

Session 12 Confidence in God's Kindness

INTRODUCTION

Joel 2. We're on our eleventh session on the book of Joel. The book of Joel is, I believe, an absolutely significant prophetic word for this hour of church history. Line upon line, every word is relevant. However, the book of Joel is mostly unknown and nearly completely neglected by the Body of Christ. I've read a number of commentaries on it, and most of them have explained it away where it's really not relevant for today, but rather a record of an event that happened a long time ago and that was the end of it. I believe that these three chapters, Joel 1, Joel 2, and Joel 3, are an urgent word from the Lord with relevance for today.

THE SEVENFOLD RESPONSE GOD DESIRES IN A TIME OF NATIONAL OR GLOBAL CRISIS

Last week we looked at the sevenfold response that God wants whenever there's a national crisis (Joel 2:12-17). These seven responses are critical; they're divinely mandated, and the Lord insists on them for a number of reasons. As the world is perplexed by things like September 11, and as the whole globe is about to enter into a time of crisis and glory unprecedented in human history—there will be a release of revival unprecedented in human history running alongside the crisis. People in the nations, both believers and unbelievers, are asking, "What shall we do?" The Lord says it very, very clearly; He tells them exactly what He wants to be done. But most of the Body of Christ is not hearkening to this. I believe that the Body of Christ will fully do this before the Lord returns. There's no mystery as to what God wants. He says it very, very clearly; it's just as simple as doing it.

We gave seven responses last week from Joel 2:12-17. This is what He wants in the hour of global crisis in cities and nations. I'll give the briefest review of that, because we only spent a moment or two on the seventh response. We didn't have time to develop it, and that's the critical message of the whole book of Joel. I was planning on spending more time on it last week, so we're going to spend an entire session on it this week.

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S ROLE IN THE COMING GLOBAL CRISIS

Number one: God wants us to understand His role in the coming global crisis. Surprisingly, God's role is probably the most misunderstood role. For example, in a very limited sense—though terrible in its intensity—what happened on September 11, causing 3,000 deaths. But what's coming is so far beyond that in scope and intensity on a global level. Very rarely was God mentioned in the equation. We prayed to God; we saw man's hand in it; we saw the Devil's hand in it. God's role in crisis is almost completely misunderstood. Yet the prophets have cried from Genesis to Revelation that God stands uniquely in relationship to crisis. Sometimes He allows them; sometimes He causes them in a very direct way. He's interested in removing everything that hinders love. That's the purpose of His judgments.

FOUR FACTORS THAT DETERMINE AND GOVERN GLOBAL CRISIS

I talked about four factors involved in the global crisis: God's zeal—His judgment to remove everything that hinders love; Satan's rage; man's sin; and creation's groaning. There's a natural process that's related to man's sin that's at work in creation. It's part of the crisis process, the process of the crisis that's coming.

We talked a bit about that. I talked about three responses. The first response is to understand God's role. That's not a small thing; on the contrary, it's very important. The book of Joel is clear about that.

B. We're to turn to God with wholeheartedness, including fasting and mourning.

C, D, and E; three four and five. This is a mandate to make the response corporate. These three things aren't technicalities; they're real mandates that are distinct from one another. They have difficulties and challenges and obstacles. By the grace of God I've sought to give myself to these three things, and they're each very different from one another. They have their own distinct challenges and obstacles. God's mandate is to make the wholeheartedness corporate. That's not an option; that's not a technicality; that's not a poetic way of saying, "Hey, why not throw in the others? The more the merrier." This is a divine mandate. It takes work to do this: calling sacred assemblies; calling the leadership. The busiest group in the Body of Christ, in many cases, is those in leadership, and they're almost the least responsive. It's a whole different challenge to get the leaders on board than it is to get the people on board. Getting the people on board, however, is a challenge in itself. Even calling a sacred assembly is different. There are a lot of obstacles even in calling them, and they must be called.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S KINDNESS: THE BRIDAL PARADIGM

Then there's the point of earnest prayer. The last is confidence in God's kindness—which we refer to here as "the bridal paradigm." It's the encounter with the passion of God's heart that makes the process very, very different when this final dimension is added. We can do six of these things, and I've seen several groups who are really pressing in to one through six, A, B, C, D, E, F, but they don't have confidence in God's kindness. It makes the entire process very different. It's a very different process without the seventh response. I've seen people awakened to response number seven, but they don't press in on one to six; they draw back on the other ones. So it's all of them together; and they're all here in Joel 2:12-17.

"TURN TO ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH FASTING ... AND WITH MOURNING"

Let's read Joel 2:12, "'Now therefore,' says the Lord..." (Joel 2:12). The *therefore* is referencing Joel 2:1-11, the crisis in Joel's generation which was a type and a foreshadowing of a global crisis coming in the generation in which the Lord returns. In essence Joel says, "Therefore, in light of the crisis, turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning; rend and tear your heart." I found this to be the most challenging, and the most piercing, and the most penetrating, word in the whole exhortation. "Tear your heart. Do what it takes to get through to the bottom of the issue, to deal with it in a radical way."

The tearing of the heart: what a powerful exhortation and command. The Lord says, "There might be times when it's not easy to do it. The price may seem too be great. Tear your heart, not your clothes in some religious ritual."

Jesus talked about the tearing of the heart in Matthew 5 when He said, "If your hand offends you, cut it off. If your eye makes you sin, pluck it out" (Mt. 5:29-30, paraphrased). He was talking about so radically pursuing righteousness that we even get bruised in the process. There's a tear; there's a bruise. There's sometimes a pain when the Lord, in cooperation with our decision, pulls the roots of bondage, pulls the whole root system out, and, "Ouch!" It hurts to break through in certain areas. We want to get free; but we want to do everything but tear the heart and really lay our lifestyles out in such a way that freedom becomes a reality. We want to be free by the Lord sovereignly whisking us away one day and it's all over. The Lord says, "I will help you." There's a divine enabling; there's a divine empowering, but there's also a cooperation. He says, "Tear the heart. Rend the heart." That's typically the part that's most overlooked in the process. That's the part that I really don't like. I don't mind missing a few meals. I don't mind crying a little; I don't mind gathering together with all the people for some anointed music and praying. It's the tearing of the heart part that gets intensely personal.

“RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD, FOR HE IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL...”

It says, “Return to the Lord.” Then Joel gives five reasons why we return to the Lord. That’s what we’re going to look at tonight. He’s gracious, number one. He’s merciful, number two. This is why those who are lost in bondage to sin, who have lost their way, can return with confidence, because they know these things about the personality of God. They know that He’s gracious. Or do they? I think that one of the reasons that there’s not as much turning as there needs to be is because we don’t know that He’s gracious. We don’t know that in His graciousness He will make a way of deliverance for us. He will help us, like in Luke 15, and the story of the lost sheep, He will carry us to the place of breakthrough and victory. He really will be gracious. He will help us each step of the way in the tearing of our hearts.

Number three: He is slow to anger. Number four: He is of “great kindness.” That’s the one I really like to focus in on: He is of great kindness. Number five: He relents from doing harm. It’s in His personality to change His plans from doing harm, from allowing the judgment to hit that geographic area. He says, “I do everything that I can to work out a way to do it differently. I don’t want to violate the free will of man, and I don’t want to violate My own justice. I’ll do everything that I can, because I’m looking for a way to cause the situation to turn out well.” He does relent from doing harm; it’s in His heart to do that.

Then Joel makes this very important, very interesting, mysterious statement: “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” (Joel 2:14)?

“BLOW THE TRUMPET IN ZION, CONSECRATE A FAST, CALL A SACRED ASSEMBLY”

He goes on in verse 15 and says, “Blow the trumpet; consecrate a fast; call a sacred assembly! Gather the people; sanctify the congregation! Gather the elders, the children, the bride and the bridegroom, and let them come out of the chamber” (Joel 2:15-16, paraphrased). Verse 17 describes the prayer: “Let the priests . . . 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’” (Joel 2:17, NKJV)?

This is interesting. For those of you who have studied Joel, some commentaries say that it’s a locust invasion in Joel 2. There was a locust invasion in Joel 1; but in Joel 2, the prayer is that the nations wouldn’t rule over Israel. The threat is the invasion of a nation called Babylon. The prayer wasn’t, “Lord why should the locust devour our crops?” It was, “Why should an unrighteous nation come in and destroy us?” That’s one of the ways we know it’s the Babylonian invasion. It’s a great military crisis that’s on the verge of coming in and wiping out the nation of Israel. We’ve gone through that a number of times in the last ten weeks; I won’t go through it again.

THE GRACIOUSNESS OF GOD IS OUR MOST POWERFUL MOTIVATION

I’ll focus in on Joel 2:13-14. Roman numeral II on the page, “Confidence in God’s Kindness.” This is critical. The understanding of God’s heart doesn’t come automatically; it takes time to develop this understanding. We feed our spirit on it deliberately because this is one of the great motivations, the most powerful motivation to get the people to turn. He says, “Turn, because He’s gracious.” That’s the motivation that Joel is using in order to get the people who have a willing spirit to have courage to make the necessary decisions to tear their heart so that they stop the things that are breaking their fellowship with God. It gives them the courage that God could actually release power to deliver them.

If you have an angry God, the people who are willing to respond to Him think, "I probably won't make it anyway, so why go through the hassle? He's going to wipe me out in a moment." It's the idea of a God with a big hammer looking for a reason to smash us and crush us. That's the God many believers are worshipping. They say, "Technically we know He's a gracious God," but in terms of real, practical emotional responses, we're not coming before a God who is gracious. We do the math and say, "He's looking for a reason to smash me, so why go through the pain? I won't break through; I'll come under judgment anyway. If I do press in all the way, He's not bending over doing everything that He can to come and deliver us."

I tell people, "You take one step and He will take ten."

He's bending over, if you will, in a posture of eagerness, saying, "I want you. But I don't want to violate your free will. I want you if you want it. I want to help you if you want to be helped. I won't force you. If you want it, you take one step and I'll take ten to deliver you."

THE TWOFOLD MOTIVATION OF KINDNESS AND JUDGMENT

We need a gracious God who is merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, or we won't be sufficiently motivated. Joel has already given them the motivation in Joel 2:1-11: a great enemy army, a great military invasion is on the threshold. He's going to annihilate the nation. The judgment motivation is already in place. There's a twofold motivation. There's the judgment motivation for those who resist; the Lord says, "I'm warning you, threatening you with judgment." Yet to those who are willing to respond He offers Himself as the God of kindness who will go out of His way to help them get through and break through so that they can cooperate and be in a position of receiving blessing instead of a position of receiving God's judgment.

We have to work through this. In Romans 2:4 Paul the apostle says it most clearly. He says, "Don't despise the kindness of God, for the tenderness of God's heart leads you to repentance if you encounter His kindness" (Rom. 2:4, paraphrased). If the people of God with a willing spirit will encounter the God of kindness, it will lead them to repentance. It will motivate them to tear their heart. And it will motivate them with hope that God is actually going to help them in the process.

When we encounter the God of kindness, it leads us down the pathway of repentance. But we can't minimize the importance of the God of kindness in terms of the experience of the people. We must labor to establish this. It's not enough to hear it once or twice; it's not even enough to preach it a few times. Our spirit must be overflowing with this reality.

THE CALL TO WHOLEHEARTEDNESS FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINDNESS OF GOD

At the very center of this eschatological, end-time judgment is the call to wholeheartedness based on the fact that God is of great kindness. We have to press this point. We have to "overdo it," in a certain sense, though it's impossible to really do that; but we have to get the people ready on this. That's why we're returning, because of five things: He's gracious, He's merciful, He's slow to anger, He has great kindness, and He relents from doing harm.

Number one, He's gracious. He evaluates us so differently than anyone else does. He evaluates us so differently. It says in Psalm 103:14 that when He relates to us, He remembers that we're dust. I love that. When He relates to us He remembers our frailty. He remembers that we're dust. Psalm 78:39 says the same thing. "He remembers that we are but flesh" (Ps. 78:39, paraphrased). He remembers it. I like that.

He is gracious. When He looks at me, I say, "I blew it again!"

He says, "I remember that you're but dust and flesh. Therefore, as I relate to you, I relate to you at a workable level."

COMMUNICATING THE KINDNESS OF GOD IN THE MIDST OF OUR BROKENNESS

God is human-friendly in His style of relating to us. He's gracious. His requirements are within the reach of weak and broken people, by the grace of God. "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 Jn. 5:4) if we get in the river of experiencing and encountering love. That's what 1 John is all about. If we get into the river of encountering Him, His commandments aren't burdensome; they're doable for weak and broken people. My point is, it's God's graciousness that set up the boundaries. He set up the whole framework whereby we could succeed in touching Him to change history. The standard isn't so high that weak and broken people can't do it.

He is a gracious God. He created the standard and the whole framework. In Matthew 11:30 He says, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Mt. 11:30). The premise is, "If you're in the place of encounter, if your heart is being touched by the Spirit, if you're feeding your spirit on the truth of who I am, if it's touching and awakening you, My commandments aren't burdensome. My yoke is easy; My burden is light."

We obey God because God's help is there, because God is kind with our failures and He helps us with the Holy Spirit. This only works as we're pursuing a life of encounter with the Lord. We call it a life of prayer. Another term that you might use is a life of encounter. He is gracious. He's gracious in His style, His standards, His whole framework. The boundary lines of walking before God and with God are doable. He's gracious. He isn't the military leader or the harsh football coach who can't see any weakness at all. He's gracious. It's critical. That was David's greatest revelation: God's merciful heart and graciousness. That's why David ran to God instead of from God when He stumbled.

NO ONE CAN FULLY MODEL THE PASSION THAT HE HAS FOR MERCY

Number two, He's merciful. Not only does He create a pathway and a standard that's doable in His grace, He's merciful. He tells us in Isaiah, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55:8). We all know that verse. If you read the context, He's talking about His willingness to give mercy to sinful people. He says, "There's no one who would give mercy at the extreme to which I will give mercy." The most merciful person would still back down after a certain while. But the Lord says, "I would still give mercy if they say yes to Me." He says, "Search all the earth, and as far as the heavens are above the earth, no one can fully model the passion that I have for mercy."

"HE DOES NOT RETAIN HIS ANGER FOREVER, BECAUSE HE DELIGHTS IN MERCY"

"Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity, and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy" (Mic. 7:18). It's like the Lord says, "This is the thing that I enjoy the most. I love taking weak and broken people who have a yes in their spirit and absolutely blowing their minds with My ability to give them another beginning, a new start." The Lord says, "I delight in it. I love the look on their face. I love the response in their heart when it dawns on them that I'm giving them yet another opportunity for a brand-new beginning after so many warnings and so many failures."

I believe that one of God's favorite dimensions of ruling and leading the whole universe is watching the expressions and the heart responses. Ten thousand times He says, "Mike, I'll give you another beginning!"

I say, "Oh, God!"

He looks at me and say, "I love it when you do that! I delight in what happens in the lives of My beloved when I give them mercy!" It radically reworks our whole inward life; it really does. Our emotional chemistry is radically changed.

In Ezekiel 33 He says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, none whatsoever. I want them to turn and live. I'm looking for a way to forgive them without violating either their free will or My own justice" (Eze. 33:11, paraphrased).

WITH GREAT DIFFICULTY THE RIGHTEOUS ARE SAVED

God honors the free will. When a man says, "I don't want God!" God says, "That's exactly where I'll allow you to live in time and eternity, without Me. I won't cause you to relate to Me if you don't want to do that. I won't violate the dignity of the free will."

He won't violate His justice, but He says, "I look for a way." The Lord looks for a way, every way possible to forgive. God went way out of His way in redemption. 1 Peter 4:17-18 tells us that it was with great difficulty that the righteous are saved. It's not difficult on the side of the righteous, because it's a free gift. The difficulty is what it cost God to provide the way of salvation. With great difficulty the righteous are saved. One translation says, "The righteous is scarcely saved" (1 Pet. 4:18, ESV). I don't like that translation; I like "with great difficulty." In other words, for God to become human, to come to the earth, to be crushed by the wrath of His Father, required great difficulty.

The Lord says, "Mercy is what I'm about. I went way out of My way to make a way for you. I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. As high as the heavens are above the earth, that is My desire to show mercy. I delight in it."

He is slow to anger. Each one of these has a little dimension that overlaps, but they each have unique distinctions. It's not just saying the same thing every time. There are some overlaps with respect to that holy sentiment of good will towards us, but there are distinctive dimensions of this. Each one of them is worth going deep into the well of God's heart.

He is slow to anger. He gives time. When we'd have said, "Enough is enough!" God gives another season, another chance. In Luke 9, John the apostle basically said, "Lord, the city of Samaria didn't respond. Just nuke the city! Burn the city" (Lk. 9:54, paraphrased)!

The Lord said, "No! No! No!" The Lord had plans. He said, "I'll give them time. I'll visit the city in power" (Lk. 9:55, paraphrased). Of course in Acts 8, John got to call down the fire of the Holy Spirit on the very city that he wanted to eliminate a few years before.

One of the passages that profoundly moves me is in Revelation 2:20-22. It's to the church at Thyatira. He says, "You allow that woman Jezebel ... to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality" (Rev. 2:20). This is the risen Christ speaking to John. He says, "I will give them time to repent. If they don't, I'll take the options away. I'll cast them on a sickbed" (v. 21-22, paraphrased). It's not the fury of God casting them on a sickbed. The Lord says, "In the place of sickness they won't have the same capacities to engage in immorality."

I'll take the options away in order to free them. I want them free. I'll cast them and their children on a sickbed. I will completely distract them with a burning fire to get them free from the other negative fire, the sinful fire."

The Lord's commitment to cast them on a sickbed was about freeing them. The part that touches me is that He says, "They're fully engaged in this, but John, go and tell them I'll give them even more time. I'll give them yet another chance."

I say, "Lord, this is an amazing thing!"

"THE INIQUITY OF THE AMORITES IS NOT YET FULL"

In Genesis 15:16, the Lord tells Abraham, "Abraham, your descendents will inherit the land of Israel. It's going to be a while before they inherit it. In fact, they won't inherit it for another 500 years"—under the leadership of Joshua. He says, "You'll inherit the land, but here's My plan. You're going to go into four hundred years of captivity in Egypt" (Gen. 15:13-16). I mean, He tells Abraham this.

Abraham is thinking, "Boy, that's intense. Four hundred years! Wow!" Abraham may have thought, "Maybe I won't write that one down." But he did, and it's important that he did.

The Lord gave a reason. He said, "In the land of Israel are the Amorites." He said, "Their sin hasn't come to completion. Their sin hasn't matured yet, and it won't mature for another four hundred years. I'll never, ever do anything that will violate My justice." He said, "I will give them time. I already know in My foreknowledge that they won't repent, but I won't allow the sword of justice to strike them until they've gone to the uttermost depths of defying My grace and My kindness towards them. It will take them 400 more years, but they'll say no to Me. I know in My foreknowledge that the Amorites will resist Me, and in four hundred years the time is up" (Gen. 15:16, paraphrased).

I can imagine Abraham saying, "Could we shorten that to three hundred years? Is there any way that maybe we could...?"

The Lord says, "No, I cannot. It's in My nature. I won't speed up the process."

That's an amazing fact of God's heart relating to a rebellious nation. He says, "No, I'll give them all the time that they need, but I know that they'll say no." He said of Pharaoh in the time of Moses, "I know that Pharaoh will say no at the end of the day." It's an amazing thing.

Luke 13:6-9 tells the story of the man who has the vineyard. Three years later there's no fruit, and the owner of the vineyard said, "You know, I put a lot of time and money into this and there's no fruit. This is a bad investment. I put an incredible amount of time and energy in this, and there's no fruit."

Then, the other man says, "Why not give it one more year? Give it another season before judgment comes" (Lk. 13:8-9, paraphrased).

That's the Lord's heart. He says, "If there's even a chance, I'll give them yet one more season." He's very slow to anger. He's looking for a way to release blessing instead of judgment without violating your free will and His own justice.

THE LORD IS NOT WILLING THAT ANY SHOULD PERISH

Peter tells us, “Beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet. 3:8). He goes on to say, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (v. 9). He’s giving ample time for the nations to be saved because He wants no one to perish. In fact, He’s letting human history continue on because He says, “I want more to have a chance to hear the gospel and for the gospel to have a stronghold in the nations.” In order that more people may hear it with a better opportunity, He gives those nations more time, because when He comes at the second coming a number of these nations will be wiped out forever when He sets up His earthly kingdom. A number of the nations won’t fully enter into His earthly kingdom; He will wipe them out. But He wants to give them yet another generation as a chance to respond.

God is so slow to anger. It’s a magnificent study in the Word of God, the study of God’s desire individually and corporately to give us a chance—both as people and as nations. Sometimes we get in a wrong relationship with someone, in strife, and then we find out that they did something really bad and we say, “There You go, Lord!” The Lord says, “No, I’m looking for a way to forgive them, not to crush them. I’m looking for a way to forgive them, not to crush them.”

Sometimes you may hear of someone who has caused you a hard time doing this or that. You say, “Well, I bet the Lord is going to get them.”

And the Lord doesn’t! Ten years goes by and He doesn’t! The Lord says, “Ten years is nothing. That’s what I’m doing with you. I’ve let you go for ten years.”

“Well, Lord, let’s not get all technical about it...”

Number four: He’s of great kindness. He takes the initiative; He makes plans. He desires to make a way of escape. He’s looking for cities to avoid the calamity that’s scheduled for the planet. He’s looking for a way out. That’s His personality. He’s inclined in kindness to lead the universe with kindness.

THE LORD TREATS HIS PEOPLE WITH MERCY AND JUSTICE

He relents from doing harm. Joel 2:26 says, “He deals wondrously with His people” (Joel 2:26, paraphrased). He does relent from doing harm. That doesn’t mean God made His mind up and it was final and then suddenly He changed His mind and took even Himself by surprise. I don’t believe that’s what’s going on. Rather, I believe the Lord is saying, “The way that it’s going in the present tense, I will honor the free will of human beings. I cannot violate My justice.”

God doesn’t even violate His justice when He deals with the Devil. He gives the Devil every dimension of fairness. Even the way that He conquers and defeats him is entirely fair. The Lord doesn’t take any short cuts at all, even in defeating the Devil. He demonstrates perfect justice in everything He does. He plays exactly according to fairness. He operates by fairness and justice, but He relents.

We’re going to go briefly through a few examples of God treating His people with fairness. One of the greatest is this story in Genesis 18:22-23, with Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham says, “Suppose there are only fifty people out of the thousands who live there?”

The Lord says, "I will take fifty. Fifty will do it."

Abraham says, "How about forty-five?"

Then, "Forty?" Then, "What about thirty? Or twenty?"

Then finally he asks, "Lord, how about ten? Would ten do it?"

The Lord says, "Of course ten would do it! I would save the city for ten! I would save it for ten! Find Me ten who will agree with My heart. That's enough reason for Me to save this city."

The Lord obviously was speaking in absolute truthfulness. He wasn't saying, "Well, I know that they're not, so I'm just going to wipe them out anyway." The Lord says, "No, I long that ten would come forth, and I would save Sodom and Gomorrah for ten."

It's not like the Lord is changing His mind. It's like the Lord is saying, "If the circumstances will change from what they are now, it will give Me a way to change the administration of how I'm leading the earth." If the city rises up and repents, the Lord says, "Without violating My justice or their free will, I can now send them blessing. I can do it without violating the truth."

It's in that sense that He relents, because the circumstance changes. Of course the Lord in His foreknowledge knows it all, but He relates to us according to our own ways and weaknesses. He says, "There's a dynamic relationship: you press in and there's a different situation and I'll cause the circumstances to be different." There's a cause and effect and He wants us to know it.

THE MYSTERIOUS PERHAPS OF GOD

Then Joel says in the next line, "Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him" (Joel 2:14)? I learned this passage from the New American Standard, which says, "Perhaps He will turn" (ibid, NASB). I love it! I love that line, "Perhaps He will turn." I call it, "The mysterious perhaps of God."

The Lord says, "I might, and I might not." The Lord isn't trying to keep us guessing like it's a game. That's not what's going on here. The Lord says, "I won't tell you the full implications of all the numbers and all the amounts." We try to make equations out of it; He says, "You just press in and trust Me. If I could find ten in Sodom to save it, just trust Me that I'm a God of kindness. If there's anyway that I can do it without violating their free will or My free will, I'll do it." So the Lord gives the invitation to the whole human race: "Perhaps!"

HE WILL TAKE THE DISASTER ZONE AND TURN IT INTO A REVIVAL CENTER

In Joel 2, He's talking to Israel, which is waiting for an invasion from the nation of Babylon, a military invasion that's absolutely going to destroy them. He says, "Perhaps even in this invasion, I will have pockets of mercy. Perhaps I'll have cities of refuge! Perhaps! I won't just lay it out to you so that you can make an equation out of it and then try to fulfill the equation without relating to Me." God says, "No, you trust My heart, you press in and I can assure you that I have far greater mercy than you do."

He goes on and says, "Perhaps He will leave a blessing behind Him." He will take the disaster zone and turn it into a revival center. He will make it a place of blessing. God will leave a sovereign blessing in the place that would have had disaster if they had not turned. He will make it a revival center.

"A GRAIN OFFERING AND A DRINK OFFERING FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD"

He says, "A grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God" (Joel 2:14). Now what that means is that if the Babylonian invasion happens, this military invasion, the crops will be all destroyed as described in Joel 1 with the locusts. If there's drought, they'll all be destroyed! There will be no grain and there will be no wine. There won't be a grain offering or a drink offering. The very presence of those two things means that the Lord withdrew the judgment. When Babylon came through, they left them with no crops and no temple and no religious institution. There was no way for them to offer these things, to continue in the life of devotion and worship they had had.

So in our context, when Joel says, "Perhaps they'll have a grain offering and a drink offering," it means, "You cry out to God, and judgment is coming, and perhaps I'll turn it around and I'll allow the singers to sing and the dancers to dance." In other words, "I will allow you to continue without the judgment touching you in a personal way. I'll put a hedge around you of protection."

"SEEK THE LORD, ALL YOU MEEK OF THE EARTH"

I'll take you to a few passages. We only have a few minutes left, but I want you to see these. We won't look at them all, but they're very dynamic.

Let's look at Zephaniah 2. Zephaniah is a contemporary of Joel. This is right before the Babylonian invasion. The Babylonian invasion was a picture and a type of the global crisis at the end of the age before the Lord returns. The Lord meant it to be a picture in history of what would happen on a global scale, but even larger and more intense, as a judgment on the whole earth.

Zephaniah 2 is a parallel passage to Joel 2. It's the same time frame. Zephaniah and Joel were undoubtedly friends. Look at what Zephaniah says in Zephaniah 2:1. He's calling the sacred assembly. "Gather together, yes, gather together ... before the decree is issued" (Zeph. 2:1-2)—before the decree in the heavens—that time in natural time, in real time and space. There's a time that can be measured in the earthly sense where God says, "It's now too late, from this minute forward."

Zephaniah goes on to say, "Before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you" (Zeph. 2:2). He's describing the Babylonian invasion.

Here's what he says in the next verse; this is the parallel to the "perhaps" of Joel. "Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger" (Zeph. 2:3). Another translation uses the word *perhaps* there as will. "It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger."

"IT MAY BE THAT YOU WILL BE HIDDEN IN THE DAY OF THE LORD'S ANGER"

He's telling this to the nation of Israel right before the Babylonian invasion and making it a picture, a parallel for this hour of history. "Perhaps when the fierce anger does touch the land, I will cause you to be hidden.

Perhaps I will raise up a hedge around you and your geographic area and you'll be a city of refuge, a pocket of mercy." Perhaps! You don't know. Press into God. That's what we're believing for our city here. It may be the whole city, it may be part of the city, it may be hundreds of miles; I don't know. The perhaps of God is there.

The Lord says, "Trust Me; you press in and I'll pay you well. I'll do better than you'd have guessed if you had all the facts."

I love that: "The perhaps of God."

"ROTTENNESS ENTERED MY BONES; AND I TREMBLED IN MYSELF"

Now look at Habakkuk 3:17. Habakkuk and Zephaniah and Joel were all contemporaries, along with Jeremiah. Habakkuk and Joel and Zephaniah, you need to study all together. Habakkuk obviously refers to the Babylonian invasion. That's the next big event on the calendar, and at the time of this writing it's right around the corner. But Habakkuk 3 is also talking about the very end of the age. He's talking about this glorious coming of the Lord described in Habakkuk. The second coming of Christ is being described in majestic terms of God visiting the planet in judgment. It's really terrifying, which is the ultimate fulfillment of what Babylon is doing in a limited way. It's the day of the Lord coming to deal with sin. But at the second coming there's a far greater extreme of that. It's the same subject: the day of the Lord dealing with sin. Habakkuk describes that day, and there are few chapters in the Bible that will move you in relation to the second coming of Christ like Habakkuk 3. It's absolutely stunning and terrifying.

He says, "When I heard, my body trembled; my lips quivered at the voice; rottenness entered my bones; and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble" (Hab. 3:16). He trembled seeing Christ Jesus coming in majesty to remove everything that hinders love.

He says, "I want to find a way to rest. How is this going to happen? When He comes to the people He will invade them with His troops" (Hab. 3:16b, paraphrased).

Just as we saw in Joel, here is that *perhaps*: "Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines"—it may or may not—"though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls"—there's no longer any meat—"yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; He makes my feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills" (Hab. 3:17-19).

The prophet says, "Perhaps in that day when I cry out, perhaps the food may not be there, but perhaps it might be there. I don't know!" He's just finished describing total annihilation in Habakkuk 3. He says, "Perhaps there will be provision; perhaps there won't be. But I know this as an individual: I will press into God's heart. I know that God will be strength to Me. He may be provision in a way that's not the rule of the day for the rest of the geographic area."

Normally when judgment comes, it's settled. Habakkuk says, "The fig tree doesn't blossom; the fruit's not on the vine, but it might be in the lives of the righteous."

The Lord says, "There's a supernatural provision that I'll give those who cry out to Me with their whole hearts." I love this.

THE PEOPLE OF NINEVEH TURNED FROM EVIL, AND GOD SPARED THEM

Turn to Jonah 3:7-10. Jonah the prophet has gone to Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria, which was the wickedest nation in the world in Jonah's day. They were a brutal, savage enemy of Israel. That's why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, because it would be akin to a Jewish prophet going to Berlin at the height of Adolph Hitler's reign and preaching repentance to Berlin so that they could enjoy revival. Literally, it was of a similar intensity. Nineveh was the Berlin of Assyria. It was the capital of a very cruel and unmerciful people who came in and annihilated the nation of Israel in 721 BC.

Let's go to Jonah 3:5. "So the people of Nineveh believed God" (Jon. 3:5). In Jonah 3:1-4, Jonah preaches and they believe God! In Jonah 3:5, they fasted and prayed, they put on sackcloth, and did what God commands in Joel 2! This evil city repented! And the king of Nineveh "arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh" (Jon. 3:6-7). He caused the whole message of judgment to be published. He put it in the *USA Today* of Nineveh and sent it abroad to the whole nation. Basically he said, "No one can eat, man or beast! Everyone is going to fast and repent."

Here's what this unrighteous king said: "Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish" (Jon. 3:9)? "Then," the Bible says, "God saw their works" (v. 10).

I'm seriously talking about an empire that wanted to annihilate the nation of Israel. A hundred years later, in 721 BC, they actually swept in and wiped out the ten northern tribes.

"Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and did not do it" (Jon. 3:10). This is real! This really happened to Nineveh! If it can happen to Nineveh, it can happen to anyone!

"IT MAY BE THAT THE LORD ... WILL BE GRACIOUS TO THE REMNANT OF JOSEPH"

In Amos 5, Amos is actually describing the judgment of Assyria about a hundred years later. Amos is saying, "The Assyrians are coming. They're going to wipe us out under the discipline of God." He's prophesying to Israel. In Amos 5:14-16, he says, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (Amos 5:14-15). He's talking about the ten northern tribes. Here's the key phrase: "It may be that the Lord will be gracious." Amos had this "mysterious perhaps" of God in his theology as well.

The "It may be" can apply to your city; it really can, and I'm taking this really seriously for Kansas City. I want Kansas City to be a pocket of mercy. In the midst of global crisis and judgment I believe that God is going to raise up cities of refuge all over the earth and I want this to be one of them. I believe that it can be in the grace of God. I believe that your city can be a pocket of mercy if you gather the people together in wholeheartedness and do what God says in Joel 2:12-17. But not five minutes before the disaster; we want a corporate, long-term history of entering into the place of encounter with God's heart. We're not earning the mercy, we're lining up to where God can show it without violating our free will or His own justice. We're not earning it, we're lining up in such a way that God can manifest His goodness without violating His own ways. Don't think of it as earning it; think of it as lining up in agreement. I love that.

AMOS INTERCEDED ON BEHALF OF ISRAEL, AND GOD SPARED THEM

In Amos 7:1-6, it's the same problem: judgment is around the corner. This time, the judgment is a locust swarm, like in Joel 1, and a consuming fire. "Then the Lord God showed me: Behold, He formed locust swarms at the beginning of the late crop" (Amos 7:1). God is the One who formed it; it wasn't just a natural product of the circumstances being right. Sometimes God forms it.

It was "at the beginning of the late crop; indeed it was the late crop after the king's mowings. And so it was, when they had finished eating the grass of the land, that I said: "O Lord God, forgive, I pray! Oh that Jacob may stand, for he is small" (Amos 7:2). This agricultural disaster would have wiped them out, because the Assyrians were coming right on the heels of it.

This parallels what happened in Joel: in the first chapter with the locusts, in the second with the Babylonian invasion. Locusts were about to invade, and then the Assyrians were coming. All of this is described in Deuteronomy 28, where the Lord said He would send in the locusts and then, after that, the military. This is God's way. He says, "I will stir up the agriculture in a negative way. I'll get your attention by attacking the food. If that doesn't do it, I'm sending in an army."

Amos cries out, "O Lord God, forgive, I pray! Oh, that Jacob may stand, for he is small" (Amos 7:2).

Then the Scripture says, "The Lord relented concerning this. 'It shall not be,' said the Lord" (Amos 7:3).

Amos said, "Whew, boy, intercession works." This is real! It works!

Look at the next verse. The Lord showed the prophet that the people were falling backward again in compromise. They hadn't repented, though his prayer had bought them some time. The Lord called for a conflict by fire, a great devouring fire that would devour the whole territory.

Amos said, "Well, I know that it worked before. I know the power of the ministry of intercession." He said, "O Lord God, cease, I pray! Oh, that Jacob may stand, for he is small" (Amos 7:5)!

The Lord said, "OK." And He relented and the fire didn't happen. He stopped the fire. I love the perhaps of God! You never know when it's coming.

"MY WRATH WILL BE Poured OUT ON THIS PLACE, AND NOT BE QUENCHED"

Look at 2 Chronicles 34. This is right before the Babylonian invasion as well, and it's absolutely fantastic. Josiah was the king at the same time Jeremiah was a prophet, and Zephaniah and Habakkuk and Joel were prophesying at the end of Josiah's reign.

In 2 Chronicles 34:22, Huldah the prophetess, who was a keeper of the wardrobe, and who possessed the anointing of the Spirit, went and prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said, "Tell the man who sent you to me" (2 Chron. 34:23)—you'd think the Lord would say, "Tell Josiah the king," but He said, "Tell the man who sent you to Me." Here's the most powerful man in the land, and he went to this lady who was the keeper of the wardrobe and said, "I hear that you have an anointing of the Holy Spirit on you. I need help!" He was a humble

man. He was the most powerful man in the land, and he said, "Talk to the Lord for me and get some divine information."

Here's the message: "I will bring calamity on this place and its inhabitants" (2 Chron. 34:24). In other words, "The Babylonian army is coming; all the curses of Deuteronomy 28 are coming upon you"—the curses which spoke of a military invasion. Why? "Because they have forsaken Me and burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands. Therefore My wrath will be poured out on this place, and not be quenched" (v. 25).

"YOUR EYES SHALL NOT SEE ALL THE CALAMITY WHICH I WILL BRING ON THIS PLACE"

The Lord really did pour out His wrath in 586 BC in a terrifying way. This was written just a few decades before. But look at verse 27; that's the verse you want to read. Now He's speaking of Josiah. "'Because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and its inhabitants, and you humbled yourself before Me, and you tore your clothes and wept before Me, I also have heard you,' says the Lord" (2 Chron. 34:27). Josiah was in his thirties. "'Surely I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be gathered to your grave in peace; and your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place and its inhabitants'" (v. 28).

In other words, "He will die, but he will be gathered to his grave in peace. The calamity is coming, but it won't come in his lifetime. I will prolong the calamity and he won't see it in his day." This is the God we're relating to, the God we call *Bridegroom*. I like this God. I like His ways. He's sending His judgments, but beloved, it's not just final; there's something that the people of God can do to get in alignment with His heart, because God says, "I'll do everything to give mercy if you'll give Me a reason to give it."

In Ezekiel 33:10-11, the Lord says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Eze. 33:11). He's saying, "If they'll turn, I'll absolutely let them live." This is right before the Babylonian invasion. "I will absolutely let the nation live if they'll turn to Me."

GOD OFFERS TO SAVE THE BABYLONIANS WHO ARE ABOUT TO DESTROY JUDAH

Here is the absolutely surprising one, in Jeremiah 51. This is some years later. Babylon is now going to be in judgment. God says, "You know what? If you cry out for Babylon, maybe I'll show mercy even to Babylon."

Jeremiah says, "Lord, Babylon has been mean to us!"

The Lord says, "Yes, but Babylon has been My rod of correction that will cause a midstream correction so that the Messiah will come through the line of Israel and bring salvation to the world."

"But Lord, they're mean! They're cruel and they're evil!"

The Lord says, "You cry out, and perhaps I will save even the people of Babylon" (Jer. 51:7-8, paraphrased).

God had offered to save the Israelites in the midst of the Assyrians, the nation that had come up against them. And here, a few hundred years later, He said, "I will do it for Babylon." God will save a remnant even among the wickedest nations if the people of God will cry out.

“WHO CAN TELL WHETHER THE LORD WILL BE GRACIOUS TO ME?”

My favorite two are the last two here. Well, they're all my favorite ones. How can any of these not be your favorite ones? Here is David in the time of his sin with Bathsheba, in 2 Samuel 12, and the prophet Nathan comes and says, “Your son is going to die. This new baby born in fornication is going to die.”

For seven days David is lying on the ground fasting and crying out to God. Finally the baby dies. And the men over here are scared; they say, “The baby died. Who is going to tell the king? He may do something really extreme. He's been lying down for seven days.”

So they sneak up on the king and the king says, “What's going on?”

They whisper to one another, “Umm, you tell him.”

“No, you tell him!”

He says, “No, I understand what's going on.”

They say, “The baby died.”

David says, “OK.” He gets up, washes his face, gets a Big Mac, eats dinner seven days later, and worships. He says, “I love you, God!”

They say, “David, you're crazy. You're bizarre! Why are you doing that? Your baby died.”

But he said, “I knew the baby might die, but I know God. Perhaps. Perhaps.” He says, “I know him. I remember the days in the wilderness, and I stumbled and fell a number of times and He saved me. Perhaps; you never know with God” (1 Sam. 12:22, paraphrased). He says, “I'm free now.” And he went and worshiped God.

They said, “David, you're strange.”

He said, “Oh, I know God. God has this dimension in His heart. You humble yourself, you cry out, and it moves Him. He delights in mercy!”

“LET ME FALL INTO THE HAND OF THE LORD, FOR HIS MERCIES ARE VERY GREAT”

Last one. 2 Samuel 24; here he is sinning at the end of his life in a grievous way. It's more serious than it appears if you don't really understand the gravity of it. He just numbered Israel. It was a profound statement of pride. We read in 1 Chronicles 21 that the Devil moved David to do this. A spirit of pride came on him for a moment. It was satanically induced and David wanted to boast in his army instead of in the Lord.

The Lord says, “David, this isn't like you, this isn't you!” And He adds, “There's going to come judgment for this.” He tells David, “I will give you three choices. Number one: you can have an invading army come in.”

David went, “Agh!”

“Number two: you can have a drought and people will die of starvation, or be really troubled because of the agriculture.”

Again, David said, “Agh!”

Finally the Lord said, “Or you can have My hand come as a pestilence for three days over you. Which do you want?”

David said, “I don’t like men; I don’t trust them; they’re mean.” He said, “I’ll throw myself into Your hands God, because who knows with You what You’ll do? Who knows what You’ll do” (1 Chron. 21:13, paraphrased)?

He says, “I’ll take Your judgment. I don’t want man’s and I don’t want nature’s; I want Yours. I want Yours directly. I’ll take my chances with You, because I know who You are.” It’s just that revelation that David had of God’s heart.

Amen.

MINISTRY TIME

We covered a lot of verses tonight. You have something to go work on in your private time. Let’s stand.

Lord, we love You. O God, perhaps. In the name of Jesus.

Let’s not worry about Kansas City or New York City right now; let’s think about us as individuals. Although this is talking about national calamities and things like that, let’s talk about individuals. He’s the same God. Think about your life: not what you’re going to do back home, or what you’re going to do in Kansas City. Raise up a wall, a hedge of protection. Let’s think about our own lives. Let’s throw ourselves with mercy into His hands.

The Lord says, “I will give you mercy.” Remember 2 Chronicles 34:27. He says, “You go tell that young man, Josiah, because his heart was tender, because he humbled himself, because he tore his heart, because he wept, that I have heard his tears. It has moved My heart. Tell him I will give him peace in his day.”

Talk to the Lord in your own life. This is a God of great kindness. The forerunners must be able to communicate the God of kindness in the midst of judgment. There’s no contradiction. He’s the God of kindness. Beloved, this is the One whom we’re proclaiming in our neighborhoods, in our churches, in the market place; this is the God we’re talking about.