

Return To Me with All your Heart

Joel 2:1-17 (key 2: 12-13)

“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.”

In today’s passage we’ll look briefly at fasting through the eyes of the book of Joel chapter 2. The Old Testament had only one commanded fast, which was found in Leviticus for the Day of Atonement. All other fasts were voluntary. Since the command to fast was directed to the nation Israel, and since the Day of Atonement was fulfilled in Christ, we will focus on the voluntary fasts of the Old Testament. And of course the preliminary question is: what is fasting? Answer: Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. We want to learn though this passage what it means to return to the lord with all our hearts.

Look at verse 1-2, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand 2a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.” In Joel’s day Judah was not right with God, so God’s judgement was upon Judah. It was going to be a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. This is all because our God is holy and has no tolerance for sin. His judgement is guaranteed and will come at his appointed time. There was a large and mighty army that such was never experienced in ancient times nor will ever be in ages to come. Let us look further at this mighty army.

Look at verse 3-5, “Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste nothing escapes them. 4They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. 5With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle.” There would be nothing that could stop them, they are well organized and very focused at their God given mission [7-8]. Even the heavens and the earth shake and tremble. The sun and moon darkened and the stars no longer shine [10]. This is all because God is determined to quench sin from its sight.

Look at verse 11, “The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?” The day of the Lord is dreadful to those immersed in sin, to the lovers of sin and unrighteousness. Those who see nothing wrong with their sinful lives. Those whose hearts are far away from God whose hearts are ever indulging in self seeking and pleasure. Never concerned about the holiness of God and that we all made in the image of a holy God. The day of the Lord is dreadful and no one can endure it.

When the army and the drought devastated Judah, you might have thought that Joel would encourage the people. He might have said, “Hang in there! Things are bad, but they will get better. Tough times don’t last, but tough people do.” Instead Joel said, “You think that was bad? Worse is to come if we don’t repent.”

Let us all read verse 12, “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Because they heard the warning of judgment, God’s people should repent. It’s doesn’t make their repentance less valid because they had to be scared into it. The important thing is that they turn back to the LORD in sincerity, and God tells them how. Firstly, sincere repentance is to turn to God, and therefore away from our sin. Secondly, sincere repentance is done with all your heart, giving everything you can in surrender to God. Thirdly, sincere repentance is marked by action (with fasting) and emotion (with weeping... mourning). Not every act of repentance will include fasting and weeping, but if action and emotion are absent, it isn’t real repentance.

Look at verse 13, 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.” Rend your heart, and not your garments: One expression of mourning in Jewish culture was and is the tearing of the clothes. It was a way to say, “I am so overcome with grief that I don’t care if my clothes are ruined and I look bad.” Prophet Joel knew that someone could tear their garments without tearing their heart, and he described the kind of heart-repentance that really pleases God. What pulls our hearts to God like a magnet, is because our God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. We had first experience of this through Jesus Christ. God sent his son Jesus to be a sacrificial lamb for our sins. While we were still lovers of sin, Jesus died for us. This was but God’s grace and compassionate heart towards all people. His love was fully revealed in what Jesus did for us on the cross and what he is continuing to do through the holy spirit in our lives. Instead of sending his judgement over sinners, God sent Jesus instead of calamity, to be the ultimate sacrifice, so that whosoever believes in him may be saved. This is but God’s love for each and every one of us. This love and grace of God is what makes us come before God with broken hearts, saying lord have mercy on me, lord hear our prayers.

Look at verse 14-17, "Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God. **15Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.** 16Gather 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. 17Let 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?'" A holy fast could be declared because there was a serious issue, a life a death kind of a sense within the hearts of the people. God's judgement was on the horizon. This was so serious that even children nursing at the breast were also called to come to the assembly, those getting married, the bridegroom called to leave his room and the bride her chamber to come to the assembly for a fast. This was so serious that even the priests were called to weep and offer prayers, ""spare your people lord, do not make your inheritance an object of scorn. Because Judah is God's inheritance, just like in our day, those who placed their faith in Jesus salvation work are God's inheritance. So a fast was something deemed necessary, it was not something they felt was an option. Through the prophet Joel, the people were made aware of the impending judgment of God. There was no time to focus on anything else but prayer and petition before God. In other words, fasting is not something that needs to be forced on anyone, or someone to be persuaded to fast. It comes as a reality of the situation within the heart of a person. Are we realizing that we are far from God? Or do we regard our relationship with God to be ok? The key verse says, even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.

Why did the saints fast in the Old Testament? In summary, we can say that voluntary fasting in the Old Testament expressed a mournful, urgent seeking of God in distressing circumstances. We have just looked at the situation in Judah through the prophet Joel. Here are other illustrations from the Old Testament.

- 2 Samuel 12: 16-18: David fasted and wept for his dying child.
- Esther 4:3, 16: The Jews fasted when threatened with extermination at the hands of Haman.
- Jonah 3:6-10: Nineveh fasted when Jonah pronounced judgment on them.

their fasting naturally flowed from profound spiritual urgency. It was not the product of routine spiritual ritual. Fasting was an outward expression of the inward reality of a shattered heart. It was an urgent response of repentance and great humility. It was the seeking of deliverance from a gracious God in profoundly desperate situations.

It is a serious mistake to pursue external fasting without an earnest appreciation for the more important internal reasons that prompt it. Someone who casually pursues fasting as a religious duty without a broken heart actually mocks the reason for its existence. And that is why through this three day fast, it is important that we could genuinely relate with at least one of the prayer topics. That at least one of the prayer topics shared is something that you are personally pursuing or in need of. That is something truly breaks your hearts or brings you to utter humility before God. After our prayer meeting last night, one of our members sent me a message on WhatsApp, that while they were praying they felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to play an active role in the kids ministry. They shared how when they were kids they nearly got easily generatively influenced towards God. They could then pray with broken heart towards kids ministry. I praise and thank God who is gracious and loving calling us to participate in his redemption, truing us into his servants.

We need to ask ourselves serious questions, to truly assess the conditions of our hearts. We live in a generation where the church has become friends with the world. In the name of God is love and graceful. Preaching on repentance and against sin has become num. All in the name of fearing to offend others. The trans gender community and LGBTQ+ has become more prominent such that they are now forcing things down our throats even though they are a small community. Many of young people have sold their soles to drugs and comfortable living with little regard to God. Easy to outwardly live a Christian life but within the heart be flooded with sinful desires. We need to ask ourselves serious questions, do you turn to God in your trials or surrender to fear and grumbling? Do you spend most of your time complaining instead of bringing all matters to God in prayer? Do you repent of sin or tolerate it in your life? Are you confident in your own strength or do you see your utter need for the grace of God? The true answers to these questions say much more about your sanctification than whether you have fasted recently.

In conclusion, this fast was a call to begin the year 2025 with a firm foundation in the lord. As we can see from the passage, a fast is not something that should be forced or something done out of a routine. It comes from the prompting of the heart, a genuine heart brokenness in light of who God is. And we are prompted in fasting because we remember God's grace and love. May we return to the lord with our hearts. May we live through the year 2025 through the presence and fear of God. May the lord hear our individual prayers. Amen!