

Our Response to Desolation

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Preacher: Jesse Kincer

[0 : 0 0] We're gonna jump back into our series on the minor prophet Joel. To covenant faithfulness after a long time of covenant unfaithfulness.

And last week, Elliot spoke brilliantly about God's desolations. And these are things that he sometimes brings us into. And he also called them severe mercies, which I think is a really good way to understand them because they do feel severe.

And we can also just understand them as just purely being punitive, but actually there is mercy even in those severe times. And yet, if we're honest, they bring up tough questions.

Why would God do that? Why does he lead us into difficulties? And why does he lead us into suffering? And that's not an easy answer, right? People have been trying to answer those questions well for millennia.

But we have to remember that he is our Jesus, our God, our Father. He is the good shepherd that guides us into the shadow of death, the valley of the shadow of death, as much as he leads us into green pastures and still waters.

[1 : 3 0] That's true. And as great as the green pastures and still waters sound for their obvious blessings and benefits, according to the Bible, there are unique revelations and unique glories and unique graces that we will come into and receive by walking through those desolations as well.

And so the invitation from Joel is there is this call for us to grow in wisdom and understanding for how to navigate that path through the desolate places that God could bring us into.

And what we're going to learn today is like we actually have some responsibility. As God brings us into these places, we have a responsibility to respond. But as we're going to see in this passage today, just because it's our responsibility to respond a specific way, it doesn't mean it's our way, nor does it mean that God isn't with us.

So without further ado, Joel chapter 1, verses 8, sorry, Joel chapter 1, verse 8, and we're going to go to verse 20, and then we're going to jump to chapter 2 and do verses 12 to 17. It says this, Verse 10,

Verse 10, Let's jump to Joel 2, verse 12, And with morning.

[5 : 0 3] 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.

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. Blow the trumpet in Zion.

Consecrate the Lord your God, for the Lord your God, for the Lord your God. Gather the Lord your God, for the Lord your God. Gather the people. Gather the people. Gather the people. Consecrate the congregation. Assemble the elders. Assemble the elders. Gather the children.

Gather the children. Even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom. Let the bridegroom leave his chamber and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations.

Why should they say among the peoples? Where is their God? This is God's word to us. So believe it or not, this is good news.

[6 : 20] This is a passage that is full of wisdom and grace that leads us to God's goodness in the midst of his desolations, his severe mercies.

And it may be hard to see it, but it is there. And we're going to get at it by answering three questions. What does this teach us about who God is? What does this teach us about who we are? And what does this teach us about what God wants?

So God gives many instructions here. He multiplies them quite a few times, which you want to stop and say, okay, I better pay attention. But he says to lament and mourn and wail and fast and that they have a purpose.

And we're going to eventually get to that. But with regard to the situation that Joel is speaking into, the circumstance, we have to remember why God brought this desolation in the first place.

And I want to say this, as Elliot pointed out last week, not all of God's desolations are brought on because of sin. But that is precisely the reason for the desolations that Joel is talking about here.

[7 : 19] See, Israel continued to break their covenant with God. God, though he is merciful and patient, he will not be abiding sin forever. And as we consider what our response to desolation due to sin should be, we have to remember two things about God and be able to hold them together at the same time.

God really hates sin. God also really loves his people. God doesn't find pleasure in bringing about desolations.

He doesn't. This cartoonish image of God that we've probably seen of this guy in the sky on the clouds with a white beard and a robe kind of throwing lightning bolts in a very sophomoric, vengeful way at people doing things that he doesn't like.

Right? That isn't who he is. And we have to understand that. We have to know that. As disciples of Jesus, so those who are interested in knowing who this God is that we believe, faith in God begins with knowing who God is.

Not who we think he is. Not who we want him to be. But how he has revealed himself to be in the scripture. And when you know who God is, it will lead you to trust him in all things, even when we don't necessarily understand why he does the things he does and why he brings us into the places he brings us into.

[8 : 42] So what does faith mean? What does faith in God for you and me mean in the midst of God's severe mercies? Well, it's this. It's confidence that despite my present desolate reality, God is still somehow good and somehow can work this out for my good.

It's hard to see sometimes, right? So, like, to understand who God is, to understand what kind of God he is like and how he can work things like this out and what Joel is speaking into, we have to understand that God is a merciful God.

And we're gonna be doing a series coming up on the parables of Jesus, and one of them is about the unmerciful servant. And it starts with a God figure settling accounts with those who owed him money.

And he calls in one debtor who owns him like the equivalent of a billion, kazillion dollars. And he can never repay that. And so this God figure is about to throw this man and his whole family, including his kids, into prison.

But upon pleading for mercy, the God figure decides to forgive all the debt. He decides to show mercy and to set them free. And again, what this teaches us about God, God brings us into this paradigm of understanding sin and what it does to our relationship with him.

[9 : 57] The paradigm of debt obligation and debt forgiveness is one of the ways God helps us to understand that. God's love doesn't mean that he pretends we have no sin.

He doesn't pretend that there isn't a debt that we owe him. And at the same time, his love means that he is more than willing to forgive sin. He just doesn't do that without bringing us into awareness of the situation.

To say it another way, God uses desolation to help us see what he sees. Have you ever, in the course of your existence, misread a moment?

Have you ever cracked a joke at the wrong time? I remember, well, before me and Haley were married, we went on to double date with a couple. And before the food arrived, they asked me, man, what do you love about Haley?

And very unseriously, I said, you know, I like her because she has childbearing hips. I thought that would be a funny joke to lighten the mood.

[11 : 07] Boy, was I wrong. I misread the moment, misread the, and the food hadn't arrived yet. It was a long lunch. Husbands, have you ever given your wife solutions when she really just wanted sympathy?

We misread moments, don't we? Sometimes we don't see what we should see. Sometimes we don't know what we should know. My kids, they complain, they can complain from time to time that I work too much or spend too much time on my iPad at home, reading or playing video games.

I can see, now I can respond to that in one of two ways. I can say, hey, that's an attack against my character. I don't feel it's justified. They just don't understand how tired I am. I come home, I need time on my iPad to decompress.

They don't understand how important I am at work. A lot of people depend on me for what I do. And all my work puts food on the table and clothes on your backs, you bunch of ingrates.

And I can hear that and I can respond in those ways. Their voice displeasure, kind of the relational desolation they are bringing me into, though I may not like it, I can look at it and say, well, here's one more thing now I've got to overcome in my life.

[12 : 30] Or I could slow down. I can try to see what they see. Which really what they are saying is that they love me and they care about me. They want to spend time with their dad.

Am I willing to slow down and discern their hearts in that? We can often approach our relationship with God and the desolations he might bring us into in the same way.

Just one more thing to overcome in my life. Really? Really? Thank you. But that's a very narrow lens to live by. And we miss out on what God is trying to get us to see.

And what he might be trying to get us to see in our desolations is that we are dried up and desperate sinners who need his help. That's who we are.

I've heard a pastor say this. We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.

[13 : 35] It's who we are. We are helpless and we are hopeless on our own. We've gone our own way and without God's intervention we would never stop doing that.

Living life without reference to God is what we naturally incline ourselves to. Living large in our own supply is what we naturally tend toward.

But that kind of living will leave you dried up. That kind of living is what the people of Israel had done. And Joel says to him about the desolations of God, look around you guys.

The harvest of the field has perished. He says this in verse 11. The vine dries up. The fig tree languishes. The pomegranate, the palm and the apple, which are all trees that bear fruit different seasons.

All those, they're dried up. But there is not one season that you're going to go through where something's going to produce something that's going to satisfy. And the gladness dries up from the children of man.

[14 : 42] Living your own way without reference to God. I'm going to say this. It works for a while. Been there, done that. But at some point you will end up like God's people did here.

God will bring you into that kind of desolation. Desolation. Maybe not around your life. Maybe it's just in your soul. But he does it and he allows it to happen for our own good.

He wants you to see what he sees. He wants you to know what he knows. And sin is deceitful. You eat its fruit and you're satisfied for a while.

But in the end, your soul ends up more like what Joel just described. Desolate, a desolate field. No grain, no oil. No vine.

No grape on the vine. No fig on the fig tree. Everything's dried out. No wine, no gladness, no joy.

[15 : 39] And the life and the growth and the joy and all the things that we once loved and once knew is now replaced with a consistent sense of weariness and scarcity. And your life may not look like that.

You may have a lot of stuff. You may have a lot of money in your accounts. You may have relationships around you. But there's something in there that just is unsatisfied.

And we've lost the biblical reference for this description of our inner soul reality. And I don't know if we've lost it more if we've gotten so busy we've lost sight of it.

We go our own way. We end up with dried up souls. Unhappy, unfulfilled, tired, fruitless. And if you choose to live without reference to God, this is where you're going to end up.

Every single time. But after a while, the riches and that revelry that you're enjoying, it just dries you out.

[16 : 40] And God's put me in that place of dryness multiple times in my life. Because I don't learn too good. The first time, I was 22. I'd been living on my own terms without reference to God for a while.

I was making good money. I had a mortgage. I had a girlfriend. I had surfing buddies. It was the, as far as I was concerned, the pinnacle of my life on my own terms. And yet, I didn't arrive.

I was absolutely miserable. And still, I couldn't figure out why. Or maybe, if I was more honest, I didn't want to figure out why. I didn't want to face the facts.

Because sin is deceitful. And that's the thing about our situation as sinners. We get desperate. But we are as thick as we are desperate. We don't realize how much we need God's help.

But that is one of the blessings of God's desolations, particularly for sinners, is that he uses that to get our attention. C.S. Lewis said this famously, suffering is God's megaphone.

[17 : 49] His desolations is his megaphone. If he can't get through to us in simple ways, he's going to ratchet it up until he can get our attention. And he is willing to overcome every distraction and denial that we use to fix and cover or ignore our sin problem.

And what he wants us to do is he wants us to step away from that. He wants us to see that so we can step into something better, into freedom from ourselves, into a deeper walk with him. And he calls us into that.

But here's the thing. You and I, we have to respond. We have to respond what God is calling us to. We see a few commands from God in today's passage. Through the prophet Joel, he says, lament, mourn, be ashamed, put on sackcloth, consecrate a fast, call out to the Lord.

That is the, like, worst bumner of a party that you could ever attend. And what God is doing is he is calling them into some practices to show them a pathway so that they get to the place of seeing as he sees and feeling as he feels.

And here's the beauty of this. God has ordained repentance to help return our hearts and our minds to what is true. And that is where he is.

[19 : 10] God abides in the place of truth. He is truth. And he wants us there with him. The invitation in Joel 2, chapter 2, verse 13, is God telling his people to return to me.

He says, return to the Lord your God. He doesn't say, consecrate a fast and then see you later. Hope it all works out. He says, return to me. Come to me. Which tells us a lot about repentance.

Repentance isn't just saying you're sorry. It's returning to where God is. It is returning to not just believe rightly about him, but to start thinking rightly with him.

And so he says, return to me. Return to me. And God is inviting his people to come back to his heart, to come back to his truth, to come back to him.

And he is saying this to his people that are in the land, even though the land is decimated, who are going to the temple, who are worshiping, who are making sacrifices, who are bringing their offerings of praise and thanksgiving.

[20 : 12] And what we can learn is that, you know what, there are times where that is appropriate. When giving God thanksgiving is a good thing. But you know what? There's also a time to not do that.

There is a time where it's more appropriate to give God your tears than your thanksgiving. And that's what this passage is getting at. And this first part of repentance that he gets at isn't practicing joy.

It's actually practicing what he says. It's mourning and lament. It is grief. And there is a godly grief that comes with repentance. Repentance. He says in verse 12 of chapter 2, Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and with weeping and with mourning.

And then it says this, rend your hearts and not your garments. Repentance is more than going through the motions. It's more than saying the right words.

It is a heart condition. Return to me, God says, with all your heart. He wants all of it. He wants all of your desires.

[21 : 18] He wants all of your passions. He wants all of that ugliness that is in there. Return to me with all of that. But come full of sorrow and of anguish. Come honest.

Come honest with what is going on inside of you. Lament is honoring the desolation, not ignoring it. And anytime we see someone in the Bible rending their garments, it was always in a response to either something terrible or catastrophic that had happened, or it was a response to something terrible or catastrophic that was about to happen.

And to rend your heart simply means to respond in this context as we should with what is appropriate. One of the stories is a guy coming back from the battlefield, and he said, Lord, if you give me victory, I'm going to sacrifice the first thing that walks out my door.

Well, bumner. His only daughter walks out his door. He rends his garments. He is broken to the core. Something catastrophic had happened that he could not get out of, that he could not relent from.

And to rend your hearts means to embrace the tenderness and the sensitivity and the anguish and the godly sorrow and the appropriate lamenting that God would have us have toward our sin.

[22 : 56] Full disclosure, I'm terrible about doing this. I often respond to my sin by minimizing it, justifying it, explaining it, excusing it.

Just last night, at a long day, I was going to have to wake up really, really, really early this morning to finish some stuff. So I went to bed early. My family's down watching TV.

It's a little loud. And I wait and I wait, and I start to get irritated, and don't they know that I have to wake up so early, how inconsiderate. And so I went down and I barked.

Turn that TV down, but at a much higher decibel. That was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. But I can minimize my sin.

I can justify it, and I could say like, well, if they only knew, if they weren't so inconsiderate. Thankfully, God is patient with us. He just doesn't go like, oh, you blew that one.

[23 : 56] It doesn't pop us out like a flea, you know? But how do we do that? How do you and I get to a place where our hearts are really tender?

You know? I mean, we can all tear our garments, right? We can make it look like, you know, Hulk Hogan style, like we're really into this. But how do we get to that? How do we force our hearts to feel like that?

Well, perhaps a good prayer is to ask God to help us see our sin the way he does. I think I've experienced that three times in my life.

Like, I think I know, just from like knowing the Bible, I understand a little bit how God sees sin. I'm talking about the times where God says, I'm gonna give you some insight into how deeply I grieve this and how nasty it really is.

And you wanna talk about mourning. You wanna talk about wanting to wail. You wanna talk about godly sorrow hitting you with conviction. Those three times in my life, I was like, Lord, I'd never wanna do that again because I don't ever wanna feel what I just felt.

[25 : 10] That was terrible. That was terrible. There are accounts during the first great awakening of the 1700s where guys like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield are preaching sermons and not at the altar call, right in the middle, like right now, people are falling out of their chairs on the floor, weeping and wailing and saying, what must I do to be saved?

What causes that? It's not because they were better preachers than we have today. God was rending hearts.

And that really questions his command to rending our hearts. We have to ask ourselves, what is God getting at? What is he asking us to do?

Because it sounds like it's something we can't do. Well, I think what he is asking of us is this. Do you want your heart to be grieved? Do you really want to let go of that lust or that greed or that pride or that anger or that selfishness or the control that you want to exercise over everything?

Do you really want to know how much that what you do grieves the Holy Spirit? It's easy to say yes. It's easy to rend the garments.

[26 : 36] I'm there. But what are we willing to do? What are we willing to do to get ourselves there? Because in this passage, God calls his people to some pretty gnarly practices.

He says, put on sackcloth. Stop wearing your fancy clothes. Wear the clothes of the poor. Wear the clothes of the hopeless.

Stop eating. Call a fast. Stop covering your sin and your desolations with like feasting and good times. Call a fast. Let your body's desperation for food open your eyes to your soul's desperation for God.

It says this, be ashamed. Wait, I thought God is like anti-shame. Well, there's a godly version of shame toward our sin.

There's a godly version that is appropriate. And what that godly version does, it pushes us to go to God. The ungodly kind of shame is the one that causes us to hide from him.

[27 : 48] We gotta be able to discern between the two. God's severe mercies call us into some severe responses sometimes.

How desperate are you? What do you do if your heart has settled? What do you do if your heart has grown numb or callous toward a sin?

And often these are, you know, that happens toward the besetting sins in our life. Those sins that we just can't seem to get victory over. Those that we can't seem to always control or keep in check all the time.

Right? That could be pornography. That could be overworking. That could be overeating. That could be dark thoughts against other people. We get so tired sometimes of losing the battles that we just like, you know what?

We just give up fighting and we make peace. We try to start managing our sin. That's not what God wants from us. And he's saying right here, guys, here's some tools. You wanna be wise followers of Jesus.

[28 : 54] Here are some tools that will help you when it feels like all you're doing is losing, when it feels like there is no chance for victory for you. For my own life in my 20s, three things that helped me gain victory over porn.

And this was something that started at the age of 12. And I had to step into accountability. I had to step into living in the light with other wise, godly men.

Another one was actually regular fasting and prayer. That was huge. Confession and repentance. Praying to God. Repenting to him. Telling others.

I did a five-day fast one time. Just water. It was the worst, best thing ever for me. By the end, I was like, I was so desperate for God to intervene.

And he met me on the fifth day in such a profound way. The third thing, in addition to accountability, regular fasting, and prayer, was filling my free time with spiritual practices.

[30 : 05] So when you cut out a bad thing, you can't just leave it empty. You gotta fill it in with a better thing. We gotta practice some good spiritual things. And so when I had free time in my hands, my body was immediate, my mind was immediately, go look at porn, go look at porn.

And I had to say, no, I need to go look at God's word. I need to go look at God's word. I need to go pray. I need to get into community with other believers. Jesse, how long did that take?

A couple of years. A lot of setbacks. What are we willing to do? Are we really desperate enough to rend our hearts so that we might see victory over our sin?

Because there's more at stake than we realize. There is more at stake than our sinful hearts let on. Because here's the reality, friends. Sin lulls us into a false sense of security that is independent of God.

It will do that to you over time. Rending our hearts reminds us how weak and helpless we truly are without him. And all those practices God named, weeping, fasting, mourning, crying out, those are all doing that same thing.

[31 : 26] Where sin is a lack of mindfulness of God, it also produces a distancing in your relationship with him. And that is the real catastrophe, I think.

Being separated from the love and goodness of God, the love and goodness of the Father. Not tasting of that and feasting on that. Man, it is worth starving yourself to get back to there.

If that's where you're at. If sin is separating you from that, man, like Jesus said, cut it off. God is calling us today, just like he did through Joel, to return to him.

Return to him with humility and hope. Return to him with your tears and your sorrow. Come to him because of who he is. Verse 13, the second half, it says, return to the Lord your God, why?

For he is gracious. He is merciful. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[32 : 37] And he relents over disaster. God wants us to return to him because he loves us.

And what is the goal of God's love? For you and me to be one with him. For you and me to be in the fullness of his presence. Knowing his mind, knowing his heart.

All those things. And just remember this, a torn heart, a rent heart, maybe a tender heart, but it's one that he only can heal.

As the band come up and we look to respond, in a moment we're gonna be taking communion. I just wanna say to you, if you're here and you're not yet a follower of Jesus, come to him as you are.

That's all. God doesn't need anything from us. He just wants us. Come to him. Come to this God who sent his only son.

[33 : 43] Come to him. Come to Jesus who left heaven to step down into earth, who rent his body through death on the cross to heal your heart.

Come to him today. There's gonna be a prayer on the screen during our time of communion for you to pray. And I wanna encourage you to do that. And for those of us who are followers of Jesus, as we prepare ourselves to take communion, where do we need to respond?

Where do we need to step into taking our sins seriously again? Where do we need to repent? Or maybe we just need to simply ask, Lord, I don't even know, but man, it's been a long time since I've felt some conviction over some stuff that I think I should be feeling conviction over.

Will you come and will you run my heart? As we take communion, we are reminded of that truth that we ended with.

God's love has one goal. And that's for us to be united with him, to be one with him, to know him. And that's what communion actually reminds us of.

[34 : 53] We get to partake of Jesus in this meal that is a sign and symbol of his death. And at his death and at the cross, what that accomplishes is that it rent the temple curtain so that sinners like you and me, with hearts rendered over our sin, could come into God's presence and be healed.

So Father, we come to you today. We come to you today very humbled, very aware that there are places in our lives where we need you to convict us.

We need our hearts rent over sin. Where we have been cavalier, forgive us. Lord, as we come to you, whether it is for the first time in repenting and receiving your salvation or coming to the communion table, we just ask that you would come and you would bring healing in this moment.

We pray that in your name. Amen. Amen. Amen.