

Worship & the People of God

We live in a more and more individualistic society. People like to think of religion or faith as a personal journey. People certainly today don't like to think of organized religion or the church exercising any authority over its members. People want to be on a personal spiritual journey. Now this is not all wrong. For example, Evangelical Christianity has talked a lot in the last few decades about having a personal relationship with God. Well, that's certainly true. God calls us to have a personal relationship with him. That's one of the most amazing truths of the Bible. But in that process, have we failed to emphasize enough of the corporate nature of our faith? We as Christians have not only been called into a personal relationship with God, but we've also been brought into a family. When we've been adopted as sons and daughters of God, we look around and realize we have a bunch of new siblings! That's why our God says to us, "I am your God, and you are my people."

And so while society is valuing individualism more and more, we must be reminded that our faith as Christians has both an individual aspect, as well as a corporate aspect. We are a family. As Christians, we are a people. Not united ethnically or nationally. But by the new name that we have as Christians. One united diverse people.

And that extends to how we worship God. The last few Sundays we've been going through a short sermon series on worship. We continue that series today. Today we're going to talk about "Worship and the People of God." Worship and the people of God. As we study this passage today in Joel, I want to remind us that we've been brought into a community of believers. It's an organized community; it's called the church. And God has local church congregations throughout the world. And he calls his family to come and worship as a people. Collectively. Together.

That is one of the truths we find in this passage in Joel. Now this chapter is not specifically about worshipping as a people of God. That's just one truth we can derive from this passage. What this passage does show us is how the people of God deal collectively with the imminent threat of judgment. That's the context of this passage. God was calling the people back then *collectively*, in very inclusive terms, to bring the covenant community together in a widespread repentance. And this repentance was to be expressed through a solemn, formal, gathering of the people. And so as we look at what's going on here, I think we see a great example in action of the point I want us to take home. God's people are a people! They're a unit. A family. And he so often deals with us collectively. And that's especially the case in calling us to weekly worship him as a church. And so as we look at this passage's teaching, look for how the corporate nature of God's people keeps getting brought out. And then at the end I'll try to tie this all together for us in applying it to our worship as a church.

So look with me together at the first section in this chapter. That's verses 1-11. The pew bibles title these verses as the "Day of the Lord." That's a good title. These first eleven verses are a warning about the coming Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord is about final judgment. Verse 11 describes it as great and very terrible. Who can endure this final judgment day?

Well these eleven verses describe the day of judgment in light of chapter 1. Chapter 1 talks about a massive invasion of locusts. Evidently locusts had

recently swarmed through the area, devouring everything in sight. The picture given in chapter 1 is of this all consuming attack by the locust. The land is laid waste. It seems like nothing is left. There's no food for the animals, let alone for the people. There's no grain or drink left for the normal offerings to the Lord. And the prophet Joel interprets this as a sign of judgment from God upon the people. Of course, we know that not every natural disaster has *immediate* connections with the sin of God's people. We live in a sin-cursed world, and so these kinds of disasters do happen, sometimes unexplainably. But we also know that God sometimes brings these disasters upon people as a wakeup call. Think about the 10 plagues on Egypt. One of the plagues was a locust invasion. That was supposed to be a wakeup call to Egypt. Well, when God brought the people into the Promised Land he threatened to bring such plagues upon Israel if they rebelled against God. And so here the prophet Joel in chapter 1 speaks about a locust invasion and at the end of the chapter calls the people to repent. We're not told the specific issue of sin here. We're not told how the people had gotten off track. But in light of the locust invasion, the people are called to lament and repent.

But then in chapter 2, in our passage for today, Joel announces another invasion. As he describes this invasion, at points it sounds like he's talking about another locust invasion. But as the description unfolds, it looks like what he's really doing is describing the final Day of the Lord using the imagery of the recent locust invasion while it's still fresh in everyone's head.

Things like verse 2. The judgment is described as a day of darkness and gloominess. Certainly a huge countless swarm of locust flooding into the country could have literally darkened the skies. Verse 3 talks about the waste that would be laid: before the army, the land would be like the Garden of Eden, and after the destruction, it would be like a desolate wilderness. Again, you could think of the locust doing this. Verse 5 talks about the noise like chariots - surely the combined noise of each of the locust would make some roaring buzz in your ears that would send chills down your back. Verse 9 describes the army infesting everywhere, in the city, on the walls, into the houses, through the windows.

And yet as much as this could have seemed like it was still talking about a locust invasion as in chapter 1, the message is clear. Joel is talking about the Day of the Lord. He tells us he's talking about the Day of the Lord in the first and last verse of this oracle, verses 1 and 11. And verse 11 tells us which army this really is. Not locusts. It's the army of the LORD. His army camp is very great. This is a terrible day. Who can endure such a day when the great Lord comes for judgment? When he comes with his great army?

And what should be especially frightening to the people is verse 1. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sound an alarm in the Holy Mountain. This is Jerusalem. The Lord's army is coming against his own city. Against his own people. This is not what we'd expect. You'd expect that God's people would go forth with the Lord as part of his army. Here the Lord's army is coming against his own city and his own collective people. And so the horn is to be sounded to warn the people. By the way, notice right from verse 1 the collective nature here. God's people in Jerusalem are being warned as a unit of the impending final judgment day.

But then look at the second section of this chapter. Verses 12-17. This is a call for repentance. And look how it's announced in verse 15. Another blowing of the horn. And again this is in Zion, in Jerusalem. God's people are being summoned. When this horn was blown in verse 1, it seemed to be to alert the city to the invasion. Kind of like an air raid siren that you'd hear in a city when missiles are headed toward it. But now the call to blow the horn is repeated in verse 15 and we understand what's really going on. The people have only one good response

to the army of the Lord. They have only one good response to the impending judgment day. Resistance is futile. There is no victory in taking up arms against God. The only rational response is repentance and lament. And so the people are being called, as a people to respond.

Just look at the solemn and formal way Joel is calling the people to gather. Look at the string of commands in verses 15-16. These are all getting at the people to come together in a very formal way in a very formal holy assembly. Verse 15. *Consecrate* a fast. Verse 16. *Gather* the people. *Sanctify* the congregation. *Assemble* the elders. *Gather* the children and nursing babes. The bride and bridegroom are to *go out*, and come together with the rest of the people. The priests are to take their normal places for interceding for the people. Do you see all these commands? They're all getting at the same thing. Consecrate, Gather, Sanctify, Assemble. Come together *as a congregation*. The people are to meet as the formal, visible, church. *Together*, they must come before God. This will be a holy gathering of God's people, set apart as a special assembly before the Lord. And what would they do? They'd lament and repent. They'd appeal to God for compassion and forgiveness. Now this wasn't a typical worship service; no it was a time of lament, but certainly the way they gather together is in the vein of the typical coming together of God's people. Yet, here it's marked with a sense of urgency in light of the coming Day of the Lord.

And look at how collectively the people are described here. It's all the people. The entire covenant community. All who belonged to the covenant. From the elders to the children. Even nursing infants. Even those who might normally be excused, like the bride and bridegroom on their wedding day. Bring *everyone* and grab the priests! Everyone was called to participate in this solemn assembly. It's time to go to the LORD as a people.

You know as I look at this urgent call for corporate repentance, I can't help but think about it in light of the book of Jonah. We don't know for sure which book was written first, Jonah, or Joel. But they seem to be in a bit of dialogue with each other. Remember that Jonah preached a message of judgment against the pagan Ninevites. And this pagan nation responded by a wholesale repentance. The whole nation from the greatest to least started lamenting and fasting. They even had their animals wear sackcloth. And in Jonah 3:9, the King of Ninevah when he orders everyone to repent, says, "Who knows whether God will turn and relent?" Well look at verse 14 of our passage in Joel. That's the same question put to Israel when a fast is declared. Who knows, maybe God will turn and relent? And then in Jonah, after God spares the Ninevites, Jonah is upset. And Jonah says in Jonah 4:2 that he knew all along that God was a "gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, one who relents from doing harm." Well that same quote is right here in verse 13 of our passage as well (cf. Exodus 34:6)? These two books sure seem to be in dialogue, don't they?

In Jonah, you have the clear example of a pagan nation responding to the prophet of the one true God. That's a bit surprising. Frankly, you'd expect the Ninevites would skin Jonah alive or something terrible like that. But they corporately and collectively as a united people come in repentance and mourning before God. They have no real promises or assurance that God would forgive them. They didn't know about the graciousness of God like Jonah knew. They hoped beyond hope, not even knowing for sure if God would forgive them. But they looked for forgiveness as a combined people, and found it.

If the pagan nation of Ninevah responded this way, how much more should God's covenant people? How much more should the Israelites who had been given all the promises, the adoption as sons, the covenants, how much more should they respond in

repentance when faced with judgment? How much more should they come together as one united people calling upon the name of the LORD? What happens in Jonah serves as a searing testimony against Israel. Will the pagan nations outdo them? This is a call for God's people to assemble and come before him, looking eagerly for the compassion that they know he has. It's that very compassion of God, his graciousness and mercy, his being slow to anger, that is the basis for the people to come in fasting and repentance. That is their only hope - the mercy of God.

And it's that mercy and grace which we see in the last section in this chapter. Verse 18 through the end of the chapter is really a sort of response to the people's repentance. Notice verse 18 begins by saying, "Then the Lord will be zealous for his land and pity his people." The tone of the prophecy makes a shift. Now Joel foresees forgiveness and restoration for God's people in light of their corporate repentance.

At first Joel describes a number of material blessings for the people. For example, it says that the destruction of the locusts would be reversed. These very material earthly blessings are quite fitting for the nation of Israel, because those are the terms God had given them when he first brought them into the Promised Land - that they would have bountiful earthly blessings in the Promised Land if they obeyed God's covenant. But these promised earthly blessings look forward to better blessings. This promised restoration had a better restoration than just an earthly kingdom in Palestine. The later prophets prophesied like this quite frequently. They'd speak in terms familiar to the old covenant. Blessings in the Promised Land. Physical, tangible, blessings. Blessings in Jerusalem and connected with the temple. But these prophecies ultimately found a better fulfillment in the new covenant. It was as if the prophets were given the language of the old covenant to begin to describe the new covenant. But as they gave those prophecies there were some clear hints that God was promising something better than just what was in the old covenant. And we see that here in this passage.

Just look at verse 28. Beginning at verse 28 we have an amazing promise. God promises to pour out his Spirit on all flesh. In the old covenant, that wasn't the case. The Spirit would come and go as he pleased, working primarily in prophets and sometimes in a king here and there. But here Joel prophesies that the restoration that God is foretelling will ultimately bring the people to a better place. They'll be in place even better than before under the old covenant, the covenant which they broke, the very reason the people had to lament and repent. God says here through the prophet Joel, that at the restoration, he'd pour out his Spirit on all the people.

That's a pretty inclusive work of the Spirit! Verse 28. Sons and daughters will prophesy. Old and young men will have dreams and visions. Even servants, both male and female! All these God will pour out his Spirit upon. This is ultimately looking forward to the new covenant that the Messiah would bring. This is looking forward to the day of Pentecost after Jesus ascended up into heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit on the New Testament church. God's people then were brought together *organizationally* through the terms of the new covenant; but they were also brought together *organically* through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would unite God's people together as one, spiritually. This is why Paul can describe that in Jesus, there is neither male nor female, slave or free, but we are all one in Christ. Because the Spirit has been poured out on those who are members of the new covenant through faith in Jesus. In the new covenant, we all commonly receive the Spirit. Peter himself quotes this passage on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out. This prophecy finds its fulfillment when those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ are saved. The Spirit then lives inside them. All part of the benefits of being united together as a people of God in Christ.

Of course the result of this is that now God's kingdom and his people are being established throughout the earth. God's kingdom is growing to fill the earth, because he is making disciples of all the nations. As people throughout the world call upon Jesus, they are united spiritually with all God's people. And so God rightly calls us then as his people to assemble to worship him by the Spirit. We assemble now, not just in Mount Zion. God's sacred assembly is no longer just on his holy mountain in Jerusalem. But he is present whenever believers gather in his name throughout the world, because he has poured out his Spirit.

Of course, to step back for a moment. Let me reiterate. This is all because of the work of Jesus. In this chapter in Joel, the people were confronted with the imminent coming of the Day of the Lord. Verse 1 warned, "It is near." Because it was near, the people were called to repent. And isn't that so similar to how Jesus started his earthly ministry? Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is *near, repent, and believe in the gospel.*" You know, there's a close connection with the coming of the kingdom and the coming of the Day of the Lord. The great and terrible Day of the Lord is when the Lord Jesus will come again. At his second coming, his kingdom will come in its fullness. Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom at his first coming, but it will come in its fullness on that great final Day of the Lord. A day of judgment for many, but a day of blessing for God's people.

But that final Day of the Lord is only a blessing for God's people because of the cross. On the cross, Jesus essentially experienced the Day of the Lord ahead of time. He experienced God's wrath against sinners on the cross. He bore the punishment. All the terribleness of that Day he experienced on the cross. That's why when Jesus hung on the cross the earth grew dark. That's why there was an earthquake when he died. The very things written about the final Day of the Lord here in this chapter by Joel were seen for Jesus on the cross. On the cross, Jesus experienced the Day of the Lord in the place of God's people. In our place: for you and me, and whoever has been made a part of God's people by faith in Jesus. That is amazing good news.

And so when we gather now as a church, we come to worship. And part of that is coming afresh in repentance and faith. And yet when we assemble together as the holy people of God, when we assemble as a sacred convocation, and when we repent of our sins, we'd don't have to say, "Who knows?" as like in verse 14 of our passage. "Who knows if God will turn and relent?" We don't hope that there *might* be forgiveness. We have a certain hope. We have confidence when we come together as the people of God. That rhetorical question has been answered in Jesus. In Jesus, there is forgiveness. Jesus turns God's wrath away from his people. Because of the cross. And that's because Jesus answered another rhetorical question from our passage; verse 11. Verse 11 asks, "Who can endure" the great and terrible Day of the Lord? Jesus can. He endured it on the cross. He suffered it and overcame it. For us. For his holy people - people who he makes holy by his blood. Believe in Jesus. Trust in him. Turn from your sins and look to the cross, and be saved from the Day of the Lord. That that day would be a day of blessing for you.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, there's a lot of good news in this passage, isn't there? But what I've especially wanted us to see is how this passage relates to how we now worship God as God's people. When we worship God, we worship as the united people of God. Already in the Old Testament we see God's people collectively coming together. In verses 12-17, the people come together: man, woman, and child, even infants. Now there was certainly something extraordinary about this call. There was something urgent about it. It wasn't a typical worship service. It was a time of corporate repentance. But it does show us that there are times for God's people to come together as a whole. If all God's people were

summoned here for this urgent repentance, then certainly that has an application for the ongoing worship of God! That when God's people are summoned to worship, *all* his people are called to worship. Surely that's the typical pattern we see in the Old Testament. And surely this is all the more true in the New Testament, now that the Spirit has been poured out. Now that these verses 28-29 have been fulfilled at the day of Pentecost, there is an even greater unity of the church family. The Spirit has been poured out on the whole assembly of God's people. And so what was true in the Old Testament is even more true now in the New Testament church! Even more so are the young and old, male and female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, even the feeble and handicapped, the outsiders and outcasts, as many as are able, are called to come together as God's people. This naturally finds its fruition in the public worship service of God each and every Sunday.

Now certainly there are times where it's fitting to have more exclusive gatherings. I think of a passage like Nehemiah 8:2 where Ezra read the entire law to the assembly. That was an event from early morning until midday. And there it was just those who were old enough to understand the reading of the law that were in attendance. Certainly there are times for things like that; extended conferences and teachings. And in the same way there are times for more specialized groups: things like women's groups and men's groups, gatherings of the youth, or of the older folks. But never at the expense of dividing up the family. There's surely times where it's helpful to break up into special groups. But when we come together to worship, we're seeking to do just what we see here in verses 15-16. We're trying to gather the whole church family. Our worship is a family affair. And so we encourage all who are able to come to come. Certainly there's special reasons why that isn't always the case. Sometimes our elderly and sick just can't physically be here very often, or even at all at some point. For our children, we provide the option of a nursery and child care when that's needed to assist the parents. But none of these things are ever the default. We never just push the young or old or sick away from us. We want to welcome the entire church family to our worship service. Not to give a dirty look at a child who might make a little noise, for example, but to smile back at them. To welcome them. Every member of the church has just as much right to be here to worship God. God calls and summons his people as a whole to come and worship. Come and worship.

Now there's an objection I hear to this sometimes. You see, what I've described to some, might sound a lot like quote, "organized religion." That sounds like a dirty word to many. Well, yes, I am describing organized religion in some sense; though that's not the term I'd normally use. But some people don't like organized religion. I was talking to someone at a birthday party the other day and they said something said like, well, we can worship God whenever we meet up with other Christians; that's what Jesus said, wherever two or three are gathered together, I am with you. Well certainly that's true. But the Bible also says more than just that. Because in another sense, we see God calling his people to *regularly* assemble *together*. We talked about that last week when we looked at Hebrews 10:25. We must not forsake assembling together. Yes, at special times, but especially at a regular interval, one day in seven. That is the fourth commandment, you know. And so yes, whenever you meet up with other Christians, there is a sense of a holy assembly going on, because of what we read here in Joel, that all believers are given the Holy Spirit. But do you see how that just makes *this time* all the more special? This time where we heed God's call to be united together as *one body* of Jesus Christ, regularly assembling each week to worship him as one complete spiritual family? As the united people of God? Organized religion has been abused, but so has everything good in life. We do organized religion, because God's the one who's organized it. And the beauty is that the organized church is fundamentally united not just organizationally, but even organically, spiritually,

through this Holy Spirit that God's given us. That's the foundation of our organizational unity.

One last objection I often here about this. Well, it's said that this sort of organized religion just ends up being mere external ritual and formality. Go to church and go through the motions. Stand up, sit down, etc. But that's not what we're talking about. And that's not what this passage is talking about. Just look at verses 12-13 again. God's calling the people to turn with all their hearts. To tear their hearts not their garments. God's telling them this while at the same time telling them to gather as a formal, sacred, assembly. In other words, yes, it is a common problem that can happen. Gathering together each week as a formal organized church can result in mere outward religion. But that's not what God wants. And so we must keep striving toward the sort of worship God is demanding of us. Real, individual, heartfelt worship, that is expressed even together, as a community of believers when we assemble for the public worship of God.

And with all the objections people might make about coming together as a people of God to worship - I hope many of you here have tasted of the many good things about coming together. It's exciting and wonderful to meet you all here each week and to come before the Holy God as a family and congregation. Look forward to this time. If we look forward to things in life like family get-togethers, how much should we get excited to join together each week with our heavenly families, here as we worship our heavenly Father? Amen.

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