

Restoration

Joel 2:12-3:21

June 15, 2025

You might think time travel is a relatively modern invention of science fiction. It's not. Long before Marty McFly traveled *Back to the Future* in 1985, creative minds contemplated traveling to tomorrow or returning to the past. For example, H. G. Wells' classic, *The Time Machine*, was published in 1895, 90 years before McFly's DeLorean took flight. After service today, find a friend and see how many books, shows, or movies you can think of that reference time travel.

At this point, the possibility of time travel still belongs to the world of science fiction. But let's imagine. *What would you do if you had access to a time machine?* Would you travel forward to see what the future holds? Or would you go back in time and try to change the past? It's a fun thought experiment, but I don't think traveling through time is in our future anytime soon.

Look with me at Joel 2:25 (NIV) where God says to his people,

"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."

Can God really *restore* years that were taken from us? Could God actually *bring back* a wasted season of life? How can God *return* to us what is long gone? We can't travel back in time, so how can God restore to us the years the locusts have eaten?

Last Sunday, we looked at the first part of Joel's prophecy, an account that could be described as an *invasion*. God's people experienced an invasion of locusts that devastated the land, destroyed the local economy, disrupted temple worship, and left them utterly defeated. This was no mere natural disaster. It was an act of God. God sent an army of insects as a manifestation of his judgement. It was a preview future and final judgment—the day of the LORD.

Some of you shared with me after last week's sermon that you too had at one time experienced an *invasion*, not of locusts, but a season of crisis or an invasion of suffering that left you disrupted, defeated, and disoriented. Like plague of hungry pests, job loss, financial insecurity, broken relationships, disease, or the death of a loved one left you feeling empty. Like Judah's fields, vines, and fruit trees, you felt stripped bare. The locusts invaded and they feasted.

If you could travel back in time and change the past, you probably would. But you can't. Those years are gone. They're wasted. Spent. What the locusts have eaten, you can't get back.

Or can you? God says to his people,

"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" (Joel 2:25, NIV).

Following the message of invasion in chapters 1 and 2, Joel's prophecy continues in chapters 2 and 3 with a message of hope for God's people. First, in Joel 2:12-17, God gave his people a **word of invitation: return to the LORD your God**. Second, God spoke to his people a **promise**

of restoration in verses 18-32: **I will restore**. Finally, in chapter 3, God gave those who would persist in rebellion **a promise of retribution: I will repay**. Invitation, Restoration, and Retribution. Let's unpack those three sections one at a time.

Notice how the invitation begins in 2:12: ""Even now," declares the LORD."

Invitations are typically dated. I've never received an invitation to a party, ceremony, or celebration that says, "Come whenever you feel ready." "Join us at your earliest convenience." "We won't start until you get here." Arrive when the event is scheduled or miss the party. No exceptions.

The words "even now" in verse 12 communicate both a gracious invitation and a window of opportunity.

""Even now," declares the LORD" (Joel 2:12, NIV).

What exactly was God inviting his people to do? Read along with me starting in verse 12.

""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.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. 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. 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?' "" (Joel 2:12-17, NIV).

There's something interesting about Joel's prophecy. Nowhere does Joel or the LORD state which of Judah's sins brought about God's judgment. Nor does it say why God's judgement fell on the whole community. Notice in verse 16 that everyone from the oldest members, to the little bitty babies, and everyone in between received the LORD's invitation.

Reading between the lines, it seems that God's people had turned away from trusting the him. The text doesn't specifically mention idolatry, but more than likely, that was the root issue. To be clear, Joel doesn't mention the worship of false gods or the manufacture of carved images. But the spirit turning one's heart away from God and turning to other things certainly was at issue.

Pastor Tim Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* offers this helpful definition.

“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. ...A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. ...An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, “If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.”¹

Listen again to the LORD’s words of invitation.

““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, NIV).

The hope of *restoration* starts with a heart of *repentance*. God invites us to repent and return to him. Joel may have been the mouthpiece, but the invitation came from the LORD. “Return to *me* with all your heart” (2:12).

What does repentance look like? Genuine repentance requires a contrite heart and open hands. In other words, the call to repentance is a call to *grieve* and *receive*.

The fasting, weeping, and mourning mentioned in verse 12 are expressions of grief. We are to grieve that our sin has brought about our alienation from God. Anything less isn’t repentance, it’s at best regret.

Repentance begins with the call to *grieve*, but it ends with the call to *receive*. Verse 13 reminds us of what God has revealed about himself in Scripture. The LORD our God is

“...gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (2:13).

What are repentant people to bring before a holy God to repair the relationship? Nothing! We’re called to come empty handed. This posture is illustrated beautifully in the next verse. Remember, following the locust invasion, the land was stripped bare. God’s people had no grain, no oil, and no wine to bring as an offering before the LORD. This was a vivid picture of fractured fellowship and broken worship.

¹ Keller, Timothy, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009) xvii-xviii.

What does God say he will do for the one who repents and returns to him? Verse 14 says God will

“...leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God” (2:14).

We are to come empty handed because God *himself* provides the offering. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans that we

“are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith” (Rom 3:23-24a, NIV).

Repent and return. Grieve and receive. For, God is

“...gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (2:13).

Moving on to verse 18, following the invitation to return, God then made **a promise of restoration: I will restore**. Follow along with me as I read verses 18-27.

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

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.

“I will drive the northern horde far from you, pushing it into a parched and barren land; its eastern ranks will drown in the Dead Sea and its western ranks in the Mediterranean Sea. And its stench will go up; its smell will rise.”

Surely he has done great things! Do not be afraid, land of Judah; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things! Do not be afraid, you wild animals, for the pastures in the wilderness are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

“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. Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed” (Joel 2:18-27, NIV).

In these verses, God promises his people he will restore what was lost. What will restoration look like? Joel's prophecy mentions four results of restoration. God's people will *receive* abundant provision. For example, verse 19 says,

"I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil, enough to satisfy you fully" (19a).

Or consider verse 26,

"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" (26).

In addition, restoration will result in the *removal* of their enemies. Verse 20 graphically describes how invasion would end.

"I will drive the northern horde far from you, pushing it into a parched and barren land; its eastern ranks will drown in the Dead Sea and its western ranks in the Mediterranean Sea. And its stench will go up; its smell will rise" (20).

A third result of restoration would be the *return* of joy and gladness. Joel says to God's people,

"Do not be afraid, land of Judah; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things!" (21).

Again, in verse 23 God's people hear these words of encouragement,

"Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful" (23).

Finally, and most importantly, restoration would result in a *restored* relationship between the LORD and his people. In verse 27, the LORD says,

"Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed (27).

These verses spell out the results of God's promised restoration. This was how God would restore "the years the locusts have eaten" (25). God's people would *receive* abundant provision as their damaged crops, trees, and vines began to produce again. God would *remove* the locusts from their land. As a result, joy and gladness would *return* to their hearts, and with it, their relationship with the LORD would be *restored* through worship and fellowship with him. God's promise of restoration would be fulfilled in Joel's day among God's people.

One characteristic of Old Testament prophecy is that God's promises often have an *immediate* fulfillment and an *ultimate* fulfillment. We saw this last Sunday when we considered the day of the LORD. In the locust invasion, God's people experienced a day of judgment for their sin. But that immediate fulfillment also served as a harbinger of "the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (2:31) that was to come at the end of history.

In other words, the restoration God's people experienced in Joel's day was pointing them forward in faith to a day when the restoration of all things would be fully and finally realized. Scripture speaks of that day in Revelation 21. As I read, listen for echoes of God's people *receiving* abundant provision, the final *removal* of our enemies, the *return* of joy and gladness, and the *restored* relationship between God and his people.

"Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children" (Rev. 21:1-7, NIV).

A day of restoration is coming for those who have repented and returned to their Creator through faith in Jesus Christ. God will fully and finally restore "the years that the locusts have eaten" (Joel 2:25). In his mercy, God may grant us a taste of restoration in this life. But one day, everything that was lost, everything that was broken, everything that went wrong will be fully and finally restored.

God promises his people restoration. And you know what? God not only *promises* restoration, but he *guarantees* it! Listen to what Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus.

"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit *guaranteeing* our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13-14).

The promised Holy Spirit "who is a deposit *guaranteeing* our inheritance" is the one Joel spoke of at the end of chapter 2.

""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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. 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. 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" (Joel 2:28-32, NIV).

If those words don't sound familiar, let me encourage you later today to compare the end of Joel 2 with the Pentecost account found in Acts 2. There Peter quotes from this section of Joel's prophecy to say to his hearers, in essence, "The promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our full and final restoration has come!"

In the few minutes remaining, let's quickly consider what Joel had to say in chapter 3. Following God's invitation to "return to the LORD your God," and in light of his promise of restoration, there is a second promise spoken of in this final chapter. God gave those who would persist in rebellion **a promise of retribution: I will repay.**

The last few verses of Joel's prophecy found in 3:16-21 echo the promise made to God's people we've already considered. God's people will be restored fully and forever.

But in the first half of chapter 3, Joel addressed a different audience. This promise of retribution was given not to God's people, but to those who would persist in their sinful rebellion against the LORD. To those who will not repent, Joel's message is clear: on the great and dreadful day of the LORD, God's judgment will be *fair* and *final*.

Verses 1-8 of chapter three tell us that God's just judgement will be *fair*.

"In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will put them on trial for what they did to my inheritance, my people Israel, because they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land. They cast lots for my people and traded boys for prostitutes; they sold girls for wine to drink. "Now what have you against me, Tyre and Sidon and all you regions of Philistia? Are you repaying me for something I have done? If you are paying me back, I will swiftly and speedily return on your own heads what you have done. For you took my silver and my gold and carried off my finest treasures to your temples. You sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, that you might send them far from their homeland. "See, I am going to rouse them out of the places to which you sold them, and I will return on your own heads what you have done. I will sell your sons and daughters to the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, a nation far away." The LORD has spoken" (Joel 3:1-8, NIV).

While we must not take pleasure in the fact that many will enter into eternity apart from Christ, we can take comfort in the fact that every instance of wickedness and injustice in this life will be judged by a God who is fair and just. No evil will go unpunished.

God's judgment will not only be *fair*, but it will also be *final*. Verses 14-16 depict the finality of God's just judgment this way:

“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” (Joel 3:14-16a, NIV).

Chapter 3 serves as a warning. But it also serves as a reminder to God’s people of what we’ve been rescued from.

There’s no such thing as a time machine that will take us back to a time before an invasion, but God promises his people something greater.

“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” (Joel 2:25, NIV).

The day of the LORD is coming. Will it be for you a day marked with painful retribution or will it be a day of joyful restoration? For those who have accepted his invitation to return to him in faith, God promises his people the hope of restoration.

Let’s pray.