

RUF Bible Study – The Minor Prophets
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Joel – Will God Save Me?

“Tell your sister you’re sorry.”

I’ve heard that phrase a thousand times as I tormented my younger sister growing up. And now as dad, I’ve said that and variations on that sentence another thousand times. We want our kids to say, “Will you please forgive me for” and then state their crime. Please forgive me for smacking you in the face. Please forgive me for taking your candy. And then the other person needs to say, “Yes, I forgive you.”

It’s a form that we think helps get down the words that need to be said in order for reconciliation to happen. So often we just say, “I’m sorry” which amounts most of the time to “I’m sorry you feel that way” or “I’m sorry you took it that way” or “I’m sorry you made such a big deal about that.”

Those aren’t good. But we also realize that there is the form of forgiveness and repentance and there is *actual* forgiveness and repentance. The two don’t necessarily go together.

We might rather just ignore the whole situation and hope it will go away. Or we might rather have what happened to our friend. He and his brother had been fighting in the car on a long trip. Suddenly, his dad stopped the car on the shoulder and turned around. He yelled at them, “Both of you out of the car.” So they got out of the car, stunned and not sure what would happen next. He instructed them, “Now. Fight to the death. Only one of you is permitted to get back in” and he locked the door.

Funny. Effective. And if you’re honest you wouldn’t mind if *she* were voted off the island. If I were the one to knock *him* out of the poker game. If for some reason *she* just didn’t come back to the group project. If *that fraternity brother* didn’t make the grades and didn’t come back.

We don’t work it out. We’re not really sorry. There is no forgiveness, and we just keep on going.

Joel will talk about this, but on a much greater scale. He’s not talking about repairing our relationship with our siblings, friends or coworkers. He’s concerned with how to fix a broken relationship with God.

Joel is the second of our minor prophets. They’re called minor because they are shorter, not because they are in any way less important or meaningful.

We don’t know much about Joel at all. There isn’t really any information in the text about him or when he lived. So we can’t pinpoint the exact dates or even location, but that doesn’t matter. It is amazing how relevant and pertinent these minor prophets are to our lives today.

Bad things happen to you. I hear about them all the time as I talk with you and spend time with you. And I know what you share with me is just the tip of the iceberg in your hearts and lives. We are a hurting people. Then we start to think about Haiti and the destruction we see on the news reports. Over 150,000 people dead already. How can we even fathom that? I was thinking recently of the tsunami, and of course 9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing.

There is real evil. There is real hurt. There is real disappointment. What should we do and think? What then?

The judgment of God

I guess I’ll admit this is going to be the same sermon over and over again as we go through the minor prophets, but it’s an important theme throughout all of them so we’ll just continue to talk about it if we need to. As you read through Joel, you realize that this prophet is pretty mad, and he’s calling out for judgment and repentance. Thus, as he speaks for God, God himself is telling people of their wrongs and how he will judge them for their sins.

Last week we talked about how sin breaks relationship. It’s more than just breaking rules and doing wrong stuff. It involves that to be sure, but that wrong stuff breaks and hurts relationship. So as we talk about sin we need to keep that in mind.

Sometimes you might hear someone ask someone, “Are you saved?” Most of us growing up in Oklahoma probably know what that person is meaning, which is probably “Are you a Christian?” But I think we need to consider this follow up question: “Am I saved from what?” What is it that we would be saved from exactly?

I think most people think we need to be saved from going to hell. And that is true. Hell sounds like a really bad place where we don’t want to go. And we need to be saved from sin. We need to be saved from the power of sin, the presence of sin and the eternal impact of sin, which is death.

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For this series, I used commentaries by McComiskey, Boice and Dever, and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Jeff Ferguson. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

We also need to be saved from God. That is the kicker. Hell is bad. Death is bad. But those things happen because of the judgment of God. He hates sin. He punishes sin. He judges sin. And at some day each of us will stand before him in judgment. We need to be saved from God.

That's what Joel is talking about. He starts to go after the sins of the nations, speaking them and demanding justice. Look at Joel 3:2-3: *I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehosaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land, and have cast lots for my people and have traded a boy for a prostitute and have sold a girl for wine and have drunk it.*"

There is much more these nations have done, but we're at least talking about enslavement and sex trafficking. Have you been hearing how this has been happening in Haiti already. People have been coming in pretending to be helping and instead have stolen young girls in order to ship them off and make them sex slaves.

What do you think about that? What do you think about that level of injustice in our world? Do you think they should be judged?

I'm not sure if you have been to the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial. You should go. Remember that almost 15 years ago (April 1995) one of the greatest tragedies and up to that point the greatest act of terrorism in the US happened just twenty miles up the road. 168 people died in that explosion, including 19 children in the day care in the building.

You can still read what was spraypainted on a wall nearby:

We seek for truth.

We seek justice.

The courts demand it.

The victims cry for it.

And God demands it!

Do you think that's true? Do you think God demands justice for the wrongs of the world? He is a righteous God, holy and right and true. He will not allow evil to continue forever. He will judge the wrongs of the world. He is a warrior. He says in 3:10 that he is going to war: *Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a warrior."* There is a great song by Sojourn called Warrior that you should listen to that expresses just this part of God and his heart. *Oh the warrior will conquer all – the world will fall before his feet.*

Let me just say that you want this. You get squeamish and I understand that because it is confusing. But you know in your heart that justice must be meted out eventually. You are not okay with the evils of the world just continuing without any judgment or any payment.

This is one reason why you get so mad when things happen to you. You get frustrated when you are wrong. You get defensive when you are mistreated. Because you have a standard of right and wrong. That standard is operating in your life. People shouldn't treat me this way! Okay, well that is a standard that you judge the world by.

God has a standard too. He will judge. There will be a valley of decision (3:14) where God will decide the fates of these people who are committing these sins.

Now before we move on, let me also point out something very important. It's not just "those sins out there." God is also judging the sins "in here." The sins of Israel, of the church. This is where the locusts come in to play. Joel is all about locusts. Joel says there will be a swarm of them coming to eat up everything in their site and leave a path of destruction on God's people as a way of judgment for their sins.

These locust swarms can be over 20,000 square miles large, and have 120 million insects per square mile. They destroy everything in their paths, and they are just everywhere.

It's interesting to note that we don't know what these sins were specifically. Joel doesn't spell them out for us. In this sense, this book works almost like a liturgy for us, calling us again and again to work through the holiness of God, to confess our sins and look to him for help in whatever our trials and troubles.

There are sins within the church. There are sins of conservatives and liberals, of Republicans and Democrats, of pride and apathy, of nationalism and racism and sexism and a preying on the poor.

God is telling all the people to prepare for war! There is going to be a war on terror, but this time there is no mythical weapons of mass destruction – there is real destruction of sin and brokenness and evil that God is going to wipe out. He challenges the fight.

Do you remember the classic movie Madagascar 2? Alex the lion gets back to Africa and meets his parents. He realizes he can take over his rightful place as leader of the pride as long as he can defeat a challenger in a contest. Alex gets tricked into picking a lion named Tiny or Fifi or something that sounds pretty tame. Turns out the challenger is huge, mean and massive. No worries, because Alex, who grew up in New York City, thinks this is going to be a *dance* contest. Alex busts a move and totally dominates the dance part. But Tiny comes up and just pounds him. Alex gets destroyed and has to leave the pride in shame.

We cannot stand against God. We think we can win a contest with him. We try some cool dance moves, dancing around this and that issue, defending ourselves, distracting God. But we won't win with that. God is a God who demands justice because he is holy and right. You would not think it is okay for a federal judge or supreme court judge to turn a blind

eye to justice, to wink and look the other way at some cases. You want justice in the end. You want Michael Vick to pay. You want Tiger Woods to pay. You want the sex traffickers to pay. And you should. You want justice. You want to live in a right world where there are consequences to sin. So does God.

Please don't say, "My God would never do that." Joel and the rest of the minor prophets keep us from saying things like that. Joel presents to us a God who judges sin. The other sugary sentiment of God is more like that of a two year old who doesn't think anything bad will ever happen, that he will never get spanked, that there are no consequences and the world revolves around him. That view is not reality.

At least see that the Bible doesn't present that view. And that the Bible's view is more consistent to the way you actually live life and want the world to work.

Where are you seeing suffering in your life? Where do you long for the justice of God? There is certainly the pain of Haiti. Are there other people you know where you long to see things set right? Are there strained relationships that need change? What about your own life? Where are you seeing sin break relationship? Where do you need the rightness of God? Where are you afraid of the justice of God?

What we're seeing here is that it's more important to find out what God thinks of you than what you think of God. What does God think of you?

The love of God

So we have the justice of God. It is real. And it is certainly startling and scary. We should take notice. God isn't just our buddy. God isn't all about giving us warm fuzzies and telling us how awesome we are all the time. He takes sin very seriously and his holiness is a real thing.

But. Thank goodness there is a "but." I'm so glad, aren't you?

But God's justice isn't the only part of him and his goodness. There is also his love. God is committed to justice *and* to mercy.

Look at the promises of hope from Joel:

The Lord will rescue his people from their enemies. 3:16-17

God restores his people. There will be plenty to eat. 2:26

There will be wine-dripping mountains, 3:18-21, and a fountain flowing from the throne.

The effects of the devastation would be reversed.

But not only that. God says he will reside with his people – I will pour out my spirit on them. 2:28-32

I will dwell with them. 3:17

What God is saying is that he is going to love the very people he is judging. He is going to be setting things right, and even better than they were before. He sets before us these glorious visions of the way things ought to be and will be. How about a trip to the awesome wine-flowing mountain! If it's a dry red wine, then I'm there. I used to drink about a gallon of milk every day, but I'm not so much of a milk fan anymore, but maybe a cool cookie tree off to the side, I'll take the milk-flowing hills. Streams of living water.

These are all pictures of health, prosperity, wealth, goodness, gladness. The barren land will now flow in abundance. Joel says, *You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied.* (2:26) Food and eating together are important pictures and cultural cues for intimate relationships. Eating together means friendship and unity.

God says we'll eat together, and that he will be with us. He will be there, dwelling with us. Our relationship with God will be restored, and will be better than ever.

Do you see the love of God? Do you think about the love of God? Do you only view God as a displeased principal who sits up there and gets people in trouble?

I've told this many times before but in 2nd grade I got in trouble for looking out the window at lunch and calling a girl outside an ass. I'm not sure why I said that, even to this day. I guess I was just trying to be cool. Well, stupid Scott Adams told on me (I'm not bitter!). Do you think basically people are snitches like Scott Adams?

So I trudge up to the principal's office. He tells me to get my Husky pencil and Big Chief tablet, and I figure I'm about to write sentences. Of course. Punishment. I don't like punishment.

So on my way back, when no one was around, I ran away. I just took off. There was a tremendous sense of freedom as I ran to my house, which was only a few blocks away, maybe a half mile. But I was so scared. I huddled in my room. No one was home, and I didn't want to get caught. So my "freedom" wasn't much of a freedom after all. Life "on the run" was pretty miserable, as I came to find out in my few hardened hours as an escapee.

My parents found me, and then they betrayed me. They took me back to school, back to the principal's office. And instead of writing sentences, I got something far, far worse and far more memorable. He spanked me with a paddle. I'll never forget that.

And that – that has made me hate authority ever since. I have this view toward authority that makes me think that they want to harm me. That they are out to get me and hurt me. Okay, so this is Doug Serven personal counseling time.

Do you see how this is not understanding the love of God? How this has warped my view of who God is? That I tend to think only of the punishment and wrath of God?

But God says he loves me. A trip to God's office is a trip to my porch in springtime with guitars and games and friends. It's my birthday party at the Royal B. It's a week-long vacation at Big Cedar, a day on the lake tubing and waterskiing, with some beer in the cooler and some steaks on the grill when we get back. It's a day in the British Museum with no agenda but just access to all the cool things in the world. It's a day with my kids at Disneyland and all the fast passes I want.

And here is the other thing. Those pictures of blessing are ultimately made all the better with God there. And all the more disappointing with God absent. I have been to some pretty cool places, but when Julie isn't there, I always feel sad and a part of my heart is lonely. I want to share them with her and be with her there. I want her present in those places. The places are great, but in the end, she is the one who makes them alive for me. God's presence is the real thing we're after.

There is love. There is joy. There is blessing. There is promise. There is gladness. There is restoration. Do you know that? Do you want that? Can you taste that?

The Spirit of God²

Okay, so maybe you're tracking with me. If so, then you know we have what appears to be a problem.

How can God be loving and still be just? And how can God be just but still be loving? Do you sense this problem? Many, many people – we can also call them social or moral conservatives – would say that God is just. If you break the rules, he will get you, so you must be a good person and toe the line. Many others – we could call them social or moral liberals – will say that God is loving. He loves everyone. So it just doesn't matter what you do because everyone will be okay in the end and get to heaven.

I want you to consider that it is not loving for God to just say everything is okay without any justice. That isn't actually love at all. And it isn't just for God to judge everything without love. That is meanness. There must be love and relationship involved or else we just need the internet to pay our fines and process our crimes.

How can God be both loving and just?

Turn to the next place Joel turn up in the Bible. Do you know where that is? Peter certainly was thinking about Joel after Jesus raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. In Acts 2, Peter preaches his big, great sermon and uses Joel 2 as one of his texts, quoting 2:28-32. This is the passage that talks about the Spirit of God being poured out on all the people, what we now call Pentecost in the church calendar.

God's promised presence came onto his people. They were transformed. People thought they were drunk because of their worship. And it was people from all throughout the world from all these places– Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphlia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, Rome, Jews, Cretans, Arabians (2:9-11).

After quoting Joel 2 to all these people, he says – this is about Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus lived among us and worked wonders and miracles. He lived the perfect life in your midst. And then he was crucified according to the plan of God. God knew this and God meant for this to happen. It wasn't a mistake at all. But God then raised him up and conquered death because death wasn't able to hold him.

Peter is telling them that that promised presence of God talked about in Joel – those blessings of God that are mostly there when he is there – that goodness we long for – the restoration – that comes from Jesus. Jesus is the presence of God. Jesus made his tent to dwell among us. Jesus is our joy and our life. Jesus says “I am the bread of life. My blood is the wine.” When we drink and eat with him, we enjoy his spiritual presence.

This is the place where justice and love come together. It's on the cross. God poured out his justice on one who did not deserve it so we could experience his love that we do not deserve. In his love, God judged. He poured out his wrath. He did this because he loved his people and wanted to dwell with them and even *in* them, which is what Peter is talking about. Justice and love come together on the cross of Christ. Nowhere else. All other places are just pictures and reflections of this place.

Do you know the love of Christ in this way? Has he paid what you owe in justice or are you planning on taking it yourself? Are you filled with the Spirit? If you are then you will see both the love and the justice of God and that love will change you and transform you. If you just see the love of God, you will not be changed. If you just see the justice of God you will not be changed. You need both!

How do you get it? How do you get this Spirit and this transformation? They ask that very question of Peter in Acts after his sermon. He tells them in Acts 2:38-39– “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*”

Joel really says the same thing in 2:12-13: *Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love: and he relents over disaster.*”

Rend your hearts and not your garments. Stop just wringing your hands and talking about forgiveness and instead repent and come to Jesus. See his goodness in love and justice. He isn't a guru or a hero or a wise sage or just a misunderstood revolutionary. He is the Savior. He is the only one and the only thing that can save you from God's wrath.

² This is where some of these Keller thoughts come together.

If the Spirit is in you, then you will be saved. Repentance is turning away from your sin and the things you have been trusting in as idols and the loves of your life and instead turning to God in Christ alone. It's not walking an aisle. It's not praying a prayer. It's not doing the right things. It's not even repenting the right way. It's Jesus coming in your life. It's the presence of Christ dwelling in you. You become the temple of God where he dwells.

Now one way you know this has happened is your relationships change. This is what started happening in Acts 2. All these nations that hated each other? They became Christians and revival happened and because of Jesus they started loving each other. The community was changed.

Jesus allows you to love people. Different people. He breaks down the barriers of racism, classism, nationalism, sexism, intellectualism. He humbles us because we know God can save anyone – he saved me! He saved a sinner like me? So I should have hope for others and pray for others and love others instead of insulating myself in pride and arrogance.

May the love of Christ help us to enter into the broken places of our own lives and the people around us – with the love of the gospel. Where do you see war in your own heart? Where do you see war around you? Where are the locusts? Where do you want peace and the presence of God?

Where do you need to repent? Rend your hearts and not your garments. May we come to God with a true heart of repentance and not the weak “I’m sorry” I’ve offered up so many times in the past. The Spirit of God has come and it is time to repent and believe.

Who does God save? God saves people like you and me – sinners. He saves sinners who repent.