

Introduction

The Great Chicago fire of 1871 caused damage that is difficult to imagine. What began in the O'Leary's barn quickly spread and ended up consuming an area of 3.3 square miles. Three hundred people were killed and the dwellings of 100,000 residents were destroyed. A huge portion of the city was reduced to rubble. In the aftermath, however, building codes were improved, and the city was rebuilt so that today downtown is a remarkable place with a sizable number of impressive structures. As an admirer of architecture, I like just standing around down there and looking. The argument could be made that without the devastation back then, the city would not possess the stunning edifices it does today. It was better than restored. In our study of the message of Old Testament prophet Joel, we have seen terrible and unprecedented devastation, but this morning we come to a section which promises rescue and restoration.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

The region of Judea was reeling from a recent experience of unprecedented proportions. The area was overwhelmed by a swarm of locusts so enormous that literally every green thing in the land was consumed. They would be talking about the devastation for years and generations to come. Joel 1:4 says "What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust has left the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten." The vines, the trees, the fields were all robbed. The brooks were turned to dust. The beasts were perplexed, and the joy and gladness of the people was parched. It was an appalling and mournful condition. The Lord was shaking the people to wake them up to the sad state of their relationship with him. They had rebelled against the Lord. These catastrophic conditions pointed ahead to a day of the Lord which would be even worse because of the sins of the people.

In fact the Lord called for a trumpet to be blown in Zion as an alarm. God was not done with his discipline of the people. He was bringing a great and powerful army against the land whose devastation would outstrip that of the locusts. This would be a great and terrible day of the Lord, and who would be able to endure it? And yet if the people would rend their hearts, if they would be grieved over their sin and return to the Lord, there was good reason to believe He might relent because the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In fact the prophet called for a second trumpet to be blown in Zion. This one would call for a solemn assembly to gather before the Lord in faith and call upon the Lord to spare them for the sake of his name.

So God was shaking the people to get their attention to see the horror of their abandonment of the Lord. He brought devastation through the locusts and he promised greater devastation to the people themselves through an oncoming army. But they should repent, they should turn in sorrow from their sin, and they should cry out to God in faith to save them. But would they? And what would God do if they did? Those questions are answered in our text this morning. And we can summarize the features of this portion of Joel's prophecy in four words: repentance, rescue, restoration, and results.

I. There was Repentance.

The text does not explicitly say so, but there is evidence to suggest the people of Zion did in fact repent. You notice in verse 19, "The Lord answered and said to his people." When you answer

somebody, you are replying to what they have said or done. The prophet tells us that the Lord answered his people. He replied to them. And since the answer is a positive one, we are given grounds to understand that they responded well to the prophet's directives.

When God warns and people respond, the Lord answers. When persons acknowledge their sinfulness and rebellion and turn, God responds. Jesus depicted this grace beautifully for us in the parable of the prodigal son. This young man took his entire inheritance before his father even died and went away from home and wasted it in indulgent living. But when he in regret returned home, his father was there waiting with open arms and rejoicing.

Here is the Fathers Day nugget. That young man displays a graphic expression of dishonor and disrespect. It is truly ugly. Children, honor your father. That is a command of the Lord. But fathers, when your children turn from dishonor and repent, your model is God. He opens his arms and welcomes home the ones who repent.

But for God to welcome you back, you must get up and return. I just wonder if there are ones here this morning who are wandering from the Lord, who are adrift in the sea of life and selfish pursuits have overtaken your once-zealous resolve to obey Christ. God waits to welcome you home, but you must return to him. James says, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."

There was repentance in Zion. We know it because the Lord ANSWERED his people.

II. There was Rescue.

Notice with me verse 20. "I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him to a parched and desolate land, his vanguard into the eastern sea, and his rear guard into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things."

Now that the Lord's people have repented and returned to him, he is relenting from bringing the enemy army upon them for their destruction. They are a wicked and powerful lot. Yet the Lord was going to use them to scourge his people. Now, instead, he is bringing justice down on them. Their stink is great because their evil was great. When the Lord says that the northerner had done great things, he does not mean wonderful things but terrible things. The people had cried out to the Lord to be spared and the Lord was sparing them from the enemy who threatened to do them harm.

When human beings hear the gospel and repent and return to God, we are rescued from an army of evil. At the head of that army is the devil, the thief that comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, like a swarm of locusts. Marching in step with the devil is the world, the anti-God system of this age with its selfish and fleshly pursuits. It will leave you just like the prodigal's friends left him when they used his money up. This is the world Jesus was talking about when he said, "Woe to the world for its temptations to sin" (Matthew 18:7) and when he said, "if you were of the world the world would love you as its own" (John 15:19).

When Moses and the Israelites left Egypt, the Egyptian army came after them in swift pursuit and the Israelites found themselves backed up against the Red Sea. But God opened a way for them through the sea and then closed it back over the Egyptian army, thus eliminating the threat. And when we turn to the other end of the scriptures in the book of Revelation, we find that again God will destroy his enemies, this time finally, in a body of water, the lake that burns with fire. God's promised destruction of the enemy which threatened Zion is a picture of the rescue of God from all the enemies which threaten his people.

There was repentance and therefore there was rescue.

III. There was Restoration.

The people repented, and God brought rescue. And in addition he brought restoration. Restoration is announced in verse 19. The Lord said to his people, "Behold, I am sending you grain, wine, and oil." These elements were the central to every day life in Zion. And they were essential to worship as the grain offering and the drink offering. These elements had been destroyed by the locust swarm. But now the Lord is going to restore them. Verse 24 says, "The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil." The pastures and wilderness would again be green, and the trees and vines would again bear their fruit.

One of the comforting verses in the scripture is verse 25. The Lord declares to his wayward but now repentant people, "I will restore to you the years the locust has eaten." The damage from the locust swarms was torrential. It was lasting. And it was catastrophic. But at the repentance of the people, the Lord was going to restore the years' worth of damage. Rightly does the prophet say, "Be glad and rejoice for the Lord has done great things."

I want to point out to you the play on words here. In verse 20 it is said that the mighty enemy army did great things. But they were evil and hostile and destructive and they were judged for those great things. The effect of the locust and the threatening army was to rob joy and gladness. It was to bring shame. But now in verse 21, we are told that the Lord has done great things. But while the enemy's great things are destructive both outwardly and inwardly, the Lord's great things are restorative. They remove dread and replace it with gladness and joy both outwardly and inwardly. The enemy may do great damage, but the Lord more than makes up for it!

Such was the case for the children of Zion in the days of Joel. And the same is the case today. Let's go back in our minds to the damage and destruction of the locusts. It was complete and it was devastating. Because the people were in rebellion against God, their lives were destroyed. Our sin does the same in our lives. No part of our being is left untouched by swarming, cutting, destroying locust of sin which consumes the beauty of life as God meant it. Sin leads to more sin. And sin upon sin upon sin never mends what it destroys. It is death. It is the source of quarrels and conflicts. It is the seed bed of hate and bigotry. It is the cesspool of emptiness and shame. When you swim in that cesspool, you cannot know true joy. As though one of the Jews many years ago, look out of the window of your dwelling at the once green and verdant hills. Now all you see is black and dry. Hunger rumbles in your belly and thirst sticks your tongue to the roof of your mouth. What you are seeing and feeling is the devastation of your heart and life due to sin. It is a depiction of how Paul describes all human beings by nature in Romans 3: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." Such is the damage of the enemy. These are the great things he does. But God does greater things! He does wondrous things. He restores the years the locust have eaten. He restores the shame and wounds and heartache and hunger and thirst and devastation inflicted by sin. By his wounds we are healed.

I think of a woman. Jesus was reclining at the table in the house of a Pharisee named Simon. Entering the house was a woman who was known to be a prostitute. She took a place behind Jesus and began to wash his feet with her tears and wipe his feet with her hair and anoint them with

ointment. The Pharisee thought to himself that Jesus must not know the kind of woman she was. But Jesus told Simon that the reason for her tears was her understanding of her many sins and of her great unworthiness, and Jesus declared to him that her sins which were many are forgiven. Jesus told the woman to go in peace. He restored the years that the locust had eaten. That is what he does to the sinner who will come to him the same way—with tears from a heart that has been torn in two by its refusal to love and serve the God to whom we owe our very life and breath and being.

Do you see the ravages of sin in your life today? Do you see the ugliness of your hateful words? Do you realize that these are the consequences and expression of your sin against God? You have refused to love God with your heart, soul, and mind, to worship and serve him only. You have failed to love your neighbor as yourself. You have lied, stolen, hated, and coveted what belongs to your neighbor. You want to talk about brutality? Nothing is more brutal than sin and its consequences. "Whoever does not obey God's Son shall not see life but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). Your present reality is ghastly and your future is even worse. But God.

God sent his Son to bear the penalty of sins he did not commit and bear the shame of others. He had nothing to be ashamed of himself. But it took the death of the spotless lamb of God Jesus to satisfy the justice of God. Jesus is God's provision for the cry of sinful human beings to be spared what we deserve. Through him comes true restoration. In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses. In Christ we have obtained an eternal inheritance. In Christ we have the hope of glory. This is true satisfaction, abundance, and joy.

If you already know this restoration in Christ, then praise God, and live out of that restoration! But if you do not yet know it, you can. You need to approach God the same way Joel directed the citizens of Zion. Repent. Turn from your sin. Be broken-hearted before God and return to him. Repent. And believe. Trust him. Count on God's son Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—to be your rescue from the judgment you deserve. God will rescue and he will restore.

IV. There were Results for the people.

The people repented. God rescued them from their advancing enemy. He restored their grain, wine, and oil. And it was a restoration with a purpose. Look down to verses 26-27. They underscore the results of God's rescue and restoration for his people. These effects were the design of the rescue and restoration he had worked for his people.

1. Shamelessness. I mention this result first because it is declared twice in verses 26-27. "My people shall never again be put to shame." This was the assurance that they were not going to be overcome by other nations. The shame of their wandering away from God and its consequences was going to be overcome. It was going to be wiped away. The Lord would not leave them or forsake them. He would defend them, provide for them, and protect them.

Those who come to faith in Christ, likewise, are spared from shame. Shame came with sin. Genesis 2:25 states our pre-fall purity: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." But 6 verses later they disobeyed God's single command. And the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked and they started then trying to cover up their shame. They covered themselves with fig leaves; then they hid from God. Sin and shame brought a chasm in fellowship with God. But Jesus Christ when he went to the cross embraced our shame and has reversed it. Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus endured the cross despising the shame. Now, those who trust Christ stand forgiven and our shame is removed by his blood. And yet the fullness of our shamelessness is still to come.

I think about my grandson Titus when he giggles and laughs, how he is able to have this pure joy. He does not know evil. He is not able to process shame yet. And I think how wonderful it will be in glory when our laughter and joy will be unbridled and full and pure. And I long for it. It helps me even now to be encouraged that in that great day when Christ brings his people home, they will enter glory and all our shame will be completely left behind. And shame will never again be felt by us. That is something to keep you going now and to keep you and me pressing forward looking for and hastening that day.

2. There is a second result here—satisfaction. It is actually the first one the prophet mentions. Satisfaction is described here as eating in plenty. Satisfaction is when you have enough. You don't want/you do not lack for anything. You are content; fulfilled; your thirst is quenched. The longing has been satisfied.

I was talking with a stranger this week. He and his family have little more than the clothes on their back. And he gave the observation that it seemed to him having a lot of stuff does not seem to be what brings people happiness. He said he knows a few people who have a lot but are unhappy.

This world is full of people who think that the things of this world are going to satisfy them and make them happy. They spend their lives in hot pursuit of things, of privilege, of power. The chaos in this country in these days is largely related to a struggle for happiness, and I suggest to you that a struggle for happiness is the struggle to reach a level of satisfaction. If I can obtain certain power, privilege, or possession I can be satisfied, and I can be happy. It is a fruitless pursuit. Satisfaction cannot be had by the things of this world. You can satisfy your physical hunger with a sufficient amount of food, but you cannot find satisfaction for your soul apart from that which is afforded by God himself.

Psalm 16:11 declares that fullness of joy is had in the presence of the Lord, that truest pleasure forever is the pleasure of being in the presence of God. That is what the Lord is declaring to the people of Zion here. "You shall know that I am in your midst and that I am God and there is none else." Soul satisfaction comes in the presence of the Lord. And knowing you are in his presence is the result of his rescuing and restoring work. This is what God saves people for. This is our great inheritance . . . To know Him and be in his presence, the one true and living God who has dealt wondrously with you.

We all wrestle with contentment at times. But contentment comes from finding our satisfaction not in our circumstances but in our wondrous Father. Seek him and you will find satisfaction.

3. The third result of God's rescue and restoration is praise for God. God satisfies the souls of his people and we give him praise. We extol him. This is what we were made for. It is what we are saved for. God is a jealous God. He does not long for things that do not belong to him, but his glory he will not share with another. It is a righteous jealousy. Nobody but God is God, and he is a glorious God, and he has dealt wondrously with his people. It is right for all creation to engage in extolling him.

It is certainly right that the people with whom he has dealt so wondrously should lift our hearts and voices and lives in praise to our king. Psalm 147:1 says, "Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and a song of praise is fitting." It is also satisfying for God's people.

So, praise him!

Conclusion

Whether you think of the devastation of a city burning out of control or the decimation wrought by an enormous swarm of destructive locusts, the truest and worst damage in the world is the damage of and resulting from our sin against God. God himself brings destruction to shake us to see its horror and its eternal consequences. He has warned again and again of his wrath to come. But he also holds out the assurance that if men and women, boys and girls, will turn from their sin and trust in him, he will beautifully and gloriously reverse the damage. He will rescue from enemies and from his own wrath, and he will restore so that the satisfaction of our hearts and the praise of our God will flow in abundance.