

March 26
Lesson 4

RESTORING LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: 2 Peter 3:1-10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Joel 2

JOEL 2:12, 13, 18, 19, 28-32

¹² “Even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

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,
and he relents from sending calamity.

¹⁸ Then the LORD was jealous for his land
and took pity on his people.

¹⁹ The LORD replied to them:

“I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil,
enough to satisfy you fully;
never again will I make you
an object of scorn to the nations.”

²⁸ “And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.

²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

³⁰ I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

³¹ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

³² And everyone who calls
on the name of the LORD will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance,
as the LORD has said,
even among the survivors

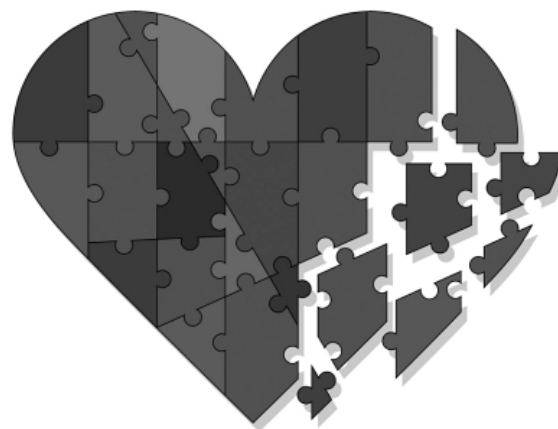


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whom the LORD calls.”

KEY VERSE

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.—Joel 2:13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the two places where portions of the lesson text are quoted in the New Testament.
2. Explain the difference between false repentance and true repentance.
3. Identify modern ways that people rend garments rather than hearts, and make a plan to avoid this hypocrisy.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Culture of Defiant Unrepentance
- B. Lesson Background

I. Repentance (Joel 2:12, 13)

- A. Turning to the Lord (v. 12)
- B. Tearing the Heart (v. 13)

II. Rebuilding (Joel 2:18, 19)

- A. Jealousy and Pity (v. 18)
Jealous God, Zealous God
- B. Provision and Honor (v. 19)

III. Revelation (Joel 2:28-32)

- A. Receiving the Spirit (vv. 28, 29)
It's for Everyone
- B. Seeing Wonders (vv. 30, 31)
- C. Claiming Salvation (v. 32)

Conclusion

- A. Locusts of Life
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Culture of Defiant Unrepentance

Deal with it. This seems to be the cry of many public figures whose lives fall far short of biblical standards. Caught committing adultery? Misusing public funds? Plagiarizing material? Just hire a public relations “spin doctor” to justify or explain away the behavior!

Moral and ethical failures happen so often that we are no longer shocked or even surprised. If anything does surprise us, it's a forthright admission of guilt that is accompanied by genuine repentance. Instead, we have come to expect excuses, finger pointing, etc. We live in a culture that is increasingly indifferent to accountability for misdeeds; it is a culture of defiant unrepentance. We are dismissed as “being judgmental” when we voice expectations for accountability and consequences. Culture wants us just to *deal with it*.

We see such an outlook in ancient times as well. But when people thought they could live above accountability, the Old Testament prophets responded to brazen sin in a most judgmental way: *repent or die!* The judgment of wrongdoing and consequences was not that of the human prophet, however; it was the judgment of Almighty God.

But how does God distinguish true repentance from false? The prophet Joel had God's answer to that question.

B. Lesson Background

The last 12 of the Old Testament's 39 books are known collectively as the Minor Prophets. The book of Joel is one of these. The word *minor* refers to the lengths of these books, not to their contents. The importance of the latter is seen in the 30 quotations from them that appear in the New Testament. The book of Joel is one of the eight Minor Prophets so quoted.

The name Joel means "the Lord is God." We don't know much about this man or when the book was written. Traditionally, the book is dated as early as 837 BC, making Joel a contemporary of King Joash ([2 Chronicles 24](#)). Joel's references to enemies are identified more readily with an earlier historical context (see [Joel 3:4](#)). Another viewpoint proposes a date several centuries later, partially because of reference to "Greeks" in [Joel 3:6](#). The theory is that Joel would not have mentioned the Greek people until they had become internationally prominent.

The backdrop for the book is a cataclysmic locust infestation that had descended on Jerusalem and the surrounding area (see [Joel 1:2-4](#)). Locusts are voracious, grasshopper-like insects that multiply rapidly and swarm. The descent of a swarm on a small area may result in utter destruction of crops, trees, and other vegetation ([1:7](#), [10](#)). Such devastation could lead to famine, with starvation taking a great toll on both humans and animals. God used locusts as instruments of divine judgment on occasion (examples: [Exodus 10:3-15](#); [Psalms 78:46](#); [105:34](#); compare [Revelation 9:3, 4](#)).

For his part, the prophet Joel connected his horrific description of the locust plague by declaring the nearness of "the day of the Lord" ([Joel 1:15](#); [2:1](#)) and this challenge: "The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?" ([2:11](#)). The question was a warning with an obvious answer: no one can withstand that day. It is futile to resist the judgmental wrath of God. But there was another option.

I. Repentance

([JOEL 2:12, 13](#))

A. Turning to the Lord (v. 12)

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

The alternative to experiencing the judgment of "the day of the Lord" ([Joel 2:11](#)) is repentance. Repentance involves turning away from sin while turning back to *the Lord*.

But words and actions of repentance must match (compare [Jeremiah 12:2](#)), so the prophet goes on to list three characteristics of genuine repentance. *Fasting* is self-denial that indicates spiritual submission. *Weeping* indicates distress; it is a natural companion of *mourning*, a sign of profound grief (compare [Esther 4:3](#)). These are the basics of repentance for people reorienting their lives from sin to God.

What Do You Think?

What should be the when, where, why, and how of fasting for Christians?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering positive biblical examples ([Matthew 6:17, 18](#); [Acts 13:2, 3](#); [14:23](#); etc.)

Considering negative biblical examples ([Zechariah 7:5, 6](#); [Matthew 6:16](#); [Luke 18:12](#); etc.)

B. Tearing the Heart (v. 13)

^{13a}. **Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the LORD your God,**

Repentance is not a simple apology or an "I'm sorry" statement. It is a change of *heart*, a spiritual decision to reverse course. This change is based on recognizing that one's earlier decisions were wrong, self-destructive, and offensive to our holy God.

Joel describes this change as rending (meaning "tearing") the *heart*. This contrasts with the common way of expressing personal anguish: tearing one's *garments* (examples: [Genesis 37:34](#); [2 Samuel 3:31](#); [Job 1:20](#)). True repentance will rip one's heart wide open, break down any resistance to God's will, and lay bare our souls.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to rend one's heart in true repentance?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In contrast with a halfhearted rending

In terms of changed priorities

In terms of how sin is viewed

Other

**^{13b} for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.**

Joel gives the reason for genuine repentance: the compassionate nature of the Lord. Even when our punishment is deserved, he desires to forgive as we repent. Joel piles up the descriptions of this aspect of God's nature in a powerful and beautiful way. The Lord is *gracious and compassionate*, not brutal and rigid. The Lord is *slow to anger*, not given to knee-jerk bursts of rage. Unlike the fictitious gods of the pagans, the Lord's nature is *abounding in love*; this has the sense of "loyalty," love that does not give up easily.



Visual for Lesson 4. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask the question associated with [verse 13a](#), above.

Joel concludes his description of God's mercy with a statement that may strike us as curious: the Lord *relents from sending calamity*. The idea is that human repentance results in avoidance of deserved punishment from God (compare [Jeremiah 18:8](#); [Jonah 4:2](#)). This is the forgiveness of God. When we repent sincerely, he is willing to forgive (compare [Acts 5:31](#)).

II. Rebuilding

([JOEL 2:18, 19](#))

A. Jealousy and Pity ([v. 18](#))

¹⁸. Then the LORD was jealous for his land

and took pity on his people.

Joel does not leave us with a picture of irreversible devastation of God's *land* and *people*. He wants to restore the country stripped bare by voracious locusts. He cares deeply about the distress of those facing starvation. God indeed hears the cries of his people in distress ([Exodus 3:7](#)).

We should take care to understand what it means for the Lord to be *jealous*. God's jealousy is not like that of a boy who has a fit if he sees his girlfriend flirting with someone else. The biblical concept of jealousy when applied to God indicates a profound sense of caring and commitment. This is even more apparent where a word in the original language is translated "jealousy" in one passage but "zeal" in another.

For example, the Hebrew noun translated "jealousy" in [Ezekiel 8:3, 5](#) and [Zechariah 8:2](#) is rendered "zeal" in [Isaiah 9:7; 37:32; 59:17; 63:15](#). In the New Testament, the Greek noun translated "jealousy" in [2 Corinthians 11:2](#) is the same one translated "zeal" in [Philippians 3:6](#). Overlap in meaning is affirmed in English by a dictionary entry that offers one meaning of *jealousy* as "zealous vigilance." The common idea is one of fervency.

JEALOUS GOD, ZEALOUS GOD

As a university professor for over 40 years, I have seen student papers that have all but butchered the English language. One of my most startling experiences was when a graduate student turned in a three-page book review with 58 grammatical/spelling errors! I have seen sentences such as "He wanted to be untied with his friends." A spell checker won't catch this error, and the difference between *untied* and *united* is important!

I have always been interested in etymology, which is the study of word origins and how meanings change over time. For example, our word *hotel* comes from the French *hostel*, which in turn comes from the Latin *hospital*. Today these three words in English carry very different meanings. At the other end of the scale, some words undergo relatively fewer changes in meaning over time. The word *jealous* is an example, as we trace it back to thirteenth-century French, then further back through Latin and Greek.

We usually think of jealousy as a negative thing, but it can be positive when the fervency (zeal) is properly motivated and informed. We see the positive side in [John 2:17](#) (quoting [Psalm 69:9](#)); we see the opposite in [Philippians 3:6](#). For what are you jealous/zealous today?—J. B. N.

B. Provision and Honor (v. 19)

¹⁹ **The LORD replied to them:**

**"I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil,
enough to satisfy you fully;
never again will I make you
an object of scorn to the nations."**

The promise of Joel is that the locust-caused famine will soon be replaced by life-sustaining agriculture. There will be plenty, and the people will be satisfied. There will be no more want, as the famine conditions are replaced by the Lord's lavish provisions.

A further result is that God's covenant people will no longer be *an object of scorn to the nations*. This is an era when each nation is understood to have a patron god ([1 Kings 11:33](#)). Such nations will no longer be able to consider the people of the true God as abandoned by him (compare [Joel 2:17](#)). The Lord is always faithful ([2:23](#)). The locust plague was horrible, but the restoration will cause Joel's audience to truly know that the Lord is their God, the one who wants to bless them ([2:27](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can churches be more attuned to God's will so that his blessings will serve to mute the reproach of secular culture?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning charges of inconsistency
- Concerning charges of irrelevance
- Other

III. Revelation

([JOEL 2:28-32](#))

A. Receiving the Spirit (vv. 28, 29)

^{28a} **And afterward,**

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Joel now describes a future beyond the restoration of Jerusalem and its people, a period he refers to as *afterward*. This passage is prophetic of the time when the old covenant gives way to the new. Centuries later, the apostle Peter will understand this as being fulfilled as the church is

birthed on the Day of Pentecost ([Acts 2:17-21](#)).

We should understand this as Peter did: as a time that features the distribution of God's Spirit such as was never experienced by ancient Israel. Joel's description as pouring is figurative language, of course, since the Holy Spirit is not liquid! But the figurative language is very powerful in painting an image of something coming from above *on all people* below. Such pouring indicates, among other things, that God's Spirit is not something inherent within ourselves; to receive the Spirit of God does not mean unlocking some hidden potential in our hearts. It is, rather, the introduction of a new presence in our lives: the comforting spiritual presence of the Lord himself.

The Spirit is said to come upon certain individuals at various times in the Old Testament era (example: [Judges 6:34](#)). But the availability of the Holy Spirit for everyone is not a reality until the New Testament era. Joel looks forward to that new reality, which we understand to be the established church. This is where all believers are given the Holy Spirit as a gift ([Acts 2:38](#)).

**^{28b} “Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.**

Joel describes the giving of God's Spirit as yielding spiritual results: the divinely given abilities to *prophesy*, to receive revelatory *dreams*, and to experience *visions* (compare [Numbers 12:6](#)). This is not the restoration of a previous state, but empowerment for something new. Joel is foreseeing the Holy Spirit's role in (at least) the founding of the church. Christians do not receive the Holy Spirit as a tool for their own pleasure, but as the presence of God to enable them for extraordinary activities as he chooses.

**²⁹. “Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.**

The phrasing here refers to both male and female slaves, and Joel prophesies that the Spirit will be poured on them as well. There will be no class or gender distinctions with regard to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Addressing the topic of access to salvation in the New Testament era, the apostle Paul affirms, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” ([Galatians 3:28](#)). Stated a little differently, in Christ we “are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” ([Ephesians 2:22](#)).

IT'S FOR EVERYONE

A student who was blind sued a music college to challenge its requirement for sight-reading music. A Christian university received negative media attention because the admission requirements included a weight limit. Overweight applicants claimed discrimination; school leadership believed that overweight applicants (we are talking *very* overweight here) were neglecting the Christian stewardship responsibilities for their bodies. Claims of discrimination regarding unequal access, overt or otherwise, are heard in many other contexts as well.

We live in an age when equal access is still a much-debated topic. Virtually everyone agrees that people should be treated fairly. But there is often disagreement on the boundary between reasonable and unreasonable accommodation. The fact that some organizations still attempt to achieve proportional representation by use of quotas indicates that society has not yet reached the point where it can take equal opportunity as a given.

But Joel points out that the pouring of the Spirit is to be “on all people.” No discrimination here! Does the “targeted demographic” approach to church growth fit this category?—J. B. N.

B. Seeing Wonders (vv. 30, 31)

**^{30, 31}. “I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.**

Joel's prophecy includes imagery that is commonly called apocalyptic. Just as God created *the heavens* and *the earth*, he can uncreate them as well. He can cause the “greater light” of *the sun* to go dark and/or the “lesser light” of *the moon* to appear any way he chooses ([Genesis 1:16](#)). These are signs of the great *day of the Lord* (compare [Matthew 24:29-31](#); [Mark 13:24-27](#); [Luke 21:25-27](#); [2 Peter 3:10-12](#); [Revelation 6:12-14](#)). *Billows of smoke* seem similar to the “pillar of cloud” and “pillar of fire” that signified God's presence in [Exodus 13:21, 22](#).

What Do You Think?

What preparations can and should we make as we anticipate the day of which Joel speaks?
What need we not bother with? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding personal preparations

Regarding preparations by our church as a whole

Other

Fire often refers to judgment ([Jeremiah 21:12](#); etc.). But that does not seem to be the way Joel is using it here, since he has already used the locust plague as such an image. Instead, fire seems connected with the powerful spiritual movements of the Lord. This imagery is seen in [Acts 2](#), where the Spirit descends upon the disciples with “tongues of fire” ([Acts 2:3](#)).

C. Claiming Salvation (v. 32)

**32. “And everyone who calls
on the name of the LORD will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance,
as the LORD has said,
even among the survivors
whom the LORD calls.”**

What an exciting passage this has been! Spiritual indwelling that leads to powerful prophesying, divine dreaming, and revealing visioning! Visible displays of God’s incredible power!

But let us not miss the climax of all of this, which is Joel’s remarkable promise that *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*. This is more than a promise of earthly deliverance of ancient Israel. God is promising a salvation that Peter sees being fulfilled on Pentecost ([Acts 2:21](#)).

The apostle Paul clarifies in [Romans 10](#) what it means to *call on the name of the Lord*. As a whole, [Romans 10](#) is particularly concerned with the issue of righteousness that is based on faith vs. righteousness that is based on law as these apply to fellow Israelites. His quote of [Joel 2:32](#) in [Romans 10:13](#) is [Romans 10:9](#) stated more succinctly. Within [Romans 10:8-15](#) Paul confirms his argument by citing Old Testament passages that include [Deuteronomy 30:14](#) and [Isaiah 28:16; 52:7](#).

When we put all this together, we can only conclude with Paul that calling *on the name of the Lord* is the same as declaring “with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’” ([Romans 10:9](#)) because “it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved” ([10:10](#)). To believe that Jesus is Lord is to submit to his lordship in following the plan of salvation as he established it ([Acts 2:38; Ephesians 2:8, 9](#); etc.).

In quoting [Joel 2:32](#), Paul is also clarifying what that prophecy means by the phrase *will be saved*. Joel’s picture is that of God’s covenant people having been found guilty of sin, with the result of judgment in the form of a locust plague. The solution is for the guilty to turn, to rend hearts in true repentance and faith. Then God will bless their land again and restore them to a position of honor. But this second chapter of Joel also looks beyond this to the “afterward” time.

That time is about much more than abundant crops and national prestige. It is about our eternal relationship with our true Father, about accepting his restoring love with faith and loving him in return for his graciousness. The issues of what is required to be saved and what being saved entails are vital for us, so we take care to read Joel in the light of Paul’s explanations.

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to help others call on the name of the Lord for deliverance?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning deliverance from unholy influence of certain people
- Concerning deliverance from unholy influence of certain places
- Concerning deliverance from unholy influence of certain things

Conclusion

A. Locusts of Life

I am writing this on a cold day. Winters are cold in Nebraska, but this is what one website described as “ridiculous cold.” The high for the day will not be above 0°, and the windchill factor will hit -30°. All the schools are closed—in Nebraska! Although my wife and I moved here from California, we can put up with cold weather. But sometimes it just seems too much!

The old saw “When it rains it pours” seems to be true for all of us on a regular basis. Winter doesn’t result in just one lingering episode of illness, but two; some months inflict not just one unexpected expense, but four; some summers witness not just one dear friend moving away, but three. These are the minor locust swarms of life, when one bad thing is piled upon another before we can recover from the previous.

What do we do? Although these may not be times when we have sinned to a greater extent than at others, we may take Joel as suggesting that such times are opportunities for spiritual examination. It would be presumptuous to think that all our misfortunes are God’s judgments on us, but there is no wiser thing to do in times of distress than to turn to the Lord. There is no better thing to do than repent of being so busy that we

have neglected prayer. There is no more comforting thing to do than to call on the Lord's name for his mercy.

When the locusts of life seem to swarm, remember that God's love is both restoring and sustaining. When those locusts devour your joy and peace, turn to God. He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and has a heart of great kindness.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, restore us where we are broken, love us when we are unlovable, rescue us when we have lost our way. We pray all this in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The Lord wants to restore us.

HOW TO SAY IT

apocalyptic *uh-paw-kuh-lip-tik.*

etymology *eh-tuh-mall-luh-jee.*

Ezekiel *Ee-zeek-ee-ul* or *Ee-zeek-yul.*

Isaiah *Eye-zay-uh.*

Pentecost *Pent-ih-kost.*

Zechariah *Zek-uh-rye-uh.*

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Write "Crocodile Tears" on the board. Ask, "Who knows what the expression means?" Quickly you should get responses about insincere shows of sorrow or remorse.

Explain the origin of this strange phrase. Say, "It was an ancient (though inaccurate) belief that crocodiles wept while eating animals they killed. The image is of a predator appearing sorrowful for the death of an animal, but making a meal of its victim nonetheless!"

Spend a few minutes discussing ways people try to rebuild trust after damaging a relationship—a token gift, a promise to change, etc.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Sorry Apologies" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work in pairs or small groups.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study by saying, "Time and time again in Bible history, the people of Israel and Judah rejected God's will and made messes of their lives. Too often, they offered insincere apologies and repeated bad behavior. The prophet Joel, however, instructed God's people about what it takes to rebuild a broken nation and broken lives."

Into the Word

Have a volunteer read the lesson text aloud. Then summarize the context of these words. Say, "Judah had sinned greatly, and the Lord sent a plague of locusts. The significance of a locust plague is that it totally devastated the agrarian economy of the nation. Judah tried to go it alone, and God showed how alone they were without him! Joel showed the path of restoration however."

Divide the class into three groups. Supply each group with pen, paper, and a Bible concordance. Each group will examine a key word from its passage, discovering the Hebrew word, meanings of the word, other passages using it, and its significance in the context of restoring sinful people. The assignments and our responses follow.

Group 1—Rend ([Joel 2:12, 13](#))

qara '—tear open, rip apart

[Genesis 37:29](#); [Isaiah 64:1](#); [Hosea 13:8](#)

God does not want rituals to show repentance, but honestly opening ourselves up to him, revealing our sin.

Group 2—Jealous ([Joel 2:18, 19](#))

qana '—having a deep sense of commitment

[Deuteronomy 4:24](#); [Ezekiel 39:25](#)

God cares so much for his people that he seeks to restore them, not destroy them.

Group 3—Call (Joel 2:28-32)

qara '—cry for help, proclaim

[Psalm 4:1-3](#)

God wants us to stop trying to go it alone but to accept his way and his help.

Allow time for groups to share and summarize their research.

Into Life

Before class, obtain small alphabet stickers from an office supply or craft store. Put aside all letters except for *Rs*, *Js*, and *Cs*.

Show the three letters to the class and remind them that they stand for the three key words from the Bible text—*Rend*, *Jealous*, and *Call*. Ask them to think about which of these they most need to be reminded of regularly:

Rend: I need to be open and honest with God.

Jealous: I need to trust that God wants to help me be better, not just punish me.

Call: I need to commit myself to following God more consistently.

Invite students to take a sticker and place it some place where they will see it daily.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “[Joel 2-Day](#)” activity from the reproducible page. Students may discuss it in pairs, or you may decide to send it home as a devotional exercise.