

Introduction

Was this not the most unusual July 4 you have ever experienced? No parades. No fireworks. Even Costco quit making their half-sheet cakes so as not to promote mass gatherings of people. I really missed the fireworks. They are wondrous to a certain extent. How they can blast off paper and gun powder inside a canister into the air so that way up in the sky it explodes into a giant smiley-face against the backdrop of blackness is captivating to me. Fireworks are sort of one of the wonders of man. But this morning in Joel we are going to be looking at the wonders of God in the heavens and on the earth. He brings them about in conjunction with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

We began our study of this section of Joel's prophecy last week. Our focus on verses 28-29 uncovered the indication of the Lord that he was going to inaugurate an age in which he would pour out his Spirit upon all of his people, and empowered in this way, they would prophesy. They would be his witnesses to declare the wondrous works of God. Beginning on the day of Pentecost, this age has come. All who follow Christ are blessed with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered to proclaim the greatness and excellencies of God. The centerpiece of God's wondrous works is Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and returning. Him we proclaim. Him we lift up. To Him we point the world.

But there is more. The Lord adds several additional details about this age of the Spirit's outpouring. In verses 30-32, three specific details emerge: ominous wonders, an out-held assurance, and an obligatory clarification. These three details all relate to the message Christ's people are to proclaim. We see the context of the message, the hope offered by the message, and the ability to respond to the message is ultimately the work of God. Each of these factors guides the followers of Christ in proclaiming the gospel.

We are warned of dark days; we are entrusted with a clear and hopeful message; and we are assured that the outcome will glorify God.

I. The Ominous Wonders.

The Lord describes these phenomena in verses 30-31. They are wonders. These are phenomena that seize attention. By definition a wonder is not a common occurrence. It is amazing and astonishing. And it is God who is performing these wonders.

These wonders are fearful and foreboding. He refers specifically to blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall become dark and the moon like blood. Blood is the term that starts the list and ends it. The very first plague that God brought on Egypt when Moses came to redeem his people was the turning of the water of the Nile to blood. The last of the plagues was marked by blood as well. The Lord struck the firstborn of all the Egyptians, but he spared the firstborn of the Israelites because they had put blood on the doorposts of their dwellings. The reference to blood points to the shedding of it; it points to massive death.

When we think of fire in the scriptures we are led to acknowledge the holiness and purity of God. He appeared to Moses in the burning bush. The Lord descended on Mt. Sinai before the Israelites in fire, and smoke went up from the mountain. The Bible tells us that our God is a consuming fire. And when John beholds Jesus in the first chapter of Revelation, he says of him that "His eyes were like a flame of fire." These ominous wonders proceed as portents of doom from God who is holy and the fire of his holiness sets ablaze the wood, hay, and stubble of human sin. The seventh plague in Egypt was hail and FIRE. And where there is fire, there is smoke. Smoke rises as a witness to the destruction of fire.

Isaiah 34:9-10 speaks of God's judgment upon Edom. "The streams of Edom shall be turned to pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever." Revelation 14:11 says of the wicked, "the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever."

As for the darkness, bear in mind that the ninth plague against Egypt was darkness over the land. These are all marks of God's displeasure with rebellious people. He is flashing before the world warning signs of its wickedness and fast approaching judgment. The world is at war with God; therefore God is at war with the world. And the outlook for the world is grim. It is like unto the warning the Lord gave to the nations in Isaiah 34. "Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world and all that comes from it. For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over to slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. . . . For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion."

This picture from Isaiah is like unto what we found earlier in this chapter in Joel. The Lord describes an army he is bringing against his rebellious people. "Fire devours before them and behind them a flame burns . . . The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining . . . the day of the Lord is great and very awesome; who can endure it?"

What does this mean, then? What is the significance for us here this morning many years after the prophecy of Joel, living in the midst of the years when what was spoken is being fulfilled? The significance is that here during that time when the Spirit is being poured out, God is bringing disastrous wonders to bear upon the earth and in the heavens. The purpose is to alert earth's inhabitants that we are in the last days. The final judgment of God is near and gets nearer everyday. I do not think that these wonders are necessarily miraculous in nature. But they are extraordinary and destructive events, catastrophic occurrences, that in many ways may seem natural and explainable. Nevertheless these are attention-getting phenomena by which God is expressing his displeasure with the world which has turned its back on its own creator.

Wars, riots, earthquakes, hurricanes, storms, fires, famines, eclipses, pandemics, political upheavals—all of these shake up the normalcy of life and cry out that final judgment has not come yet, but it is on its way. God is holy and good and righteous, and he has appointed a day of destruction. What is to come he warns through Isaiah (13:6-11):

Wail for the day of the Lord is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come! Therefore, all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt. They will be dismayed: pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame. Behold the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pride of the ruthless."

God has empowered his church with the Spirit to proclaim Christ, and meanwhile the Lord is doing some preaching of his own. He preaches through the fearful and ominous wonders of the age. His message is that the world must wake up and see what danger it is in and the justice of coming judgment. They must come alive to the seemingly hopeless crisis standing at the threshold to engulf them. God is urging the world to listen up and ask if there is any hope. Is there any way to endure the terrible and awesome day of the Lord?

II. The Out-held Promise.

A patient visits the doctor. The patient has been experiencing strange and painful symptoms. They can't sleep well. They have been feeling like they are going crazy. Their whole world is seemingly tuned up-side down from a health perspective. The doctor runs some tests and does an MRI and subsequently reports to the patient the explanation to their problems. It is bad, and if something is not done their end will come quickly. But can something be done? Yes, says the doctor. There is a wonder drug. Everyone who takes it is healed. "Give it to me now!" cries the patient.

The Lord God is shaking the world with painful symptoms foreshadowing a disastrous outcome—the great and awesome day of the Lord. It is bad. And if something is not done, a terrible outcome is on the horizon. But can something be done? Is there any hope to escape the great and terrible day of the Lord? These are the questions the world should be asking. And the answer to the question the world should be asking is an enthusiastic, “Yes!” Yes there is hope! Yes, there is a way to endure the terrible and awesome day of the Lord! Here it is! Right here in verse 32. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape.”

Can you escape the wrath of the Lord that is coming? That is what the biblical term SALVATION is really all about—being saved from the wrath of God. As we saw in Isaiah 34, “the Lord is ENRAGED against all the nations, and FURIOUS against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over to slaughter. Their slain shall cast be out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood.”

The day of God’s wrath is when he will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity. It is because of human uncleanness and rebellion that the wrath of God comes. But there is rescue. There is salvation. Here it is: everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

To “call on the name of the Lord” is the key. Stated simply, to call on the name of the Lord is to cry out to him. It is to cry out to him for deliverance. The implication is that you need help only he can give.

As we look back in the scripture we first encounter the phrase in Genesis 4 where we are introduced to Seth’s son Enosh. And we are told “at that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” Later Abraham received the call from the Lord to go out to the land he would show him. And when Abraham got to Canaan, the Lord told him he would give the land to his offspring. In response Abraham built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. Clearly, then, to call upon the name of the Lord is an act of worship and homage. It acknowledges the Lord to be God and to be the object of one’s love and the source of one’s hope.

The fact that the NAME of the Lord is so pointedly emphasized is an identification of who he is. He is not just any god out there somewhere. He is the Lord. God's name is an expression of who he is. His name is Yahweh. He is the eternal self-existent God. He is Elohim, the mighty creator God. He is the God of peace. He is the sovereign ruler of his creation. To call on his name is to recognize his personal revelation of himself and to assert that you know something of him. The people who do not call on the name of the Lord do not know him according to Psalm 79:6.

And finally to call upon the name of the Lord is to cry out from the heart for him to be your help and rescue. You need him. You are insufficient in yourself. He is God and you are just a sinful and puny human being who deserves no less than to be squashed like an ant on the sidewalk. But Psalm 86:5 says that the Lord is good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon him. A cry for help and rescue is exactly what Joel urged the people to utter back in verse 17, "Let the priests and ministers of the Lord weep and say, 'Spare your people, O Lord.'"

The scripture becomes even clearer as we turn to the New Testament. In his epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul connects calling upon the name of the Lord with being saved from God's wrath. Paul says that if you confess that Jesus is Lord and you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. And then he equates this confession and this belief with calling on the name of the Lord. Calling on the Lord presupposes faith, a belief. Paul asks, "How will they call upon him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" So you see you must believe in Christ in order to call upon his name. You must believe that he is Lord. You must believe that God raised him from the dead. Out of that belief you call upon him. You humble yourself before him; you own him as God; you worship him; and you trust in him to save you.

The name of the Lord upon whom we must call is JESUS. Acts 4:12 states unequivocally that there is salvation in no one other than Jesus, for there is no other NAME under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Paul writes the Corinthians that the church of God is comprised of "all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the fulness of understanding then, to call on the name of the Lord is to own Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and God in his life and death and resurrection and to worship and honor him and turn to him to rescue you from your sin and God's judgment.

Who is invited to call upon the name of the Lord and be saved? Everyone. EVERYONE who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. No one should fail to call because they think they are somehow left out. We are taken back to the announcement that the Lord would be pouring out his Spirit on all flesh. Male and female, high and low, young and old are all included. And according to Paul in Romans 10 so are Gentiles as well as Jews. Anyone anywhere and everyone everywhere is invited to call upon the name of the Lord and be saved from God's wrath. And if you have called and been saved, then join the calling chorus to urge the masses to call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved from God's righteous wrath.

The import of emphasizing God's offer of salvation is open to everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord is to assert that God's rescue is a free gift. It is available for the asking and only for the asking. You do not deserve it. And you cannot earn it. You cannot work for it. If you hope to be on good terms with God because you have tried really hard to be a good person, all hope for you is lost. It is human nature to try really hard and expect to get something for it. The problem is that everything for which we sinners work is corrupted by the sinfulness of who we are. It is nothing better than filth and rubbish. Nothing we do is acceptable to make up for the horrific catastrophe of sinning against holy God. It only compounds our guilt. To be spared the wrath we deserve can only be accepted as a gift. And that gift is given only through faith, a faith that is expressed when we call upon the name of the Lord.

Oh that those in this room this morning still resting under the wrath of God ready to be unleashed would look around and see the signs and see the doom hanging over you and all upon the name of the Lord.

III. The Obligatory Clarification.

There is one final point to be made in this context. It is obligatory in the sense that you must know it. You must get this clarification. Salvation is a free gift. Actually, the freeness of the gift is from start to finish. It is all a gift and all of grace . . . ALL OF IT! It is important that human beings realize that even if they call upon the Lord to be saved, it all starts with God's grace. In other words if you call upon the name of the Lord, the ultimate explanation why you did is God not you.

The people who call upon the name of the Lord do not do so because they are smarter than the rest. They do not do so because they are better than the rest. They do not do so because they are more attractive than the rest.

Ultimately they do so because of God's specific mercy and grace by which he moves on them to bring them to a place at which they see the horror of their situation and in the midst of which they have a heart to call. In the final analysis, they call because they are effectively called by God.

Jesus put it this way: No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him.

Peter put it this way on the day of Pentecost: "the promise is for . . . everyone the Lord our God calls to himself."

Paul put it this way to the Corinthians: those sanctified in Christ Jesus are called to be saints with all those who call upon the name of the Lord.

He put it this way to the Romans: Those God foreknew he predestined . . . and those he predestined he called.

Joel puts it this way: "the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls." The survivors—those who are saved, those who escape God's wrath—are those who call upon the name of the Lord. But the reason they call on the Lord is because they were called effectually by the Lord.

If you have called upon the Lord, it is because of an irresistible call God exerted upon you. You have nothing in which to boast, not even that you

called. Your only boast is that God is merciful and gracious. He sovereignly brought you to himself and gave you a heart to cry out on his name. If you are in Christ, you have no reason for pride. The worst people you have to deal with in life should be handled with love and patience because even at their worst, they are no less than what you have the potential to be apart from God's grace and call.

Paul applies this truth so poignantly when writing to Titus: "Speak evil of no one, avoid quarreling; be gentle; and show perfect courtesy toward all people. [Why?] For we ourselves [who now believe] were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

Conclusion

Here is the message of Joel 2. The locusts came and did their unprecedented damage. God warned of an even greater day of damage that was on the way unless the people would repent. They did and God promised restoration for their land. Then he promised an even greater restoration that would come through the outpouring of his Spirit. A day would come when the Lord would pour out his Spirit and his people would prophesy telling of the wondrous works of God—specifically the work of redemption through Christ on the cross. As they faithfully proclaim the good news, God would be shaking the world warning it to prepare for the great and awesome day of the Lord. And the message of the people of God in that day is that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. And by the way, everyone who shall call on the name shall do so because of the call of God himself upon them. To God be the glory!!