

## Joel 2:12-14

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*As the prophet announces God's impending judgment on Judah, he calls the people to repentance. He tells them to return to God genuinely because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love and therefore might relent of the impending judgment.*

An invading army and devastating judgment was coming (Joel 2:1-11). It was so certain that it was spoken of in chapter 1 as a past event, indicating that it was inevitable. Even so, Joel urges Judah to repent. The prophet urged the people to react quickly and genuinely. To add more weight to the truth, Joel began quoting the LORD's statements with the phrase, 'Yet even now', but suddenly stopped the quote to add *declares the LORD*.

Adding the parenthetical phrase *declares the LORD* carries much weight in the prophetic books. It is an affirmation that the prophets speak on God's behalf. A prophet is someone who receives a message from God and has the responsibility to deliver that message to God's people. When the prophet Joel said, *declares the LORD*, he added weight and emphasis to his message, indicating that it did not come from him. Instead, the message came from the LORD. Thus, the function of the phrase is twofold: (1) it made clear that Joel's message came from God, Judah's Suzerain or Ruler; and (2) it served to remind Judah that God still loved them and cared for them, despite their unfaithfulness.

After adding *declares the LORD* to the opening statement *Yet even now*, the prophet resumed his speech, admonishing Israel to *Return to Me with all your heart*. Even now, at this late date, the LORD invites the people to hear, believe the message and repent, and avoid the looming judgement. God takes no pleasure in judging His people. But it will be their choice. With this prophecy, God is making the choice clear. The judgment is certain, but repentance might still deliver them.

To *return* to God means to turn from their wicked ways and be devoted to Him, to follow His covenant law. That would include ensuring the powerless receive justice, and the widow and orphan are not exploited (Exodus 23:1-9). It implies a wholehearted turning from an orientation toward exploiting others to a firm resting on and obedience to the covenant promises of God. It is a turning away from the path of sin and self-reliance and a subsequent return to a place of restored fellowship and peace with God, and therefore a restoration practicing loving one's neighbor. That is why the LORD asked His covenant people to *return* to Him with all their *heart*.

Most often the word translated *heart* is used in the Bible to refer to the totality of man's inner nature. For instance, thought functions are often attributed to the heart. As such, it is appropriate for God to ask His people to return to Him with all their hearts, to choose to follow His ways, and believe that God's ways are for our best. Here God is making the consequences clear, but God will not choose for them. God has gifted humans with the amazing stewardship to make the choice of who or what to trust, how to look at things (perspective), and what actions to take. God

admonishes humans to see reality, and make a good choice, a choice that will be for their benefit, rather than a choice that leads to destruction.

Joel asked the people of Judah to *return to God with fasting, weeping, and mourning*. If they choose to see their behavior with new eyes, to see reality truly, the people will realize how twisted and evil things have become. This would lead them to mourn, weep, and fast.

In the biblical context, *fasting* is described as a means of opening oneself to the work of God, expressing grief over sin, and relying on God for all forms of sustenance. This act usually requires abstinence from food and involves prayer and seeking guidance from God. *Weeping and mourning*, on the other hand, are terms associated with funerals. The term *weeping* describes an expression of sorrow, a reaction to the experience of loss. Likewise, the term *mourning* refers to grief over someone's death, which usually requires putting on sackcloth (2 Samuel 3:31). These terms are used here as symbols of humility. They serve as a sign of a critical decision being made. The point is that if God's people would humble themselves before Him and seek His face, He would pardon their sins completely (2 Chronicles 7:14). Judah was invited to choose a new perspective on what was in their true self-interest. Rather than seeing their true self-interest as seeking to exploit others for their own gain, and follow their own desires and appetites, they would see that this was self-destructive, displeasing to God, harmful to others, and harmful to the well-being of the community. This new perspective would cause a change of heart, resulting in genuine repentance.

The prophet proceeded to ask the people of Judah to *rend your heart and not your garments*. To *rend your garments* means to tear them into pieces as a sign of mourning. Since the ancient people used to tear their clothes (garments) into pieces during times of affliction (Jeremiah 4:30; 22:14), Joel used the statement to tell them to repent with their *hearts*, like they would their garments. God was not after a mere external show meant to appease. He wanted a changed heart, which would result in an improved community and improved behavior among the citizens of Judah. In so doing, the prophet reminded them that outward manifestations are worthwhile only when they come from the heart.

Once again, Joel called the people of Judah to *return to the LORD your God*. He reminded them that the LORD was their Suzerain (or ruler) God. As vassals, the people of Judah needed to obey their Suzerain God. They were to turn from sin and genuinely return to Him to receive His forgiveness and experience His blessings. The greatest part of the blessing would likely flow from the improved community, based on the people treating one another with love and respect. The fundamental requirement of God's covenant with Israel was for them to serve and respect one another, to avoid envy and seek the welfare of others (Exodus 20). This however requires the people to choose to walk in this manner.

The reason why the people of Judah could still return to the LORD, even at this late hour when doom was imminent, was that *He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil*. In this prophecy, God is granting Judah the possibility of avoiding the dire consequences of continuing a lifestyle of exploitation. We can see this pattern throughout the Bible. For instance, God spared the pagan nation of Nineveh when they repented. How much more might He spare His own people if they repent? (Jonah 3:10). The Hebrew term

for *gracious* is “hanan.” It describes God as bestowing favor and forgiveness upon someone. It portrays a God who wants to give a second chance to His people to repent. It is a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to someone in need.

Not only is the LORD *gracious*, but He is also *compassionate*; He is full of mercy. The Hebrew term for *compassionate* is “rakham,” and refers to a deep love of one toward another. The term is used in Isa. 49:15 for a mother’s love toward her nursing baby. A mother who gives birth to her child will always love him/her regardless of what happens. Similarly, God is *compassionate* toward His children and wants the best for them. Despite Judah’s unfaithfulness, the LORD still loved them and called them back to His ways.

The LORD is also *slow to anger*. This idiomatic expression means “long of nose.” Someone with a short nose is hot-tempered. Their nostrils flare as their face expresses their anger. In fact, the word for anger and nose are identical in Hebrew, “aph.” Thus, someone with a long nose is long-suffering and patient. Their face is calm, they are not fired up with emotion. The LORD is long of nose because when He takes a long and deep breath, His anger is delayed. The longer God’s nose, the longer He takes to judge His people. Whenever He takes a deep breath, His *lovingkindness* continues.

The word for *lovingkindness* is “hesed” in Hebrew. It can be translated as steadfast love or loyalty. It refers to the LORD’s loyal love and faithfulness to the covenant He established with His people. The prophet told his audience that God’s *lovingkindness* is abounding, meaning that it is plentiful. God is filled with His unending love. Because of the abundance of God’s love, He can still forgive His disobedient people and spare them from calamities. In short, God *is relenting of evil*. The reason for this prophecy was to give the people a clear picture of the devastation that would come upon them if they continued in their sinful ways. If they will return, God might relent.

The word *evil* refers to the calamity that God allows to come upon an individual or a nation. In our passage, it refers to the disaster God was about to bring upon the nation of Judah. Joel made it clear that the LORD could refrain from sending such calamities if the people genuinely returned to Him. This prompted Joel to ask a rhetorical question, *Who knows whether He [God] will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him, even a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?*

The interrogative phrase *who knows?* is a humble way of holding out hope (Jonah 3:9) while making it clear that God will decide. The question implies that nobody knows what God may decide to do since He is God. Although God is always ready to forgive His people, His actions are not dependent upon man’s actions. God is never transactional, where His favor can be purchased. The Mighty Suzerain Ruler can make demands, but cannot be demanded of. God is God, “He does whatever He pleases” (Psalm 115:3b). But because He is merciful and *compassionate*, He may *relent* or change His course of actions. Moses prayed to God and He relented from destroying Israel and starting over with Moses (Deuteronomy 9:14). When people pray, and repent, God may have a change of heart, causing Him to have mercy on His covenant people and *leave a blessing behind Him, even a grain offering and a drink offering*. Therefore,

the recommended course of action is to “give it all you’ve got,” and start repenting as soon as possible.

This provision is consistent with Solomon’s prayer dedicating the temple, where he prayed as follows:

“If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence, if there is blight or mildew, if there is locust or grasshopper, if their enemies besiege them in the land of their cities, whatever plague or whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer or supplication is made by any man or by all Your people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own pain, and spreading his hands toward this house, then hear from heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and render to each according to all his ways, whose heart You know for You alone know the hearts of the sons of men, that they may fear You, to walk in Your ways as long as they live in the land which You have given to our fathers.”

(2 Chronicles 6:28-31)

Joel suggests that perhaps God would answer Solomon’s prayer through a changed heart and acts in keeping with repentance.

The *grain offering* [“minhāh” in Hebrew] Joel recommended for the people to offer was a gift of wheat or barley that a worshiper offered to the Suzerain God to show his gratitude and dedication to Him. This could be part of an act of repentance that would cause God to relent from His judgement. Joel is telling Israel that it is certainly worth a try. The *grain offering* would be “of fine flour,” without any yeast in it (Leviticus 2:1, 11). The worshiper was required to “pour oil on it and put frankincense on it” (Leviticus 2:4, 13). Only a portion was burned on the altar; the rest was to be kept by the priests, who ate it “in a holy place” (Leviticus 6:16; 10:12–13).

Drink offerings usually accompanied animal sacrifices (Exodus 29:38–46). According to the book of Numbers, “one-fourth of a hin,” approximately one gallon, of wine, was to be poured out into the altar fire for each sacrifice (Numbers 15:4–5). God had already made clear the key thing in sacrifices was the heart. This recommendation to take certain actions such as fasting and making offerings recognizes an observable reality for humans, that if one desires to change their heart, one of the best things to do is to take a corresponding action. By an exercise of the will in taking actions, such as sacrificing possessions in offerings, or setting aside appetites in order to pray, such actions lead to changes in attitude and perspective (heart).

In ancient Israel and Judah, agricultural prosperity was a sign of God’s blessings. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses encouraged the Israelites to obey the LORD and said to them: “The LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you” (Deuteronomy 28:11). Thus, the *grain offering* and the *drink offering* would represent an attitude of acknowledgment that the offerer recognized that all abundance was a blessing from God. Joel recommends these actions as a means to a changed heart, in hopes that God would relent from Judah’s impending doom, hoping for a reversal of the curse or judgment that God intended to send upon His covenant people, in order to bring them to repentance.

## **Biblical Text**

<sup>12</sup> “Yet even now,” declares the Lord,  
“Return to Me with all your heart,  
And with fasting, weeping and mourning;  
<sup>13</sup> And rend your heart and not your garments.”

Now return to the Lord your God,  
For He is gracious and compassionate,  
Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness  
And relenting of evil.

<sup>14</sup> Who knows whether He will *not* turn and relent  
And leave a blessing behind Him,  
*Even* a grain offering and a drink offering  
For the Lord your God?