

# Discipline To Deliverance

Joel 2: 1-17

We started last week in our study of Joel. This is a very fascinating yet brutal book in places with stories about locusts, vast armies, and God's disciplinary judgment. However, it also paints a picture of hope, blessing and ultimately deliverance.

As I was reading chapter 2 I was reminded of the movie Home Alone. This movie as you know starts off with a lot of inner family drama. Kevin, the youngest in the family, is a bit of a troublemaker and is always getting into it with his siblings. Anyway, the movie starts with the entire family, including an uncle's family, coming together as they are all about to set off on a Christmas adventure the next day. Kevin gets into it with his brother and ends up spilling drinks all over everyone's passports and plane tickets.

His mother takes him upstairs and gets on him and he develops a terrible attitude. She then tells him to go upstairs and think about what he had done. Kevin replies "we are upstairs dummy". He then suddenly changes his tune when he realizes that she means the attic. She tells him you can sleep up there tonight on the pull-out-bed. It is then that his demeanor changes and he says, "I'm sorry mom". To which she replies, "It's too late. Get upstairs".

We often think that when we sin, are struggling, going through some difficulty, or suffering in some way all we have to do is apologize to God and everything will be ok. But let me tell you that sometimes God allows us to go through these things or perhaps even disciplines us because we're not truly sorry for what we have done.

Sometimes we look at these things and think, "If I just ask forgiveness for this sin" or "if I just read my Bible this much" or "if I just go to church this many times" or "if I just donate this amount of money" God will have no choice but to bless me and take me out of this pain and put me into better life circumstances.

It may sound a little ridiculous, and many of us probably wouldn't say those things out loud, but I know I'm not the only one who has had times where we've thought

it, or acted as though that's the way it is. If we think about it, the implication is "I deserve for my life to be great, and if it's not, I need to figure out why it's not so I can solve that problem". When the truth is, our world is broken, and pain, suffering, illness, disease, relational issues—they are all realities of living in a sin-stained world.

Here is the truth of the matter. God will sometime use or allow things to happen in our lives so that we grow, mature, learn, and become more like Jesus. So while it's okay to ask God to help us with or even remove us from situations of suffering or discipline, to apologize, or to be brought to confession, repentance, or positive life-change by those circumstances, that doesn't mean God immediately owes us a supernatural rescue. Especially when we have His word to tell us what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to live and yet we often don't. Just saying your sorry doesn't cut it.

Last week we read about a previous disciplinary judgement that God had brought on his people in the form of a locust plague, and saw Joel's instructions to repent, cry out to God, and rely on him before things get worse. In this chapter we see things about to get worse. Another judgement, another "day of the Lord" is coming. What are the Israelites to do when this is an inevitability?

Where last week we saw multiple short calls to action, followed by descriptions of judgement, this week the description comes first, followed by a brief explanation, and then calls to action. Spoiler alert, this ends with another call to repentance that is similar in some ways. And yet it is different, because it's a different passage that the Holy Spirit directed Joel to write with its own purpose.

Let's dive in .....

*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—*

Once again, we're right into the action, with two imperative statements right off the bat: blow a trumpet and sound the alarm in Zion, Jerusalem! It's a picture of the watchmen on the wall seeing danger in the distance and making that danger

known so everyone in the city can prepare. Sound the alarm! Blow the horn! Ring the bell! Or rather: Pay attention!

**“Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming;”** He is the perfect, divine judge who will bring justice both for his people, but also against his people, because perfect justice doesn’t take sides. The reason that brings fear and trembling is for the same reason we all ought to rightly fear God: we know how perfect and holy he is, and we know how imperfect, flawed, and sinful we are.

*<sup>2</sup> a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. 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.*

This is not going to be a pleasant experience for God’s people. It’s going to be dark, and disorienting. The light won’t be visible. Lest they think this is going to work in their favor, that the day of the Lord means only judgement for their enemies, they’re wrong. It’s doom and gloom.

So already, only 2 verses in, “Pay attention! Fear and tremble! The dark and gloomy day of the Lord is coming! Now don’t that in chapter 1 that Joel cried out to the Lord letting Him know that he had begged them to repent before things got worse. Well, it would seem like if they got the memo at all, it was too little, too late. Because this judgement is coming. It’s inevitable. Inescapable, like a cloud of darkness.

The language here is beautiful and terrible. It’s shocking and descript. From the beginning we can see the picture: imagine looking out to the distance at the mountains at dawn, but instead of sunlight spreading up and over the hills, it’s an army. Waves and waves of soldiers, like nothing ever seen before or ever to be seen again.

*<sup>3</sup> Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste—nothing escapes them.*

Verse three brings a tie-in back to chapter one, with language of fire and desolation, agricultural destruction. The army takes what was once beautiful and flourishing and by the time they have passed through, nothing but devastation is left in their wake. And it's no coincidence to me that Joel refers to the Garden of Eden, which draws our minds back to the beauty of creation, and the destruction brought to it by sin. It points back to the reason for this judgmental invasion in the first place: disobedience. Our sin is not so different from an invading army, taking what was beautiful and leaving nothing but ruin.

*<sup>4</sup> They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. <sup>5</sup> With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. <sup>6</sup> At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. <sup>7</sup> They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. <sup>8</sup> They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defenses without breaking ranks.*

Notice the movement in these verses. From the mountains in the distance to consuming fire, verses four and five picture horses, chariots, mounted combatants running, leaping, rushing forward like an unstoppable flame, preparing for battle. By verse six, the people's trembling has turned to anguish, pale faces reflecting their recognition and acknowledgement of their coming circumstances. Verses seven and eight describe an organized, well-oiled machine of war. Every soldier knows their place, moving ever closer, climbing the wall, breaking through the defenses yet not scattering, not giving in. They are on the very doorstep, bent on destruction.

Then in verse nine, it happens. The invasion.

*<sup>9</sup> They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves they enter through the windows. <sup>10</sup> Before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.*

Notice there isn't even a description of combat, no fighting back. This is a one-sided conquest, not just taking over the public spaces in the city, but into the very

homes of the people, the place where they should be safe. Any comfort and security is gone. The very earth quakes, reminding me of the land mourning in chapter one, and another common occurrence during divine judgement. And calling back to the beginning of the chapter, we see more darkness in verse ten, this time with a description of the night sky, conveying the passing of time from dawn in verse three, through the day and to the evening.

I think what we should see from this is far is that it is calling God's people to pay attention, to fear God, and to rightly acknowledge the inevitability of coming judgement. It's like in the Lord of the Rings, when Gandalf and Pippin are waiting for the evil army of Mordor to attack. Pippin says, "I don't want to be in a battle. But waiting on the edge of one I can't escape is even worse". Or how many of us have faced the classic "we'll figure out your punishment when your father gets home"?

In this section of scripture, the people of God are facing inevitable punishment. Joel still doesn't tell us what that punishment is for, but the people obviously know what they did wrong, even if that detail isn't important to us as readers years later. And in many ways, waiting for an inevitable punishment is part of the punishment in and of itself. It's torture, waiting to see just how bad it's going to be! And rightly so, because it gives you lots of time to think about what you've done, and whether it was worth it.

The thing about God's discipline is that while sometimes it's the invasion, the "climbing through the windows like a thief" that is the wake-up call for us, most times we should've been able to see the army coming if we would've listened to the sounding of the alarm. What I mean is that it's not often we all the sudden just wake up and suddenly we're feeling far from God. We don't just wake up and we're stuck in habitual sin. We don't just wake up and we're convinced by untruths or worldliness.

It might take a "wake up" moment to realize these things, but often times, the writing was on the wall long before that moment of realization. The warning signs were there, the army was spotted on the horizon and the trumpet was blown. But it's easy to feel safe or choose to ignore when the problem seems far off. I'm safe

in my house. We're in a fortified city with a wall, and there are soldiers who will protect me. Then the next thing you know, the enemy is in your bedroom, and the battle is already over.

To me it seems like Joel is saying "you knew this was coming. I warned you about it. You could see it coming on the horizon. What did you do about it?" Which inevitably leaves us all with the questions, "Are there any alarms I'm ignoring right now? And what should I be doing about them?"

*<sup>11</sup> The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?*

This is God's army, conquering on the behest of his word. And that shouldn't come as a huge surprise, even to God's people, because he had used them and their armies for the exact same purposes against other nations before.

I think of the book of Joshua in particular, when the Israelites finally enter the promised land after 40 years wandering in the desert. The wicked enemy nations didn't just get up and leave, they didn't just hand over the land. No, God used his people to bring perfect, divine judgement and justice on the evil nations. And now, because he is perfect, just, and holy, he's having to do something similar against his people.

And that shows us perhaps a little bit of why we don't read of any fighting back. Because as Joel writes, "Who can endure it?" Who can stand against God's will and his plans and purposes. And if not for his mercy and grace, none of us through all of time would stand a chance.

Now, before we move on I think it's important to talk about God's discipline. The intention when reading a passage like this isn't for us to walk away looking at every negative situation in our life and say "this is God punishing or disciplining me". That is to say, we don't want our relationship with the Lord to become more like a karmic reaction: I do something bad and something bad happens to me; I do something good and good happens to me. But the Bible does tell us that God

disciplines his children. The author of Hebrews, discussing living the Christian life and fighting against sin in chapter 12:4-6.

*<sup>4</sup>In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup>And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, <sup>6</sup>because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."*

Sometimes, like a parent, the most loving thing God can do is discipline us for our disobedience, those moments when we stop caring what he wants and seek the desires of our own fallen, sinful hearts. And other times, just knowing that discipline is on the table, the threat of punishment can be enough.

Sometimes I wonder if there would be less moments of ignoring God's desires for us if the threat of a locust plague or an invading army was on our doorstep. If maybe we've pendulumed away from viewing everything as punishment and instead don't recognize discipline at all, even when it's right in front of us, the enemies climbing into the windows of our house. Where we've done exactly as Paul warned about in Romans 6 and begun taking the grace of Christ for granted, not caring about potential consequences or punishments because "Jesus will forgive me anyways".

It's easy for us to read dark, gloomy passages like this and think "that was then, things are different now". But the Holy Spirit inspired Joel to write these words for a reason, for all God's people for all time. So let us never be so arrogant to think we are beyond discipline or beyond punishment, or beyond doing the exact same disobedient things God's people have been doing for millennia. And what God wants from us now is still the same, and we'll see that in the next section of verses.

*<sup>12</sup>"Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." <sup>13</sup>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.*

Where the last chapter had a call to public, corporate repentance (and it's coming again in this one too), here we see the heart of the issue: our hearts. God wants his discipline to lead his people, as individuals, to personal repentance. To turn fully from our sin, returning to our God. But he doesn't just want the actions, it's not just about the external, or what we show the world around us. He wants our inside, our outside, our everything.

When someone hurts you or does something against you, do you want them to *say* they're sorry, or really *mean* they're sorry? Maybe a bit of a trick question, because ideally you want both, right? We all know what it is to receive a half-hearted or disingenuous apology, words with no heart. But there's also times where we can tell that someone is actually sorry through their actions or demeanor, but we still really want to hear the actual words, too.

God wants his people to repent and grieve and do all the things they were supposed to do to demonstrate their regret for their actions: fasting, weeping, mourning, tearing their clothes. But he didn't want it to stop there. To be outside actions only. He wants it to be as though their sin and the consequences of it actually cuts them deep to their core. That it breaks their heart to look back on what they've done and how far they've strayed.

*<sup>14</sup> Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.*

What an interesting verse! It's got this sort of rhetorical statement about God's sovereignty (Who knows? He may turn and relent, stopping this invasion, or maybe he won't.) He's God so it's up to him. He doesn't just immediately owe them mercy just because they repent and mourn, even if it's fully from the heart. If he relents, maybe he'll leave a blessing behind him, that results in proper worship of him, in a way the people haven't been able to do, between the locust plague and the invading army's destruction. It's a statement of agricultural bounty that would not only *allow* the proper offerings to be made but would *demand* it!

Now don't miss the meaning here: maybe God will relent, maybe God will bring blessing; but he wants and deserves their fully repentant heart *even if* he doesn't (like we talked about a few months ago with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. "Our God can save us, but even if he doesn't, we won't disobey him").



As we prepare to read the last few verses of the section today, there's an interesting tone shift here. We started out with alarm, immediate call to attention, followed directly by multiple verses depicting the approaching horror of this military invasion and we're told it's God's army. Then there's a shift and we see calls from God directly, through Joel, to return to him, to repent and cry out to him, to seek the very mercy that is part of his character. This is followed by that rhetorical statement about his mercy, and the sovereignty behind it. "Who knows..." Then verse 15, snap back to attention! There's still work to be done!

*<sup>15</sup> Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. <sup>16</sup> 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.*

Look at all these commands: "Blow the trumpet" (only this time, rather than announcing invaders it's calling to corporate gathering and repentance). "Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly" (an exact quote of the call to repentance in chapter one). "Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the nursing infants. Have the groom come out of his room and the bride out of her bridal chamber." In case there was any confusion: this is for *everyone*. Not just the men, not just the leaders and elders, not just those who are free and available. Everyone. Old to young. Heck, call the newlyweds out of their honeymoon suite because this is important!

God wants the individual hearts, but he also wants the whole community, as his people, to seek after him with repentance publicly, corporately, properly. And once again reminiscent of chapter one, he also calls the priests.

*<sup>17</sup> Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. 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?'"*

He wants the priests to do their job, interceding on behalf of the people, but notice the reason: it's all for God's glory! The priests are to call out for God's mercy so that he might relent, so that the other nations around them won't have opportunity to make a mockery of the Lord. It's not because they deserve it,

because they're owed it, or even because they properly repented. "Save your people so other nations won't say you're powerless to save. So they know what you can do".

All this points us back to why we ought to turn and run from our sin, why God wants us to repent from the heart when we disobey. It's so that we can point to God's mercy and grace, his compassion, all for the sake of his glory.

Romans 6:1 says, *"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"*

Of course not. But when we do sin, we have yet another opportunity to point to the greatness of God, the depths of his love, and the boundlessness of his grace. We need to repent of our sin for the glory of God!

Whether we're being disciplined or not, we need to keep a short account with the Lord, confessing our sin before him, asking for his forgiveness, and giving our heart and our life to him to use as he sees fit. It doesn't mean he owes us easier circumstances or a better life, any more than a criminal is owed freedom due to regretting their actions. But rather it reminds us that we aren't owed anything. We don't deserve forgiveness or mercy, or for God to relent of his punishment and judgement. What we deserve is death.