems and not think that maybe we've done something to anger God. God allows the consequences of our sins to play out.

We are not shielded from our sin. But neither are we given over to the full just punishment that our sins deserve. The people of Israel are suffering the consequences because they broke their covenant with God.

And for Christians today, for people who have put their trust in Jesus, we trust in the one who took our covenant curses on himself on the cross. As Christians we're called to look at our spiritual state.

[14 : 57] To do a spiritual health check if you will. Make sure that we are living according to God's will and God's word. And we should be honest about the seriousness of sin.

But we do not do this as a defeated people. But we do this as people who cling to Jesus. The one who took our covenant curses. The one who on the cross suffered the wrath and just judgment of God.

So that we can stand here this morning declared free and forgiven. But don't switch off to the message. Don't become comfortable with sin.

Don't let a wedge be driven between you and God. But constantly run to and cling to the cross of Jesus. John Owen, a preacher and theologian from the 1600s, captured the seriousness of sin by saying that people should be killing sin or it will be killing you.

Be killing sin or it will be killing you. Sin is dangerous. This passage should be a wake up call for each and every one of us to think about our lives and consider if and where we are out of touch with God.

- [16 : 18] This passage should disturb the comfortable. But it should also comfort the disturbed. It should disturb the comfortable because it calls each and every one of us to look at the seriousness of sin.

And drive it out of our lives with the help of the Holy Spirit. We cannot walk away from this passage without searching our souls and that is painful.

But it should also comfort the disturbed. Because once we see the seriousness of our sin. We should also look up and see the magnificence of God who sent Jesus Christ to pay the price.

This chapter challenged me this week as I was preparing on how comfortable I can become with sin. Do I flirt with sin or do I cut it off?

When was the last time I wept over my sin? When was the last time you wept over your sin? But please don't look at every bad thing in your life and think that it is judgment sent by God.

- [17 : 26] But also don't swing to the other extreme and think that God only sends pleasant things to his people. Are you in need of comfort this morning or are you in need of disturbance?

Maybe you've never heard this before. Maybe you're not a Christian. Then let the warning of Joel ring in your ears. Wake up and weep. Because we're all deserving of God's just judgment.

But also know that there is hope and refuge to be found in Jesus. This is a message that I need to hear every single day. I think we all do.

And once the people of Israel have seen this locust plague and have pondered the spiritual significance of it and the role that their disobedience played in it all, God calls them to return and repent.

In verses 13 to 20, return and repent. In verse 13, you'll see that the priests are mentioned as the ones who need to lead the way for the people in the morning.

- [18 : 34] They are to put on sackcloth and wail. Why is God singling out the priests? Because the priests should have been leading the way.

Calling the people of Israel back to God. Challenging them to consider their spiritual state before God. But they obviously haven't been doing their job because it should never have gotten to this point.

And they are to mourn because their priestly duties cannot be fulfilled. A disobedience of the people of Israel has caused a breakdown in their relationship with God.

And their mourning is not to be in the kind of attitude of, Oh, sorry, God, forgive me, I've messed up again. No. They are to come and spend the night in sackcloth and wail.

They are to spend the night on their knees wrestling and pleading with God that he would forgive his people for their sins. They are to repent from their heart and be disturbed by their disobedience.

- [19 : 35] When was the last time we spent the night on our knees repenting? I know a man who's a minister here in the UK and he was converted whilst in prison on charges of attempted murder.

And as he sat in his cell and read the only book that was available to him, the Bible, he realized that he was a sinner and he needed to be forgiven by Jesus. That man spent so much time in prayer asking God to forgive him.

And he spent the rest of his prison sentence learning about Jesus and sharing Jesus with his fellow inmates. And wrestling with the amazing grace that God had sent him because he'd been forgiven by Jesus.

He didn't just say, God, I'm sorry, I messed up. But he wrestled and lamented over his terrible actions and he turned his life around.

And now he uses his story to tell people the grace of God because he stands as a man declared free and forgiven. God is calling the priests to lead the way for the people of God to return to him and repent.

[20 : 49] And the call to repentance is both for the individual and for the whole assembly of people. You can see that in verse 14. The priests are to declare a holy fast, meaning that they're to call a time where the people hear the word of God, where they reflect on their sinfulness and they gather together to call on the Lord and confess their sins as one body.

A time where they return to the Lord and repent. And all of this repenting should be done in light of the day of the Lord. Do you see that in verse 15?

And now the day of the Lord is a big theme in the book of Joel. And everything that happens in this book is pointing forward to that day. In the Jewish mind, the day of the Lord was a day of blessing, a day of good fortune.

But it's Joel's way of pointing to future judgment of God and to the ultimate day of the Lord. When God will send his chosen king into the world and everything will be made right.

As Christians, we look on that final day of the Lord and we call it the second coming of Jesus. We look forward to that day with anticipation and quite rightly so.

[22 : 06] Because God will dwell with his people. Justice will be served. But Joel describes that day as great and dreadful.

Great because God will return and gather his people and they'll dwell with him forever. And there will be no more sin but dreadful. Because God will come to judge the world.

And that means that all those who have not put their trust in Jesus will be cast out of his presence. That is a great but a dreadful day.

And the day of the Lord that Joel is speaking about here in verse 15 is referring to another judgment that God will send if Israel do not return to him and repent. God is warning the people of Israel.

But still he's saying if you come back to me I will forgive you even now you have time to come back. Israel's disobedience has caused devastation for themselves and for their land.

[23 : 11] Sin is dangerous. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. But notice that Joel isn't standing on a platform.

Shouting this out across the people in a proud and innocent way. But he includes himself in the call in verse 19. To you Lord I call.

Joel's relationship with and knowledge of God helped him evaluate the situation playing out in front of him. And he didn't see himself as being innocent. But he called to the Lord including himself as a guilty party.

Where do you run? Joel says return and repent and run to God. Is this not a message that we need to hear every single day?

Every single minute of every single hour? I know I need this message ringing in my ears day and night because I know my own sinful heart. Prone to wonder.

[24 : 17] Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. And so what is my prayer in that situation? Lord take my heart and seal it for your courts above. Joel has a healthy view of the seriousness of sin.

Because he has a healthy view of the greatness of God. If we see the glory, the magnificence, the holiness, the purity, the love and justice of God.

If we have this big view and broad view of how great our God is. Then anything that is against him is amplified. If we see God as only being relevant on a Sunday.

Or if we view God as a dispenser of good things. Then we will think little of sin and that is a dangerous path to be on. Robert Murray McShane, a minister from many years ago said this.

Remember my beloved friends. That if you are ever relaxing in holiness. The reason is you are relaxing your hold on Christ. If you are ever relaxing in holiness.

[25 : 24] The reason is you are relaxing your hold on Christ. The Bible and the book of Joel encourages us to lift up our eyes. And see the splendor and majesty of God.

The strength and faithfulness of the God who flung the stars into space. Who created this world with his words. Who created mankind from dust. And the God who is faithful to his promises.

If we have this big view of God. Then our view of sin will be serious. We will see the sheer destruction that sin can bring.

But the great news is that this God is not only big and mighty. But he is close and personal. For God to be a just judge then sin must be punished.

But instead of punishing humanity. Even though we deserve it. He sent his son Jesus to take the punishment that we deserve. So that all who call on his name. And believe in him.

[26 : 25] Are declared free from the punishment of sin. God isn't saying return and repent and I'll make all your problems go away. But God is saying return and repent.

Because I am the only one who can take away your sin and the punishment that it deserves. This is the loving God that we gather before this morning.

This is the God that we serve and worship together. This is the God who is calling us even now to return to him and repent. Take sin seriously.

See the devastation that it causes. See the path of destruction that it leaves in its wake. Let's look at our lives and challenge ourselves to see if we have become comfortable with sin.

And fall on our knees and repent. And cry out to God in repentance. But also remember that if you are a Christian you depend on the one who has already paid the price.

[27 : 27] You depend on Jesus Christ. If you are not a Christian then maybe you have never come to Jesus before. Take this time this morning to hear the message of Joel.

Hear the call that still resounds from God's word. Return and repent. God is waiting to gather his people. God is willing to forgive the greatest of sinners.

Will you return and will you repent? That's what Joel is saying. Let's pray together. In the silence just over these next minute or so.

If there's anything that's been said this morning. If you have any questions or you want to speak to somebody. Then anyone you've seen up front grab them afterwards and let someone pray with you.

I'll be standing at the door if you want to talk about anything. But just in a moment of silence. Think about your spiritual state before the Lord this morning. Lord we come before you as a people who know our sinful hearts.

[28 : 53] And Lord we want to wake up and we want to weep at our sin. Lord we thank you that we can come back to you. We can return.

We can repent of our sins and know that you will take us back because you are a loving faithful God. Father we thank you so much for your son Jesus who paid the price for our sins.

And Lord we thank you that it is only through him that we can be saved. Lord we bless you this morning and we give you all the glory in Jesus name.

Amen.