



Have you heard about *Pocket God*? It's one of the top-selling video games for the iPhone. Here's the game description on iTunes: "What kind of god would you be? Benevolent or vengeful? Play *Pocket God* and discover the answer within yourself. On a remote island, you're the all-powerful god that rules over the primitive islanders. You can bring new life, and then take it away just as quickly. Exercise your powers on the islanders. Lift them in the air, alter gravity, hit them with lightning...you're the island god!"

That's not all you can do. You can throw islanders into volcanoes, use them as shark bait. You can bowl for islanders with a large rock, or create earthquakes to destroy their villages. You gotta wonder what the designers of this game think about God! They seem to think not only is he powerful but he's really mad.

I wonder, if you were to design a game like that, what kind of god would you create? What kind of things would he be able to do?

I think these were the kinds of questions the prophet Joel was considering. We don't know much about Joel. His name means "Jehovah is God." We know nothing about his father except his name—Pethuel. As you read the book of Joel, it's clear he was mainly concerned with the southern kingdom of Judah and especially what happened in Jerusalem. No one really knows for sure even when Joel lived. Most conservative scholars give a date before one of the two exiles, but others say it was written much later. These are questions scholars like to debate, but they don't really effect the message Joel was trying to get across.

Joel's prophecy points to the Day of the Lord.

Joel's message had immediate relevance for the people of his own day, but it has profound relevance for today as well. The theme of Joel's prophecy is the Day of the Lord. That phrase is found five times in this book. It's a phrase that occurs often in the Prophets. One very fine New Testament scholar has defined the Day of the Lord as "any day God steps into history to do a special work, whether of judgment or deliverance." But there's also one great day, a day fixed by God, and known only to God, when He'll step into history and the whole world will be held accountable.

The locust plague

This had immediate relevance for the people of Joel's day. In his day, or any day for that matter, one of the worst things that could happen was a plague of locusts. This is exactly what Joel records in chapter 1. "*Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live*

in the 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. What the locust 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" (verses 2–4). That's devastation, especially for a nation dependent on its ability to grow crops.

In 1915 a plague of locusts covered Palestine and Syria. The first swarms appeared in March and didn't leave until October. It started with adult locusts which moved in clouds so thick they blocked the sun. The females were almost 3 inches long. They laid eggs by digging holes four inches deep, depositing about 100 eggs in each hole. Close to 75,000 eggs were left in one square meter of soil. Within a few weeks, the young locusts hatched, looking like large ants. They had no wings and began hopping around like fleas, eating everything in sight. In December of that year *National Geographic* reported how they entered vineyards and in a short time left nothing but bare bark. The adults stripped olive trees, cactus plants and palms of every leaf, berry and they even ate the bark. The food supply was almost completely depleted. Some people viewed the locusts as a punishment from God so they called for prayer.

That's how Joel viewed it as well. He calls various groups to mourn and cry out to God. We already saw in v. 2 how he called on the elders to listen. Then in v. 5 he says "*Wake up you drunkards and weep!*" Hey, all the vines were being devoured so they'd have nothing more to drink. In v. 10 he says, "*Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers...*" And finally in v. 13 he calls to the religious leaders, "*Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar... Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly.*" Joel took this so seriously he called on the spiritual leaders to gather the people for prayer and fasting.

Joel clearly saw God's hand of judgment behind this plague. In 2:25 God talks about the great army of locusts "*that I sent among you.*" That has got to make you think. In the last 10 years or so our world has seen an unusual amount of natural disasters—earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, heat waves, drought, etc. Were these were sent by God as an act of judgment? I don't know the answer to that. I know God is sovereign. At the very least He allows these things and even uses them. But I also know there are times He does send these disasters as a kind of wake up

call. In Amos 4:9 God says, *“Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me...”*

Invasion from the north

But Joel saw this locust plague as a sort of foretaste or warning of another judgment to come on God's people. In chapter 2 the locust invasion is seen as a symbol of a real army that would soon descend on Judah. He starts out and says, *“Blow a trumpet in Zion”* because *“a day of darkness and gloom”* is close at hand. He goes on, *“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”* (v. 2). Who is this army? Depending on when Joel wrote, it could have been the Assyrians, or if he wrote a bit later it could have been the Babylonians. Both invaded God's people and took them captive. Whoever it was, once again he God saw as the One who brought them.

In v. 11 he says, *“The LORD thunders at the head of his army.”* Believe me, this would have been rather shocking to God's people: “Aren't we the ones he's supposed to save? Aren't we the good guys? Why is he coming against us?” But God's people had wandered away from Him. Down in 2:27 he says something very revealing. When the Day of the Lord comes, God says, *“Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other...”* You see, that's what they'd forgotten. They'd broken the first commandment: “you shall have no other gods before me.”

The Great Day of the Lord

Joel sees the coming invasion of a foreign army as the Day of the Lord. But he also looked further into the future and saw the Great Day of the Lord when God would come in judgment and deliverance a final time. In chapter 3 he speaks of this day at the end of history. *“Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness! Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the heavens will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel”* (verses 12–16).

For those who make God their refuge this is a day of deliverance, but for others it's a day of reckoning. This climactic day at the end of history is mentioned many times in the New Testament. Jesus talked about it. So did Paul. Peter wrote, *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and*

everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”

That's the question we have to ask ourselves. In light of all this, what kind of people ought we to be? As we look forward to that day, are we living holy and godly lives? It's not enough to just think, “Oh, I'm a Christian. I accepted Jesus. I got baptized. I go to church a couple times a month. I like to have my fun, but nobody's perfect. I drop a little money in the basket when it comes by.” I think deep down many of us know we aren't really that serious about living holy and godly lives. How many of us can really say we have no other gods before Him? In those quiet moments of solitude our conscience nags us about this or that, but we put it off. And deep down we know there will be reckoning.

Doug Mendenhall wrote a parable about this that I thought I'd share with you:

Jesus called the other day to say he was passing through and wondered if he could spend a day or two with us.

I said, “Sure. Love to see you. When will you hit town?”

I mean, it's Jesus, you know, and it's not every day you get the chance to visit with him. It's not like it's your in-laws and you have to stop and decide whether the advantages outweigh your having to move to the sleeper sofa.

That's when Jesus told me he was actually at a convenience store out by the interstate.

I must have gotten that Bambi-in-headlights look, because my wife hissed, “What is it? What's wrong? Who is that?”

So I covered the receiver and told her Jesus was going to arrive in eight minutes, and she ran out of the room and started giving guidance to the kids—in that effective way that Marine drill instructors give guidance to recruits. ...

My mind was already racing with what needed to be done in the next eight—no seven—minutes so Jesus wouldn't think we were reprobate loser slobs.

I turned off the TV in the den, which was blaring some weird scary movie I'd been half watching. But I could still hear screams from our bedroom, so I turned off the reality show it was tuned to. Plus, I turned off the kids' set out on the sun porch, because I didn't want to have to explain *Jon & Kate Plus Eight* to Jesus, either, six minutes from now.

My wife had already thinned out the magazines that had been accumulating on the coffee table. She put *Christianity Today* on top for a good first impression. Five minutes to go.

I looked out the front window, but the yard actually looked great thanks to my long, hard work, so I let it go. What could I improve in four minutes anyway?

I did notice the mail had come, so I ran out to grab it. Mostly it was Netflix envelopes and a bunch of catalogs tied into recent purchases, so I stuffed it back in the box. Jesus doesn't need to get the wrong idea—three minutes from now—about how much on-line shopping we do.

I ran back in and picked up a bunch of shoes left by the door. Tried to stuff them in the front closet, but it was overflowing with heavy coats and work coats and snow coats and pretty coats and raincoats and extra coats. We live in the South; why'd we buy so many coats? I squeezed the shoes in with two minutes to go.

I plumped up sofa pillows, my wife tossed dishes into the sink, I scolded the kids, and she shooed the dog. With one minute left I realized something important: Getting ready for a visit from Jesus is not an eight-minute job.

Then the doorbell rang.

The Day of The Lord is the day the doorbell rings. For some of us, this is frightening. We've not been the kind of people we ought to be. We know that. So what do we do now? Where do we go?

In light of the coming Day of the Lord, return to God.

Fortunately, Joel tells us; he answers this question for us. The answer is found in the middle of the book. When the ancient Hebrews wrote, they wrote differently than we do. They'd place the crucial point not at the beginning or at the end, but in the middle. Listen to what Joel wrote in the middle of his book. *“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. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God”* (Joel 2:12–14).

God says, “Here's what I want you to do. It's very simple. I want you to return to me.” The very fact He uses that word “return” tells us at some point along the way we've left Him. It might have been a sharp left turn. I talked to a woman this week who told me that turn took place at a Christian college, where the level of hypocrisy turned her off from the Christian faith and sent her in the other direction. Or, perhaps more likely, for you it was a gradual kind of wandering off. Nothing too dramatic; just a subtle drift; an almost imperceptible shift in priorities, habits, associations, even language. God says, “I know. I know where you are and I'm inviting you back: Return to me. Not to religion. Not to trying to be good. Not even to church. Return to **me!**”

Sometimes we wonder if it's too late. We see all the water that's run under the bridge, all the damage that's been done, and we say, “It's too late. I can't change anything now. The damage is done.” But notice how Joel begins, “Even now...” he says. Even

now...even after all you've done. Even now after all these years of wasted opportunities. Even after you've ignored my word. Even after you've run so far away from me you think there's no way back. God says, “Even now...” It's never too late.

But He makes it very clear; He wants your heart: “Return to me with all your heart.” We talk about doing things “halfheartedly.” We talk about “going through the motions.” We watch someone do something just because they're forced to; something they don't want to do, and we say “His heart's not in it.” God says, “Check your heart. I want your heart in this.”

What does that mean? Maybe v. 13 is a clue, *“Rend your heart and not your garments.”* Back then when you wanted to show sorrow and grief, you would tear or rend your clothes. God says, “Save your clothes. But tear your heart.” God wants hearts broken over sin. Psalm 51 tells us *“the sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart.”* James Boice says true repentance involves confession of specific sins. We like to be very general about our sin, but until we're willing to confess our sin specifically, we're not really repenting. It also includes contrition, which is genuine sorrow. And, finally, conversion, which is a real change, is an about-face. When your heart is broken that will show up in outward ways. That's why he adds *“with fasting and weeping and mourning.”* Later in verses 15ff he tells the priests to gather the people, both young and old, together for prayer and fasting. This is inward sorrow that leads to outward acts.

It would be easy for someone to think, “Well, I can't do that. You don't know what I've done. You don't know who you're talking to.” But Joel knows all about that and so he tells us why we should do this. He places a kind of incentive before us so we have no excuse. He says, *“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”* Four attributes of God roll off his tongue, all pointing to the immensity of His love and grace. For some reason this kind of God doesn't sell as well on iTunes but this is who He is.

Many of you have heard of C.S. Lewis. He was an Oxford professor at Magdalen college who didn't become a Christian until later in life. He tells of his conversion in his book, *Surprised by Joy:*

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him of whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling,

resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men; His compassion is our liberation."

Do you see his point? If God welcomes those who come kicking and screaming, how much more will He welcome us who come like the Prodigal Son, on our own feet?

What kind of God is this? He's a God powerful and just enough to triumph over all evil, but He's also a God who is gracious enough to welcome and restore every repentant sinner.

Listen to what Joel says next in v. 14, "*Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God.*" We have a hard time understanding how a sovereign God could relent or change His mind. I don't completely get it. I know God's character never changes, but He can change His mind. God said, "I'm going to level you guys!" Joel says, "If you return to God, he may change his mind about that. Who knows? He might even bless you instead of level you."

Here is the good news: He **will** leave behind a blessing! In the rest of the chapter Joel describes all the blessings, both of a material and a spiritual nature. But it's all summed up in one wonderful sentence. Look down at verses 25–26. "*I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten— the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed.*"

I want to just focus on one line: "*I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten...*" What's He saying? God certainly doesn't owe us anything. He doesn't need to pay us back for anything He's done wrong. But can it be that He repays what He doesn't owe? He's saying, "You know all of those lost years, all the time you wasted? I love you so much I'm going to make up for all of that. I'm going to bless you far beyond whatever you might have lost." Mind you, locusts eat a lot. And it can go on for quite some time. It's the "years" the locusts have eaten, not the "days" or "weeks." But God says if you return to me with a broken heart I'll restore all that you've lost because of your sin. I'll provide a restoration you can hardly imagine.

I can think of several examples. I think of Job. He lost everything, including his family, but Scripture says, "*The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first*" (Job 42:12). I think of Joseph. He must have felt all those years in Potipher's house and then in prison were wasted, but God more than made up for it. But those are good guys, you say. Well, what about the prodigal son? He grabs his inheritance and runs off. We don't know how many years he wasted out there on loose living, but when he returned his father ran out to meet him, brought him the best robe, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet and said, "*Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's...celebrate*" (Lk 15:23).

Maybe you were married for 20 years and you spent those years struggling to make your marriage work. You look back now and you realize how selfish you were. You'd love to have those years back. If you could do it over again you'd treat her better. But you can't get them back. The marriage is over and it just all feels like such a waste. God says, "Return to me and I'll bless you far beyond anything you lost."

Maybe you raised kids and now they're young adults off doing their own thing. You look back over the 20 years you raised them. There is a lot you'd do differently now. You'd like to have those years back. You'd tell them you loved them more. You'd spend more time praying for them or with them. You'd take them fishing instead of working the weekends. Those are years it seems the locusts have eaten and you can't get them back. But God is gracious. He says, "Return to me and I'll make you forget all of that. I'll bless you and restore you beyond what you've lost."

Conclusion

What kind of God is this? He's a God powerful and just enough to triumph over all evil, but He's also a God who is gracious enough to welcome and restore every repentant sinner. The Day of the Lord will come someday for each and every one of us. We'll stand before Him and our hearts will be laid bare. But we have a choice **now** about whether that will be for us a day of loss or a day of victory. "*Even now...Return to me with all your heart.*"

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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