

God Restores the Years

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[0 : 0 0] All right, thank you, Alex. Morning to everybody. How you doing? As Alex said, my name is Elliot. I'm one of the pastors here at City Greatest Church. So great to be with you here again on Mother's Day. And as we've already said, happy Mother's Day to every mother in the room.

And one of the things that obviously happens when you become a parent is you realize how much your parents had to suffer just for you to be here, right? And so let us not forget that. So to my mom and to all the moms in the room, thank you so much for what you do to make our community work.

So we've been going through a series in the book of Joel, and we're going to continue that today. And honestly, at this point, it's been a little bit of tough sledding, right?

Because we've been talking about the severe mercies of God and how they show up in periods of desolation and what our response needs to look like to that, which is often periods of repentance or lament.

But thankfully, that is not all God wants us to see in this book. Because as severe as those mercies may seem to us, as severe as some of those things are, God also wants us to know that His consolations are even more severe.

[1 : 1 9] That His grace is even bigger than that. You know, the first time in my life I heard a verse from the book of Joel in a sermon.

It actually wasn't in a series about the book of Joel. It was from a series about the Song of Solomon. And so it was in the mid-90s, this guy named Tommy Nelson did a series through the book of Song of Solomon.

It was kind of revolutionary for its time. And he put that series together during a time when talking about romantic relationships and sex in general was kind of fairly taboo in church.

And consequently, most people had never heard a series or done any kind of study on the book Song of Solomon. And so the premise of the series, the reason he did it, was the idea that that book, like all of Scripture, certainly has elements in it that point us to our relationship with Christ, our greater relationship with God.

But also because it's a really practical guide that God had given people that draws you into the beauty of what we might call like dating or courtship or intimacy are supposed to look like.

[2 : 3 3] And so one of the key ideas that comes up in that book that you see early in the book is this growing passion between the man and the woman. And it's not seen as wrong or shameful or dirty.

The book paints this really poignant picture of like this couple that as they spend time together and as their knowledge of each other deepens and the respect grows, very naturally their attraction grows as well.

And that desire is spoken of openly and without shame. Like they are very frank about what they want to go to with each other, right? But one of the refrains, one of the themes you see in the book over and over is this phrase, do not arouse or awaken love until it pleases.

And it's simply the idea that like what you feel, what you're starting to feel is good and right. But it's not yet. Like there's a time and a place and it's worth waiting for.

And obviously we can't go through the whole book this morning, but it's really hard to overstate if you've never done a study in that book, how much the opening chapters of Song of Solomon can make you want that for your romantic life if you've never seen a picture of it.

[3 : 49] Because this isn't a picture of like restraining sexual intimacy because it's dirty to feel that way. The book doesn't say that. It's also not some pragmatic reason like, hey, don't do that because you might get pregnant or you might get an STD.

What the Song of Solomon does is paint a picture of there is a better way. And like so much of God's word, what it's supposed to do is make you long for it.

To let you see a picture of what God had in mind and make you want it. And I'll never forget that right in the middle of a section where he was painting that picture from the scripture, and when you could tell like the audience was just captured by what he was saying, Tommy Nelson stops, he just abruptly stops and he says, now look, I am under no illusion that I am talking to a room full of 800 virgins.

Some of you are probably sitting here today thinking, man, I have really messed this up. And I am so sad that I have ruined my chance for that in life.

And then he simply says this, Joel, God says to you, I can restore the years the locust is eaten to you.

[5 : 10] And as we read these verses from Joel today, throughout the message, I want, as we go into it, I kind of want you to have this thought in your head.

The desolations of this world, and even the consequences brought about by your own sin, do not exempt you from the consoling and restoring power of God.

The people in the book of Joel have experienced devastation. They have wandered far from their father, and there has been a terrible consequence that their sin has brought about, and they have needed a time of repentance and lament.

But the great and mighty heart of God has more for them as well. And that's where we pick up the story in Joel chapter 2, verse 18. It says this, Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and he had pity on his people.

The Lord answered, and he said to his people, Behold, I am sending you grain and wine and oil, that you may be satisfied. And I will no more make you a reproach to the nations.

[6 : 26] I will remove the northerner far from you. I will drive him into a parched and desolate land, and his vanguard into the eastern sea, and his rear guard into the western sea. The stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things.

Fear not, O land, be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things. Fear not, you beast of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green. The tree bears its fruit.

The fig tree and the vine give their full yield. Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in your Lord, for he has given the early rain for your vindication. He has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain as before.

The threshing floor shall be full of grain, and the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust is eaten, the hopper and the destroyer and the cutter, my great army which I sit amongst you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

[7 : 38] You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and there is none else. And my people shall never be put to shame. This is God's word to us.

Now, to the casual observer, the focus of the Old Testament seems to be judgment. And that seems to be the case when you crack open the book of Joel as well.

It looks like a book about judgment, but when you look closer, judgment is not the central theme of this book. Judgment isn't what God longs for.

He is just. Make no mistake. He is just. He will do justice. But what He longs for is consolation, restoration of His people.

And that's, again, a theme all throughout the Old Testament, like God's mercy preserving His people when over and over they turn away and they do wicked things.

[8 : 41] But the reason they make it, the reason they persevere as a nation is not because they're awesome. It's because God is awesome. And our fear that God isn't going to come through for us in that way, that our years are ruined, that what is broken in our lives can't be restored, is a lie that damages our faith and cripples us.

Because just as these severe mercies can seem overwhelming, God's consoling love is even more overwhelming. And we see it in a lot of ways in these short verses.

First thing we see is that the consoling love of the Lord is jealous. It says, The Lord became jealous for His land and He had pity on His people.

I think jealous is a word that we might have a bit of a hard time navigating, right? Because certainly there's a type of jealousy that is something you don't want in your life, that is envious, that is inward focused.

It's kind of rageful and vindictive. It has no place in faith. And yet, the Bible tells us really clearly that God is jealous for us.

[10 : 01] It's one of the first things He reveals about Himself. In Deuteronomy 4, 24, when God is in process through the Ten Commandments and these other laws of revealing Himself to His people, He says, For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

Now certainly, some of that jealousy is simply born of the fact that God refuses to share His glory. Like He refuses to just be one of the many little gods in your lives because that is not who He is.

And much like the exclusivity that is expected between married lovers, He refuses to share that precious gift. He refuses to share His people. That actually shows up in the Song of Solomon as well near the end when it's expressing this sentiment.

It says, Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as strong as death, and jealousy is as fierce as the grave.

But the fact that God is jealous, that He won't share His glory, also tells you something else about who He is. I mean, think about it. When God's people run off after other gods, the language the Bible uses to describe how that makes God feel, how that affects Him, is the language of a lover who has been cheated on.

[11 : 31] And what that tells you, if nothing else, is that God is not distant or aloof. Like He can never be indifferent to your hurting or the hurting of other people when they're turning to other gods.

You know, there's probably a few mistakes, common mistakes we make when we try to envision who God is, right? Because it's just going to be hard. He is the holy other creator of the universe.

We really don't have the scope to think about it. And so what we do is, mistake one is, you kind of envision God as just a more powerful version of yourself. Like you make God in your image, not the other way around, right?

And so when you think about God, you think about maybe He's fickle or vain or insecure or petty or foolish. As a matter of fact, if you remember, like when you learned about the Greek gods in high school or something, that's in fact what they were, right?

Like they were just more powerful version of humans, right? They were powerful, but they were still foolish and petty and jealous of each other. So don't come to Scripture like that because if you do, you'll misread who God is.

[12 : 43] But this verse in Joel warns us against the other mistake which is to think of God as something that is so totally other that He's just above all the suffering.

I mean, God is not, let's be clear, God is not a man. He is God. But there is a reason that He reveals Himself as Father. There is a reason that He calls Jesus the bridegroom.

I mean, when God tells us that one of the things we're supposed to do is rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, have you ever considered that He does that too?

He cannot be indifferent to your suffering. He cannot be indifferent when His people run off after other gods who are going to destroy Him.

God is not distant. He is jealous for you. The consoling love of the Lord is also generous. Is it a hard thing for you to believe that God will give you His best?

[13 : 53] I'll be honest, it's one of the things I struggle with. To actually get from my head to my heart that God will give me His best. There's a lot of reasons for that.

Maybe it's because you just don't think you deserve it. You can't get to the place like, I don't deserve any better than what I'm getting. And you just haven't got to the place yet where you've let the gospel get into that piece of your heart that's like, this isn't about what you deserve.

It will never be about what you deserve. Or maybe it's because it's just what life has taught you, right? Like, it's best to not get too excited or expect too much of anyone including God because if He then doesn't answer my prayer or doesn't come through in the way I think He should, I'm going to be really disappointed and that's going to crush my faith.

That's not what Joel tells us to expect. Behold, I am sending you grain, wine, oil, good things, plentiful things, things of rejoicing that you will be satisfied.

And He will pour down abundant rain and early rain and late rain. It's imagery like if you remember when they were talking about the desolation, it had like, it was like, hey, this type of locust has eaten up this and then whatever was left over, this locust is eaten.

[15 : 21] Whatever was left over by that? Like, it's the opposite. It's like, you're going to get the early rain, you're going to get the late rain. You're going to get threshing floors full.

You're going to have vats that overflow. And it's tempting after reading some of the verses that we have in previous weeks to think that what God really, the only thing He really wants, again, is kind of a stiff upper lip.

Like, He wants you to have resilience and faith and desolation and scarcity, but that's really what He wants the most because that's all you're ever going to get. Like, what else would you expect in this life?

But the Bible makes it clear God is generous. And whatever you think He's given or withheld, like whatever perception you have of what He is willing to do, I would offer to you maybe to just consider the idea that God is not holding out.

Romans 8, 32 tells us that He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give you all things?

[16 : 40] That's not a verse to say that God's a genie who gives you your wishes, but it does mean this. God has already poured out the very, very best.

He's given you the thing that is most precious to Him. He's not holding out. And even better than that, because He's not only not holding out, He's also the only one who can do what no one else can do.

Because this verse tells us that the consoling love of the Lord restores the years. Now there's a couple lies about repentance, which we talked about last week, that I found sometimes keep people from turning to God and finding deliverance.

I think one of them is this idea that when you think about how far you've walked away, you kind of envision it like God was here and I was over here with Him and I've started to walk and I've started to walk away and when you start to think about going back, you think about how far God is back there, right?

Like, I'll never make it back because you think about all of the stuff you've done wrong and all of the things to be back in God's will, I'm gonna have to clean up so much stuff to even get back there and the thought of fixing all the stuff you've broken is just so overwhelming that you actually go on in unrepentance because, man, that's gonna be really hard so I might as well just keep doing this and one of the things you're missing is that your picture image is wrong in that it's not like God is back there, He's actually walking right behind you and as soon as you turn around, He's right there and it means you're never more than one decision away from being right back in the center of His will.

[18 : 42] Like, might there be consequences to work through? Sure, but it's not consequences of when you get all this right, me and you will be fine again. It is the loving arms of a father right there and you're right back with Him and whatever mess you've made, right back in His grace.

That's one of the lies. You don't have to walk a million miles. He's right behind you. But the other lie is even if I repent, I've gone too far.

Like, what I have broken can never be fixed. Like, you don't understand. Like, it can never be fixed and I know the kinds of things you're thinking about.

What I've done, it's done. It can't ever be fixed. But the Bible holds no quarter for the idea that you and your life are beyond redemption and beyond restoration.

Now, it is certainly true in the ultimate sense and I think that's why our minds go there a lot, right? It's why we sing earth has no sorrow that heaven can't heal.

[19 : 56] Because the Bible does tell us there is a day coming when he wipes all the tears from every eye. It is a complete and total restoration.

but I also don't think we're, we're meant to give up on now. Like, like you're meant to say it's probably gonna be bad the rest of the time I'm down here and then one day God's gonna make it right.

I mean, the reason that phrase from Joel resonated so much with those people all that years ago in that room listening to that Song of Solomon Bible study wasn't because they were getting a picture of glory and sweet by and by.

It was the simple hope that maybe I haven't messed this up so that God can't still bless my life in this way. Maybe this picture that I'm seeing might could still be in my future.

Maybe God's grace really might be bigger than my sin and maybe the best years actually could be to come. Maybe God could actually restore to me in a way I can't even imagine the years the locust is eaten.

[21 : 09] And I know what some of you may be thinking yeah, like that's a great message when you're in your 20s but I've got a few more miles on the car, right? Like, like you might even be thinking I'm not even sure how many years there's left to repay.

But, and I would invite you again to consider the men and women of old like so many it's funny what the ages we think of of people in our heads, right?

But like the Bible tells us Abraham was an old man. Like he was dried up. He had no hope for a heritage that was going to be like the stars.

God did it. I don't know what image you have of Moses probably like Charlton Heston or something like that, right? Like I get it but like the Bible tells us everything you significant you know about Moses like the Exodus and all that happened after he was 80.

80. You're ready to hang it up, right? It's part in the Red Sea time. Simon lived his whole life as a fisherman and you probably identify with this I'm sure at that point in his life because he had a wife and a family it was business and the grind and wife and children I'm a fisherman that is what my life is and one day this guy from Nazareth comes strolling down the beach and he has this encounter that he can't explain and that man says to him if you follow me you will become a fisher of men and you don't think of Simon the fisherman you think of Simon the apostle God is the God who turns graves into gardens and that's what he wants us to know as much as the devastation of the locust the one who spoke the world's into being can restore the years so how do you believe that how do you get it from a head knowledge that God wants to be generous to a heart knowledge that expects

[23 : 21] God to do something like that how do you ask for that in faith when maybe even your whole life testifies to you don't try it because you're just going to get hurt again honestly I think it's as simple as you reach out a hand to a loving father because the consoling love of the Lord puts us at peace that he is with us the end of that portion of Joel says you shall eat and plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you and my people shall never again be put to shame and you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I am the Lord your God and there is no one else and my people shall never be put to shame so my son is now three and a half years old and he's just frankly at the stage where he's all about mom mom.com all the time right and that never comes out more than during bedtime so we have a little routine where between my daughter and my son we alternate who gets to choose who's gonna put them to bed that night right and so my daughter's pretty reliable to go both ways right she kind of analytically weighs out what she's feeling at the moment and like sometimes she'll pick dad and sometimes she'll pick mom usually based on who she thinks gonna give her more in the moment right so like she's kind of got that calculus but but my son he is all about mom it is mom all the time there's never a moment he's not picking mom right and and he makes sure you know you know that a few nights ago there was a moment where he had selected mom and so then like we're doing you know good night hugs and it's like a sweet hug right like a sweet huddle you know cuddly hug with a three year old but you it was interesting because he's not hugging him you could sense there was this moment in there where he must have felt like I don't know maybe dad's getting the wrong idea and so he pushes away from me and he's staring right at me and he goes and he just starts walking towards mom as he's looking and I'm like I got it buddy and and whenever it comes that it is not his night and mom is leaving it is it's a tragedy right I mean it's like you got to have some thick skin right because he goes right into daddy you get out of here you get out of here right now like I don't like he doesn't want me in there and so he always asks me to just get out of the room and so I go out and I sit in the other room while he tells me how much he doesn't love me and how much he wishes mom would come back but but then inevitably after about 60 seconds he'll he'll show up at the door and he'll say daddy I'm scared can you come lay with me can you hold my hand and you know there's that thing often with your children when they're they're scared or they're they're tense when you just lay down and you hold his hand and you can almost just feel the tension go out of their body right like it's just like and then he's asleep in like two seconds because dad's near you know some of the best advice I've ever gotten about prayer is to simply just pray what you've got like when you're starting to learn to pray really anytime like don't don't try to dress it up don't try to say don't bring before God what you think you ought to pray like bring before him what is in you not what you think ought to be in you you don't have to systematically lay it all out and and I think sometimes that

just wells up in very simple prayers like daddy I'm scared can you be close God I don't know you're here can you be close the presence of the father is the thing that puts his people at peace the Bible says he makes me to lie down in green pastures but it is not specifically the pasture that puts you at peace there can be a snake in a pasture Psalms 23 says I will fear no evil I am at peace because you are with me and you know when when we strange Jesus folk you know like sing things like God you are all I need that's what we mean and like I know like if you if you haven't experienced that I know like it looks like a weird religious cult right to just say God you're all

I need right like it's some obsession and it doesn't mean it doesn't mean we don't like green pastures or good food or peaceful times like we want new oil and wine and cups that run over we want laughter and adventure romance just like everyone else but we've also learned that you can actually exhale when God is close that no matter what's going on like you you can feel at peace if you know God's hand is there and because of that we've learned that no dream is ever really dead when you know the one who restores the years and that's a God you can know too if you want to may that be our experience as the band comes up a couple of ways you can respond you know if you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus and it really is a privilege to have you here like really like no matter how you feel about yourself today I really believe you were made by God to be a blessing and we're glad you're with us and you know if you've been coming a week or two we've been talking a lot about desolation and judgment but man again I hope you can see that is not the deepest part of God's heart he wants you to know what it's like in your life to just just exhale to know that you are at peace with him and you are at peace with yourself and as Christians we believe that that Jesus has just made that door wide open and if you feel like maybe there's some barrier to you putting your trust in Jesus that's okay we we'd love to keep talking to you about that

I'd love to know what that is but if you want to do that now like if you know there's no barrier you know you just want that you want the faith to believe it just come just ask receive him there'll be a prayer on the screen that might be a way you can do that or or you're welcome to come talk with one of the people who are here for prayer or myself love to do that if you are a follower of Jesus you have the right as a child of God to ask your father for good things do not ever feel ashamed for asking God to give you blessing in your life you do have to not set it in your agenda right like God might know a little bit more about what's going on than you but you should ask for big things you can cry out if you're tired I need rest you can cry out if your life is in turmoil God can I have a season of peace you can cry out if you think there is no hope or you have broken your life God restore the years I don't even know how that's possible but restore the years maybe if you don't find it silly while we're sitting here praying you could even reach your hand up and simply say that daddy I'm scared I just need you to be close there's a there's sometimes a power to the physicality of your posture you don't have to maybe you want to do it in private but I would encourage you sometimes just actually reaching out matters so we're just take a moment here and pray into that like like whatever you want to ask God for and then if you're a follower of Jesus after that you can come to the communion table and take it to your seat and again remember as you're taking it is a testament that God has given his very best the blood and body of his son there is nothing more precious in the universe and if he's not withheld that he's certainly not holding back a little of something else for some frivolous reason your destiny is an overflowing cup you remember that when you take it father I give you this moment may you convince our hearts of the great goodness of your merry heart God I pray over everyone here particularly those have been in hard seasons or tiring seasons that you will bring a time of rest that you will give them small reliefs to let them know that you can restore the years God we ask great things because you're a great God and we trust it to your good knowledge and your good hand but God we cry out for it we want blessings in our lives we want blessings in this church we want people and families neighborhoods to be restored Holy Spirit we ask for that in Jesus name you