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## Return To God

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### Joel 2:1-2a, 11c-14a

Blow the trumpets in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!...

For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it?

*“Yet even now,”* says the Lord, *“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 repents of evil. Who knows whether he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him...

We pray for it every Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer when we say, “Thy kingdom come.” [Matthew 6:10]

Jesus said he was going away, but that he’d be back. *“I go to prepare a place for you,”* he said, *“And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself..”* [John 14:2-3]

Jesus said, *“A little while and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me.”* [John 16:16]

Immediately after Jesus ascended to heaven, two angels appeared to the disciples. The angels said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way...” [Acts 1:11]

We pray for it. We wait for it. We expect it. We say we want the Kingdom of God to come. But, are we ready for it?

In today's scripture passage, the prophet Joel is writing about the day when the Kingdom of God comes. And Joel writes that it will be a day of accountability. Joel wants it to come, but he adds a warning. As you're waiting for that day to come, he writes, "Let all the inhabitants of the land *tremble*." [Joel 2:1]

Now that's something I don't want to do. I don't want to tremble when I think about God. I don't want to be afraid of His judgment.

When I think about the day when the Lord comes back, I want to look forward to it with great anticipation. I want to think it's going to be a day of great celebration. I want to think it's going to be a really good day for me.

I don't want to quiver in fear and apprehension.

I don't want to be afraid of what's going to happen.

I don't want to have any doubt about how that day is going to end for me.

I don't want to think about judgment.

But Joel says I need to "tremble." He says it will be a day of "darkness and gloom." He says it will be a day of "clouds and thick darkness." [Joel 2:2] He says that day will be so "terrible" that he wonders "who can endure it?" [Joel 2:11] Joel says that on the day the Lord comes back, it will be a day of reckoning, and it may not be pleasant.

Back in those days and for thousands of years after, the traditional picture of judgment day is one in which God sits on His throne, dwarfing and intimidating His subjects. God sits up there on His throne and acts as the supreme judge. He hands down His verdict, His judgment, His final word about the goodness and the worthiness of every person who stands before Him.

But that picture doesn't play in Peoria these days. In our modern, sophisticated era, we tend to rebel against figures of authority in every arena of life. That old picture of a stern, intimidating God sitting in judgment is not very effective in generating a meaningful response. So, people like us need a more compelling image to communicate the biblical message in all of its power and clarity.

Medical research in the area of near-death experiences presents such an image. These are experiences of people who have died or have nearly died and have been resuscitated in dramatic fashion.

People who survive these near-death experiences describe an encounter with a being of light, who represents Jesus. They experience tremendous warmth and love and grace in the presence of this light. As a part of that experience, they see a very rapid and very vivid pictorial review of their life. They describe the experience as creating the feeling of shame within them as they view the events of their life in the presence of the light of warmth and grace.

So, let's put that in a way we can understand. Picture yourself sitting down right next to Jesus. You and Jesus are sitting there in matching leather recliners. You've got a big bowl of hot buttered popcorn in your lap and your favorite cold beverage in your hand. The two of you are going to sit there and watch a movie together on that 42 inch plasma TV Jesus pops in a DVD and hits the play button.

You and Jesus sit there and watch a movie of your life. You sit there and you see played out before you in brilliant color and surround sound a movie of all the things you've done wrong. You see all your spiteful actions. You hear all your harsh words, all your hateful thoughts, all your selfish ambitions, all your insensitive and thoughtless acts. They're played out right in front of you and Jesus. They're all exposed in living color.

You're the star of the show. You can't deny it's you. You can't deflect the blame. It's not your sister's fault, or your wife's fault, or the boss' fault. It's your life, your words, your acts.

What's more, all of those opportunities to do good that God brought your way and you chose not to respond to will be included. Nothing will be left out.

Does the thought of that make you tremble? "The day of the Lord is coming, it is near." [Joel 2:1]

The essence of this message from Joel is found in the twelfth verse. Before that, Joel wrote in graphic detail of the coming of the Lord and of the consequences of the impending judgment. In various parts of the Book of Joel, he wrote of the devastation by locusts, of fire devouring the wilderness, of the rumbling of war horses, of earthquakes shaking heaven and earth. All of his imagery was used as a literary device to get your attention.

He wanted to get your attention. He wanted to frighten you enough to listen to what he had to say. He wanted to contrast all the bad that's out

there in the world with his message. “*Yet even now,*” Joel quotes God as saying, “*return to me with all your heart.*” [Joel 2:12]

Isn't that a message you need to hear today? “Yet even now, return to God...”

In spite of your sins,  
     in spite of your selfishness and materialism,  
         in spite of your jealousy and resentment,  
             in spite of it all -  
                     return to God with all your heart!

It's what you need. It's your only hope. It's your only chance. Return to God.

I suggest there are three steps you need to take to make that return complete.

The first step is **turn to God.**

If you want to return to God, you have to make a conscious decision to turn toward God. That intrinsically implies that your turn will involve turning away from other things. So whatever it is that has come between you and God, whatever it is that has become more important in your life, whatever it is that garners more of your time, more of your money and energy; you must consciously set it aside.

You begin that journey back to God by recognizing your heartfelt need for God.

Joel wrote that you should return to God “with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your heart” [Joel 2:12]. Throughout the Old Testament, these were viewed as expressions of repentance. These are the signs of your desire to return to God, and the substance of your return is found in your heart. Your remorse for wandering away from God and for your wayward activities causes you to mourn.

Two years ago, when he was twenty years old, my son Ian spent a semester of college in Germany. He won a grant from his college that paid for it all. He was there for six months. He didn't have to worry about a job. He didn't have to worry about a place to live. He didn't have to worry about money. He was free, unencumbered, with no responsibilities.

On weekends and on his breaks from class, he traveled all around Europe. He visited Berlin and Amsterdam. He toured London, England and Paris, France. He traveled to Switzerland and Austria.

Every so often, he would telephone home. He would tell me about all the marvelous sights he had seen and the things he had done. I was envious. But sometimes, he would call late at night, three or four o'clock in the morning, and he talked with emotion in his voice. From deep within, he felt an overwhelming sense of being far from home, cut off from his family. He felt a need for his mother and dad. He told me that there were moments when he would walk out at night, all alone, and cry. It was then that he started counting the days until he would return.

How many twenty-year-olds would have loved to be standing in his place, foot-loose and fancy free, without a care, with all of Europe at his doorstep? There he was, and the day came when the one thing he wanted was to be home.

That's the kind of longing you need. That's the way it is when you truly desire spiritual renewal. At some point in your life, you have to turn toward God. It's only when you recognize just how far away from home you have traveled, and that the one thing you want most is to go home - that's when you turn toward God.

Your heavenly father longs for your return. Isn't it time for you to begin your journey back to God?

The second step on your journey is **turn to yourself**.

Returning to God requires that you look deep within yourself to see yourself for who you really are. It's a time to be honest about your shortcomings if you want to be restored to fellowship with God.

The covenant relationship between God and His people is not an agreement between equals. The Old Testament depicts this covenant as being similar to a covenant between a king and his subjects. The subjects are beneath the king in status and power and authority. Yet the king agrees to bind himself to his subjects and the terms of the agreement.

When you wander away from God, you have broken your end of the covenant. You have not been loyal or obedient to the terms of the covenant relationship. This breach must be healed in order for you to return to the relationship.

A man decided he wanted to buy a boat. He read an ad in a boat magazine that sounded like just what he wanted. He called and spoke with the owner of the boat. He got directions on how to get to the boat. It was

supposed to be docked at a marina that was right across from the town post office. He was told he could not possibly miss it.

The next weekend, he and his wife, and another couple got in his car and headed out on the several hundred mile trip from North Carolina to Georgetown, Delaware to look at the boat.

Well, they found the post office, but they couldn't find the marina. In fact, there wasn't even any water any where to be seen. They drove all over that town, but they could not find it. Finally, reluctantly, the man called again to check on the directions. He got on the phone and said, "We found the post office, but we can't find the marina anywhere."

When he got off the phone, he clenched his teeth and stalked back to his car. "What's wrong," he wife asked, "where's the boat?"

He told her, "The boat's in Georgetown, Maryland, not Georgetown, Delaware!" Not only had he gone to the wrong town, he had gone to the wrong state!

Do you know where you're going? That's what happens spiritually. You rush off at a frantic pace. You allow almost anyone to give you directions. Then, when you arrive at your intended destination, you discover that you're no where close to where you want to be.

Turn to your self. Are you headed in the right direction? It doesn't matter how fast you travel. If you're not headed in the right direction, you will not experience a life that is fulfilling or meaningful.

Listen to what Joel wrote: "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love... [Joel 2:13] There is always hope for you because God is a unique master. God is gracious and merciful and abounding in love. God will give you another chance. That is why, even now, God waits for your return.

And the third step in your return to God is a willingness to **turn to others.**

Joel instructed the people to "blow the trumpet" calling together an assembly. [Joel 2:15] He told them to gather the people together. You have not reached the end of your journey when your relationship to God has been restored. God wants you to be in fellowship with other people. Sometimes, for some people, this is the hardest thing to do.

Sometimes it's a double standard. You seek the grace and forgiveness and unconditional love of God. Yet, you become hard-hearted

when you are asked to extend those same qualities to others. Somehow, some people get the idea that they are more deserving of these blessings than others. That which they have been freely given, they want others to earn.

A young woman went to her pastor one day. She was 28 years old and had been married for about six years. She was distraught and greatly troubled. She had contracted AIDS. The disease was progressing.

Her husband had passed the disease on to her, and then he had disappeared, leaving her sick and alone, with their five year old son. As the disease progressed, she knew she could not care for her son. So, she allowed her brother and his wife to adopt her little boy. Now they would not allow her to see her own son. Living in a small town, she faced the agony of seeing her son almost daily, but not being able to share his life. She was unable to provide the nurture he needed and she felt the pain of separation from her child.

And the church? This situation provided such an opportunity to minister to someone in need and to offer love, encouragement, and support. But she would not allow her pastor to share her pain with the members of the congregation. She did not trust their reaction. She feared that rejection and anger would win out over compassion in the church. She just could not risk taking on any more pain and heartache. So she kept her silence. Her pastor was compelled to do the same.

He would see her in church every Sunday. He knew the pain of her heart, but he could do little to help. He wondered, "Has the church's record been so poor that we can't even count on compassion any more?"

She died alone. She suffered in silent anonymity, one more painful reminder of just how far we still have to go if we truly desire to return to God.

Joel wrote, "gather the people, sanctify the congregation." [Joel 2:16] If you have been changed by your relationship with God, you must allow that relationship to change your interactions with others.

The summons to repent is itself an act of mercy. It calls you to change your ways before the day of judgment occurs. Your greatest need for change is in the realm of relationship. You jump at every chance to express bitterness and resentment while so many good opportunities to reach out in love and warmth are ignored.

Your return to God will never be complete until you turn to one another.

*“Yet even now,”* says the Lord, *“return to me with all your heart...”*

That journey calls you to turn towards God, to have that longing in your soul to go back home.

It calls you to turn to yourself, to know where you’re headed in life and to find the right directions when you get lost.

And it calls you to turn to others with compassion, forgiveness, understanding, and love.

“Return to the Lord, your god, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...” [Joel 2:13]