

Looking Back: Clearing away the trash we regret

Joel 1:2-20; 2:12-17

Today we are beginning a new series inspired from a study written by Charles Swindoll called “Gaining a Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through new eyes”.¹

It’s a New Year and an opportunity for us to gain a fresh perspective on our lives and our relationships. But before we can step towards the future, we must first pause to address our past.

If you’ve ever taken driver’s ed., you may remember your instructor reminding you, “Check the rearview mirror before you step on the gas.” Before we go forward or change lanes, we need to make sure the road is clear behind us.

The process of addressing the past naturally brings with it pain and discomfort. The “driving records” of our lives are blemished by mistakes, wrong turns, a few fender benders, and probably even a major accident or two. We’ve most likely seen a few loved ones get hurt along the way. And undoubtedly, our records are marked by some regrets. Most of the time, rather than dealing with these failures and disappointments, we’d prefer to leave the past behind and put the pedal to the metal! But sin continues to have consequences even long afterwards.

The Israelites experienced these consequences firsthand. During the time of the prophet Joel, God’s people repeatedly ignored God and God’s teachings with devastating results.

The first chapter of Joel chronicles the destruction inflicted by three natural disasters. First, fire consumed the once-lush forests. Second, a severe drought dried up all the water. Then an army of locusts devoured everything destroying the nation’s hope along with its food supply.

After each catastrophe, the people tried to simply press on by making new resolutions to rebuild their lives. But the prophet Joel, urged them to pause, address the past and REPENT of their sins. His advice reminds us to “Check the rearview mirror” before pressing on into the future.

Maybe you can relate to the Israelites – maybe you feel like a once-fruitful plant that was attacked by gnawing locusts. Consequences from past sins have swooped in and feasted on your soul, and all that remains is regret. On the surface, things may look the same – you dress fashionably, go to work, say the right words, and go through the motions – but your outlook on life reveals the emptiness you feel.

It is easy to dwell on what might have been, the “If only...I should have....If I could have just....” But *ifs* can’t change the past.

Remorse can be defined as “a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs”. We all feel remorse over words we shouldn’t have spoken and sins we shouldn’t have committed, even things we should have done but didn’t.

So how do we deal with the past? Do we just ignore the devastation and press forward? Joel urges us to not do that. Joel urges us to pause and consider the seriousness of our wrongdoings and to repent.

If Israel had tried to simply pick up the pieces and press on without repenting, Joel warns they would face future devastation that would make the locust plague look like a picnic.

But fortunately, the Lord sent the locusts.

Yes, you heard that correctly – you might call it a divinely designed disaster. In Joel 2:25, God says “*It was I who sent this great destroying army against you*” The Lord used these tiny locust “soldiers” to achieve his divine purposes.

Why did God bring this plague upon Israel? The book of Hebrews states that God disciplines those he loves. We discipline our children not just to punish present wrongdoings, but to prevent future character flaws. The Lord’s goal was not to bring hurt and devastation but to call for repentance and bring about the restoration of a damaged relationship. When His people’s hearts stopped longing for him and instead desired the things of the world, God shocked their systems to help them regain a spiritual pulse.

When we come to Joel 2, we discover a promise from God to the people of Israel. Though He punished them, God wanted his people to be restored. God promised to replace ravaged crops, restore the economy, and reconcile His covenant relationship with the people of Israel.

In our day, God promises to repair ravaged lives, restore relationships and revive hardened hearts. But before he clears away the trash and restores hope, we must play our part. Before the promise of restoration, God required an action from the people of Israel. Listen to these words from Joel 2:

“Turn to me now, while there is time.

Give me your hearts.

Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

¹³ Don’t tear your clothing in your grief,
but tear your hearts instead.”

Return to the Lord your God,

for he is merciful and compassionate,

slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. (V.12-13)

We are to approach God with humble hearts and confess our sins, our wrongdoings, our regrets, our shame. Instead of blaming others, we need to take a good look at ourselves and own up to our faults. We can’t pass the buck; we can’t shirk our responsibilities. We need to look at the wasteland brought about by our sins and point the finger in one direction – our own!

And we need to do it immediately, because God desires a restored relationship and renewed intimacy with us as soon as possible. In His mercy, God wants to give us back those years that were lost to the locusts. God says to come back with “all your heart”. He wants us to return to Him with humble hearts, confessing and repenting fully of our sins.

A common practice in the ancient Near East was the tearing of garments to outwardly express sorrow. But God wants more than just a superficial act, an outward display; God wants a tearing of the heart, that is true inward repentance, a change of one’s mind that results in a change of actions.

The promise is given that when we truly repent and return to God we are forgiven. This is the promise we receive in the waters of baptism –our sins are forgiven but it still requires action on our part. Luther teaches in the small catechism “the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance.”

But too often, we like the Israelites, try to ignore the past and simply push on.

Think about this - What’s the first thing you are asked to do when you walk into a doctor’s office? The receptionist asks for your insurance card and then gives you a lengthy questionnaire to find out if you have ever had any illness or injuries – from a heart attack to diabetes to a paper cut. Why? Because your doctor can’t fully assess your symptoms, diagnose your illness, or prescribe medication until he or she first knows your medical history. Part of your diagnosis involves uncovering your past.

Fizzling Shame Activityⁱⁱ

So today, I want to invite you to be intentional about reflecting on your past so that you can look with hope to the future. Psalm 139 says:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me in your ways. -Psalm 139:23-24*

Take one of the tablets the ushers are handing out. Take some time right now, search your heart. Ask the Lord to help you search out past wrongs – sinful words, attitudes, and actions that did not glorify Him. Write the first letter of something that you have shame about, something you’ve done that you aren’t proud of, something you regret, whatever it is that you need to ask for forgiveness. Write the first letter on the tablet. Ask for forgiveness and ask your heavenly Father to renew your heart. He promises to do just that! We are going to play a song called Sweetly Broken to give you time to do this. When you are ready, bring the tablet up

and drop it in the water, allowing your shame to melt away in God's healing waters.

Closing:

Our shortcomings, our flaws, our sins, our mistakes are places of humility, which leads to God's grace. Recognizing what needs to be changed about us can help strengthen us and bring us closer to God. Remember that even though we may separate ourselves from God, God never separates from us. God is always loving us, calling us by name back into his arms."

The Lord your God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Turn toward God in the confidence that, through Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.

ⁱ Swindoll, Charles R. *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes*. Insight for Living, 2002.

ⁱⁱ "Repentance: A Lesson with Lumps, Alka Seltzer and a Handful of Inner Change." <http://youthministryideation.blogspot.com/2012/03/repentance-lesson-with-lumps-alka.html>