Rend Your Heart

Joel 1:1-2:17

Key Verse: 2:13 “Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”

The book of Joel is known as a compact version of four major prophecies. The four major prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Zechariah share the same pattern of God’s plan for his people Israel: 1. God’s impending judgment against Israel and its neighboring nations. 2: God’s promise to restore Israel. The book of Joel follows this pattern: Warning of God’s judgment and promise of restoration. The Prophet Joel is known as the son of Pethuel. He is believed to live in Judah in the period of King Uzziah. Like other contemporary prophets Joel’s message holds God’s broken shepherd heart for his people Israel and reveals his hope for their repentance.

In today’s passage we learn three things: 1. What is God’s judgment against Israel and why? 2. How do we have to respond to calamity? 3. How can we see this pandemic with the viewpoint of Joel?

First, the invasion of locusts (1:1-12, 2:1-11) . People say that we live in the era of the pandemic. We call this pandemic crisis, “an unprecedented phenomenon, which means we have never experienced it before in our generation. Today all people wear masks. Wearing a mask is mandatory, and it became a part of our lives. The prophet Joel warns that the invasion of locusts is also unprecedented for his people and their children and children after their children. Look at verses 1-3. “***The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel. Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in that land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.***” Elderly people have been vulnerable to COVID-19. In fact, many old people around the world died of this virus. These days, the Delta-variant attacks young people, even young children. Now there is no exception for this virus. In the same way Joel warns that God’s judgment will reach all who live in Israel, regardless of their age, gender, and social position.

What is God's impending judgment? It is an invasion of locusts. The invasion of locusts is written in 1:4-12 and 2:1-11. Look at verse 4. “***What the locusts swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.***” When I was young, I caught some locusts in the grain field and put them in a bottle. My mother fried them and we enjoyed the protein. But this is not the case. The swarm of locusts, millions over millions of locusts blown by the wind, attacks fields and eats everything green whether they are trees or plants. The place where the swarm of locusts passes, nothing is left. They eat whatever is edible in the field. This plague of locusts is written in the book of Exodus 10. God sent the swarm of locusts to King Pharaoh and Egypt as the sixth punishment. Exodus 10:15 illustrates in this, “*They (locusts) covered all the ground until it was black. They devoured all that was left after the hail—everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egyp*t.” (Ex 10:15)

Joel describes the swarm of locusts as a nation or a mighty army in verse 6. “***A nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness***.” Some Bible scholars say that this nation and mighty army indicates the Assyrian army who would invade Israel later, but we interpret this as a literal swarm of locusts. These locusts have the teeth of a lion and the fangs of a lioness, which means they destroy everything in the field. So, what will happen to the people in Israel? Drunkards have to weep and wail. Look at verse 5. “***Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips.***” Drunkards will weep and wail because they have no more wine to drink. There is no grape or vineyard which produces wine because locusts ate them all up (7-8). “***It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees.***..” They have no joy in life. Here drunkards indicate all pleasure-seeking people. Today because of COVID-19 many people, especially pleasure-seeking people, weep and cry. Many drinking bars, night-clubs, and casinos are closed. It was not long ago when they reopened. Because of the pandemic many public places and stores are closed such as movie-theaters, concert halls, sports stadiums, resort places, cruise ships, and so on.

The invasion of locusts affects priests in the temple, too. Priests offer to God with offerings which people bring to them. But, verse 10 says that the fields are ruined and the ground is dried up, so people cannot harvest crops or grain for their offerings. Look at verse 9. “***Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the LORD.”***  Since COVID-19 started, people could not go to their church. Many churches were closed and their in-person service and meetings were restricted. Offering for church and ministry became remarkably reduced. Several mega churches in S. Korea urged the government to reopen their church for in-person worship service. In fact, most churches depend on their members’ offering and donation for their fiscal revenue. This pandemic is the time for priests and pastors to mourn and cry out to God.

Look at verses 11-12. “***Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree—all the trees of the field—are dried up. Surely the people’s joy is withered away***.” The locusts’ invasion strikes hard farmers the hardest. The locusts destroyed fields and ruined all green plants and trees. Farmers are frustrated by the devastating ruin caused by the locusts. This happened the same today because of COVID-19. Because of this deadly virus, most stores are closed. All the public places and office buildings are closed, too. People have to work at home, and students study at home. People are afraid of traveling. As a result, many people lost their jobs, and unemployment rates rose sky high. The government sent stimulus checks and unemployment benefits to each house, business, and companies. Many self-employment stores and small businesses are closed or bankrupt because they couldn’t find workers. Some gain benefits from the shortage of workers, still most suffer financially because of the result of this pandemic. As verse 12 says, “*Surely the people’s joy is withered away.”* What should we do in this situation? What should the people of God do in the midst of disastrous calamity?

Second, rend your heart and return to the LORD your God. (13-20, 2:12-17) They should repent and turn to God. We should repent and turn to the Lord. Above all, priests, pastors, and all religious leaders should repent first. Look at verse 13. “***Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minster before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God***.” Here, putting on sackcloth and ashes is the expression of extreme sorrow and repentance. In the book of Esther 4:1-4, when Mordecai and the Jews heard that King Xerxes ordered the killing of all Jews scattered around his empire, they tore their clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and wailed loudly and bitterly. (Es 4:1-3) The prophet Joel urged priests to repent with tears. Priests, then, must call for national prayer of repentance. Look at verse 14. “***Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.***” Last year after the pandemic emergency was proclaimed, Christian leaders in the US called all Christians to join the National Day of Prayer and to pray for God’s mercy on this pandemic. So, we prayed for God’s mercy and forgiveness of sin based on 2 Chronicles 7:14 which says, “*if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land*.”

Look at verse 15. “***Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.***” According to the prophet Joel, this dreadful calamity comes from God the Almighty. In fact, Israel sinned against God. They abandoned God and disobeyed him. Their sin brought the swarm of locusts. During our lifetime suffering and calamity do not always come from the LORD. I tell you the five routes of calamity and suffering in our lives: First, they come from our own sins, second, from other’s sins, third, from nature, fourth, from the devil, and fifth, from God. Most sufferings come from the result of our own sin. Adam suffered guilt and shame after he committed sin before God. The Israelites suffer from the invasion of locusts because they sinned against God. People pay the price of their own sin. David suffered because of King Saul’s jealousy and hatred. Saul tried to kill David, and David fled away from him. Later because of David's sin, 70,000 people of Israel died. (2 Sa 24:15) Today we suffer much because of the virus which was caused by selfish and ignorant people. We also suffer from nature. We call this ‘natural disaster’ such as earthquake, flood, hurricane, tornado, and so on. Job suffered from the devil’s scheme. Today many people suffer from mental illness because of demon-possession.

We often suffer when God disciplines us. This is godly suffering which is good for our relationship with God. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:10, “*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*” All sufferings and calamities, from whatever reason and source, are in God’s control. The Bible says that God enables us to overcome all sufferings. It is possible when we believe that all situations are in God’s control, and in all things God works for good for those who love him. (Ro 8:28) Therefore, instead of blaming others, we must trust in God, accept his sovereignty, and find a solution from God and in God.

What does God want his people to do in this calamity? Look at verses 12-13. “***Even now,” declares the LORD, “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart 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.***” God wants his people to return to him. As a prodigal son comes back to his father, God wants us to come back to him. ‘Rend your heart’ means ‘tear your heart apart.’ When Mordecai heard the bad news against his people, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth and ashes, went out wailing loudly and bitterly. Rend your heart means grieve over your sin and repent until your heart is broken. In Psalm 51:17 David says, “*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, you, God, will not despise.*”

Today we face an unprecedented pandemic calamity. What does God want us to do? Political leaders blame each other. America blames China and China blames America. The Republicans blame the Democrats, and the Democrats blame the Republic. We should not do so. We must rend our hearts and turn to God. As Paul said, we must circumcise our hearts and stop sinning against God. Who knows that God may relent and stop spreading the virus? Who knows that overnight the virus suddenly may disappear from this earth? Our God is gracious and compassionate. He is slow to anger and abounding in love. He relents from sending calamity.

Chapter 2:1-11 repeats the picture of the army of locust. These verses show how the locusts move like a well-trained army and attack their target. But God’s people are not afraid because we believe that all things are in God’s control. Our God is the sovereign LORD who made locusts and who directs them. What really matters is our attitude toward calamity. When calamity comes, from whatever reason or source, we must turn to God. We must find an answer and solution from God and in God. 20 years ago today, America was attacked by terrorists. The president of the US called all Americans to pray. Many people returned to their churches. Many young people joined the army to fight against our enemies. We repented our empty pride and selfishness through 9/11. We rendered our hearts and returned to the LORD. God may want us to do it again through this pandemic. In chapter 2 God asks them to blow the trumpet two times: 1 & 15. “***Blow the trumpet in Zion.***” In the Bible trumpet sound is the signal of march or war. But, the first trumpet sound in 2:1 is the wake-up call for coming judgment. (1) It is the signal of a coming danger. The second trumpet sound is for a national call for fasting prayer. It is a call for repentance. (15) Let us blow the trumpet in this land. Let us blow the trumpet for God’s judgment and for our repentance prayer. Who knows if God may relent in sending this pandemic? Who knows that God will take away tonight? May God heal this land and make America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation again! Amen!