

The Day of the LORD

Joel 2:1-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-11

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Here's a recent quote regarding the coronavirus plague: "In three short months, just like He did with the plagues of Egypt, God has taken away everything we worship. God said, 'you want to worship athletes, I will shut down the stadiums. You want to worship musicians, I will shut down Civic Centers. You want to worship actors, I will shut down theaters. You want to worship money, I will shut down the economy and collapse the stock market. You don't want to go to church and worship Me, I will make it where you can't go to church.' Maybe we don't need a vaccine. Maybe we need to take this time of isolation from the distractions of the world and have a personal revival where we focus on the only thing in the world that really matters: Jesus."

Who said this? A popular pastor or theologian or Christian writer? No, it's Hulk Hogan, a popular retired wrestler. And he's right in all that he says. During this current lockdown, the only thing that really matters is to acknowledge and repent of our sins, especially that of worshipping all kinds of earthly things that don't last.

And this is what the prophet Joel teaches us in our text today. We must repent of our idolatry and throw all the things that do not matter in eternity, God's wrathful judgment would come down upon us. But if we do confess and repent before God, he is also gracious and merciful in forgiving us and in restoring us to an eternal communion with him. These are the two sides of Joel's Day of the Lord, which he mentions five times in his prophecy.

Today, we will dwell on the theme, **The Day of the Lord**, under two headings: first, **A Day of God's Wrath**; and second, **A Day of God's Mercy**.

A Day of the LORD's Wrath

Joel's warning of the coming day of judgment against Israel comes through the blowing of a trumpet from Zion, the "holy mountain" of God. The trumpet is usually blown as a warning of a coming invasion (Hosea 8:1), disaster (Amos 3:6), and ultimately, the Day of the Lord (Zep 1:16). Why would the inhabitants tremble and be in anguish and turn pale (1, 6) at this trumpet sound? Because they know that the terrible Day has arrived.

And what kind of day is the Day of the Lord? It is a day of darkness and gloom because the light of the sun, moon and stars fail (2, 11), fire (3), earthquake (10), and the terrifying sound of God's voice (11). This day recalls God's appearance at Mount Sinai, when Moses and all the people trembled at the dark storm, lightnings, fire, earthquake, loud trumpet blasts and God's thundering voice (Exo 19:16-19).

Would a locust invasion look and sound like this description? Joel compares the locust invasion to an army that creates this terrifying day. They come in the millions, so the sun is

covered, and the day becomes like the night. When they eat the plants and trees, crackling sounds like that of a flame are heard. Some people have described locust swarms sounding like the roar of a jet engine, or as Joel puts it, like the “rumbling of chariots” and “war horses” as they run (4-5). This army is so powerful and disciplined (7-8) that nothing is left after they devoured everything in its path. Joel mentions that before the invasion, the land is like the lush and verdant Garden of Eden, but afterwards, the land is turned into a desolate wilderness (3).

Like a victorious army, the locusts are not content with devouring the fields. They swarm the city and enter the houses through the windows, looking for more things to destroy. Notice that Joel says they are a thief looting the house, so that people are shocked to wake up to a house that has been ransacked while they slept. Notice also that the Day of the Lord is like a “thief in the night” coming at an unexpected day and hour (1 Thess 5:2).

All of these seem to be so terrifying. But Joel’s locust invasion is a mere foretaste of a more terrifying day, the Day of the Lord. This is the day when Jesus returns from heaven in a mighty and fiery judgment against all unbelievers, mockers and haters of Christ who persecute and murder his faithful people. Bad as it may seem, the coronavirus plague and all the plagues in human history will pale in comparison with the plagues that God will send on that day. It will strike such terror in them that they will want the mountains and rocks to fall on them rather than face the wrath of the Lamb on that Day (Rev 6:15-17).

Notice that John also saw a vision of Satan sending out his demons, who are like an army of locusts, to torment unbelievers (Rev 9:1-11). These locusts have the faces and hair of humans, teeth of lions, armor like warriors, wings that sound like chariots, and painful sting like scorpions. In his visions, John describes the Day of the Lord as a day of wars, plagues, pestilences, darkness, famine, calamities, earthquakes and cosmic upheaval. The Day of the Lord is unimaginable terror.

Terror for whom? It is terror for unbelievers, because God will pour out his wrath on them. And who are these unbelievers? The prophet Jeremiah laments the sins that the people of Judah have committed leading to their exile in Babylon. They “*steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods*” (7:9). Their “*prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction*” and the “*people love to have it so*” (5:31). They sacrificed their children to pagan gods (7:31). They turned a deaf ear to God’s prophets (25:4). Therefore, God finally declared their judgment, “*I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth*” (29:18). No one will endure his wrath (11).

These are the same unbelievers whom Paul says are, “*the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who practice homosexuality, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers*” who are excluded from the blessings of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10). John also saw the same people outside the new heaven and new earth, “*Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood*” (Rev 22:15).

These are the same people whom Hulk Hogan describes as those whom God judges. Most Americans are idolaters, worshiping sports, movies, sex, money and self. The American church

worships entertainment, big budgets, and “whatever works.” The American religion is a pantheon of all kinds of religions because “all religions lead to heaven,” whatever heaven may be. The American culture worships endless, divisive politics on Facebook and Twitter. The American people worships the “crazy busy” life, but busy with what? And 61 percent of Americans now support abortion and same-sex marriage (Pew Research).

Maybe after this pandemic is over, we will realize that sports, movies, sex, money are not part of real life, but maybe not. Which one will you be? Maybe churches will not focus so much on the glitzy and pompous entertainment, and on celebrity pastors with all their false gospels, or maybe not. Which one will your church be? Maybe after being so close to death, we will acknowledge that Jesus Christ, and not any other, is the only way to heaven. And that Christianity is the only true religion, and not any other. But maybe not. Which one will you be? Maybe we will cease from our divisive, individualistic, and politically-correct culture and work for the good of our neighbor, whatever political strand we may be. But maybe not. Which one will you be? Are you among those 61 percent who support the sacrifice of unborn and newly-born children to the gods of sex, convenience and career? And are you among those 61 percent who twist and mangle God's Word to support homosexuality?

Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10 that when our Lord returns from heaven on that Day, God will inflict vengeance on unbelievers who *“will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction.”*

A Day of the LORD's Mercy

But in the same passage, Paul says that God will *“to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.”* On the same Day that our Lord pours out his wrath on unbelievers, he will also have mercy on us who believe in his Son and take us to glory in heaven.

This is the same grace and mercy that Joel knows God will grant to those in Judah who will return to God. God's call is, *“return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster”* (12-13). God's call to them is repent with all their hearts of all the heinous sins they have been committing for generations and return to him. The people were offering their sacrifices, but they were not pleasing to God, because they were being done without true repentance and turning back to him. Outward ceremonies must be offered with inward heartrending because of mourning over sins (Jer 4:4). This is why God told his rebellious people, *“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hos 6:6; 1 Sam 15:22).

What then is true, godly repentance? Joel lists actions in the Old Testament that are demonstrative of true repentance, *“return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments”* (12-13a). Notice again that the emphasis is inward repentance, with the heart. Fasting, weeping, mourning, tearing of one's garments are signs of

repentance, but those are not all there is in true repentance. God also calls his people to gather in a solemn worship assembly to consecrate themselves with fasting and prayer (15, 17). This is what we do when we read God's law and pray a prayer of confession as a congregation.

But these outward signs of repentance must be followed by obedience to God's commands. True repentance means a change of mind and heart, followed by striving to flee from sin and drawing near to God through his Word and prayer, both individually and corporately. In David's prayer of confession in Psalm 51, he pleads to God for forgiveness with a broken spirit and a contrite heart (17). After he was assured of God's forgiveness because of his love and mercy (1), he vowed to teach sinners God's ways (13), sing of God's righteousness (14), declare his praise (15), pray for God's people (18), and offer sacrifices (19). David followed his repentance with obedience to God's laws and good works that are pleasing to God. Paul confirms this when he says that true conversion means dying to the old sinful self and living as new creatures in Christ (Eph 4:22-24). The Heidelberg Catechism calls this twofold conversion "the dying-away of the old self, and the rising-to-life of the new" (HC 88-90).

Notice also that gathering together every Lord's Day is commanded all throughout the Scriptures (Heb 10:24-25). In verse 16, God commands, *"gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber."* Older people, little children, nursing infants, and even newlyweds are not exempt from this commandment. This is why in many Reformed congregations, children as young as two years old sit with their parents during the whole service. Then, as they grow, they come to know that a worship service is different from Sunday school, and worshiping with all the congregation becomes a habit.

If the people truly repent with all their hearts and minds, then Joel asks, *"Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?"* (14). Here, "who knows" is hopeful, not just wishful thinking, because Joel knows that God is gracious and merciful to those who truly repent. Some people think that God changes his mind or repents of his actions. One of the passages they cite is Genesis 6:6, where we read that God "regretted," "repented," or "was sorry" that he made man, who became wicked. The Bible says in many places that God does not change his mind like a man (Num 23:19-20; 1 Sam 15:29; Isa 46:10; Mal 3:6; Heb 6:17; Jas 1:17).

So, does the Bible contradict itself? No, not a chance! The Bible explains God in human terms, terms that we can understand. For example, God sees, hears, smells, has wings, hands and feet, but the Bible says that he is Spirit, so he has no physical attributes. But we can understand him only when the Bible speaks our language or experience. When God "repents," it is what we understand. We can see the result of his promise: it looks like he changed his mind. But he knew all things, even the tiniest things, from beginning to end. He decreed them before he created the world. So when he promised the people of Nineveh that he would not destroy them if they repented of their sins, he did. But for the Ninevites and us, it looks like he changed his mind, but

he already before he created the Ninevites that they would be evil, but they would repent, and he therefore would not destroy them.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, this is what God promises us today. If we repent of our sins, he will spare us from his wrath on Judgment Day. The coronavirus plague is only a foretaste of that terrible Day of the Lord. He is telling us these terrible things in Scriptures so we may be persuaded to turn *away* from this sinful world and turn *to* God. All those who reject God's Word about that Day will be in eternal torment. But all of you who listen to God's warnings through calamities, plagues and disasters, cling to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and repent of your sins, will be rewarded with God's love, grace and mercy forever. Amen.