

¹² “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. ¹³ So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. ¹⁴ Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him – a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God? ¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. ¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar; let them say, ‘Spare Your people, O LORD, and do not give Your heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, “Where is their God?”’ ¹⁸ Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, and pity His people. ¹⁹ The LORD will answer and say to His people, “Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, and you will be satisfied by them; I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.”

Text: Joel 2:12-19 Ash Wed. 2026 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10 Mt. 6:1-6, 16-21 Ps. 51 Resp. Ps.: 42
Hymns: 281, 149, 755 147

A CALL TO RETURN

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

When I was a boy, before punishing me for something I did wrong, my dad would sometimes say, “This is going to hurt me more than it’s going to hurt you.” I did not understand. I was the one being punished. I thought, “This is going to hurt me, not you.”

Our text is from the Old Testament book of Joel. At that time, the children of Israel had, for the most part, turned away from God. As we read the book of Joel, we see that God warned the people that He was going to send a devastating plague of locusts on their country. God is perfectly justified in what He does. We need to remind ourselves that God is love. God would send the locusts in love, to try to humble the people, turn them back to Him, and save them.

God told the people, “*Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar.*” God wanted all the people, from the babies and children, to the brides and grooms, to the elders and priests, everyone, to turn to Him and take to heart what He said.

The Bible says, “*God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Pet. 3:9b). God wants each of us to turn to Him in repentance. One of the great blessings of Lent is that it gives us an opportunity to take an honest look at our sins that caused our Savior such terrible suffering, and repent of them.

The Lord told the people, “*Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God.*” David says, “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise*” (Ps. 51:17). The Lord wanted sincere repentance from His people. It’s good that we come to church, that we hear and study God’s Word, and that we live the way God tells us to. Those things in themselves aren’t enough. God is looking into our hearts for repentance: Am I sorry for my sins?

We’re told, “[*The LORD*] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him?” Over and over in our text God is referred to as “*The LORD*”: Jehovah, the God of our salvation. Joel assured the people then, and he’s assuring you and me now, that God is a loving, merciful, forgiving God. The prodigal son, or wayward son, came back to his father, knowing that his father was a loving, forgiving father. God tells us, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love*” (Jer. 31:3). “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved*” (Jn. 3:16-17). Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Praise God that He leads us to repent of our sins, and turns us repentant sinners to Jesus for forgiveness. Just before He died Jesus exclaimed, “*It is finished!*” (Jn. 19:30). Jesus paid for all of our sins. When we tell God we’re sorry for our sins, He forgives us. Jesus tells us, “*Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven*” (Mt. 9:2)

Joel begged, “*Spare Your people, O LORD.... Why should [the nations] say..., ‘Where is their God?’*” Joel said, “*The LORD will answer and say to His people, ... ‘I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.’*” If the people would repent and return to God, God would forgive them and bless them. The nations around would see for themselves that God is a forgiving, gracious God.

As long as the people were unrepentant, they gave the nations around them the impression that God is uncaring, even harsh. What kind of impression of God are we giving people? Every time we pray The Lord’s Prayer we say, “Forgive us our trespasses.” We need to think about those words, and pray them from our heart. We’re confessing to God that we are sinners, and that we have sinned. We’re asking God to forgive us. And He does. “*If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” – 1 John 1:9. “Lord, humble us before You and give us repentant hearts. Let others see that You are a loving, forgiving, gracious God. May they be drawn to You in repentance and trust in Jesus for their forgiveness and salvation.”

In time I came to understand what my father meant when he had to discipline me and would say, “This is going to hurt me more than it’s going to hurt you.” It hurt my dad when he had to discipline me. But he did it because he loved me and was trying to teach me what I needed to learn.

The Bible says, “*Though [the Lord] causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies*” (Lam. 3:32). God didn’t enjoy having to discipline the people of Joel’s day. He did it because He loved them. He wanted to teach them what they needed to learn, and turn them back to Him in repentance and faith.

God doesn’t enjoy disciplining us with the Law. He does it because He loves us. He wants to be able to comfort us with the Gospel. When we sin and repent, God forgives us for Jesus’ sake Who paid for all of our sins. “Thank You, Lord, for turning us to You in repentance and faith. Truly, You are *‘gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.’*” Amen.