

The first part of the book of Joel tells a grim tale that reads like a horror movie. The prophet describes an infestation of locusts. Can you imagine having a swarm of locusts descending upon your home? There are portions of Africa that don't have to imagine; it is happening right now in Kenya. A biologist for Penn State University working with the United Nations says the damage caused by the insects could be the worst in 70 years. In his prophecy, Joel talks about a literal swarm of locusts, and he also uses the swarm as a metaphor for an invading army. Israel knew a lot about invading armies swooping in from the North. The Assyrians and the Babylonians had historically taken turns devastating them.

But here's Joel, standing in Jerusalem. The temple has been rebuilt, the people have been restored after exile; this should be a happy ending, and yet, there is still something wrong. The world is still filled with war and famine and destruction.

Have you ever felt like Joel?

Do you ever look around and think, what is going on? Why is the world such a mess?

There's a word for this kind of thinking. It's called longing. We ask these questions because, deep down inside, we know it shouldn't be this way. We long for something more, something better. We long for a perfect home. What if you're not the only one?

Look at verse 12 again. God says, “Return to me.” Do you sense the longing in God's voice? Down in verse 13, God says return because I am compassionate, slow to anger, relenting from punishment. That word “relenting” means to change one's mind.

Here is an incredibly important truth about the heart of God. God does not want to punish people. God does not find pleasure in people's pain and suffering. God is not a violent judge who is just waiting for people to mess up. God is a loving parent whose heart breaks when God's children turn away and hurt each other. God cries out, “Return to me.”

What does it take, then, to return to God? Look what it says. “Return to me with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments.” That is what repentance looks like. I'm always struck by that phrase, “rend your hearts and not your garments.” God is saying, skip the outward signs. Don't bother tearing your clothing if you haven't torn open your heart to me. Returning to God begins with an inner reality of being broken; admitting wrong. It's being utterly humbled by the enormity of my sin problem, and the realization that I can't fix it. I cannot make the changes needed to prevent the destruction of my soul. But I can return and come home to the One who is able. God longs for me; God longs for you; God longs for His people to return to Him in just this way, with hearts torn open, because it is then that He can pour His solution into us.

Listen to God calling through the prophet Joel today. Return to the Lord. Some of us turn away out of shame, thinking God can't love me. Some of us turn away out of pride and defiance thinking, I don't need God. Whatever the case, return. Come back. Come home. God longs for

relationship with you. He is slow to anger—abounding in love—and to prove it, he did change his mind about punishing you for your disobedience and sin, and transferred it to someone else. This is what happened at the cross of Jesus. At the cross, in His suffering and death, Jesus assumed our debt. He paid for it all in a one-time-only sacrifice of blood and brokenness, which completely wipes out the record of your sin. To the person who thinks, I don't need God, I say: you couldn't produce a perfect record like Jesus did. Return. To the person who thinks, God can't love me because I've been so bad, I say: if God didn't love you, He wouldn't have sent his Son to pay the ultimate price for you. Return.

Turn around. Come home.

In a small town in Spain, a man had a bitter argument with his son named Francisco. The next day he discovered that his son's bed was empty. He had run away from home.

Overcome with remorse, the man realized his son meant more than anything to him, so he went to a well-known store at the center of town and posted a sign that said, "Francisco, come home. I love you. Meet me here tomorrow morning. Love, Papa."

The next morning, the man went down to the store and was stunned to discover his son had returned—along with six other boys, also named Francisco, who were each hoping for reconciliation with their own fathers.

This is the offer at the heart of Lent. This is the invitation at the heart of Christianity. "Return to the Lord your God." He longs for reconciliation with you, and He committed Himself to you at Jesus' cross, so that you might long for Him.

As you linger near the cross during this season, open your heart wide to the sacrifice of Jesus, so that the entire direction of your life becomes a return. The world is not yet perfect, but you can be at home in the perfect love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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