

Lesson 15

Some Comments About the Handout for Lesson 15

When we get to the end of verse 13, we are going to find one of the most difficult and debated phrases in the entire Bible: **“He relents over disaster.”**

What does it mean when the Bible tells us that God relents? What does that statement tell us about God? What does that statement tell us about ourselves and about our free will? What does that statement tell us about time and the future?

My plan is for us to spend about two classes looking at these and other questions about verses 13-14.

Why so much time? Because these are very hard questions, and we can't tackle very hard questions from the shallow end of the pool! If we are going to investigate these questions, then we need to take the time to do it right!

So, what then is the purpose of this handout? Why do we have this long list of Scriptures?

This long list of Scriptures is the evidence that we will consider in answering these questions. The long

list of verses on the Handout for Lesson 14 was the evidence for our upcoming study of the Holy Spirit, and the long list of verses on this Handout for Lesson 15 is the evidence for our upcoming study of these difficult questions about God.

These lists are homework! We all need to read them and study. And why is evidence important? Because no one who purports to teach the word of God should ever just say you can take my word for it.

“Just believe me – the Hebrew here is on my side! I’m not going to mention any Hebrew words, or tell you what the lexicons say, or show you where those same words are used elsewhere in the Bible. Just trust me! I’m right! We don’t need to look at any evidence.”

That is not the way to teach God’s word – or anything else for that matter. We should never just take some Bible teacher’s word for something – and no Bible teacher should ever ask us to do that.

In the New Testament, the disciples reasoned from the Scriptures – they used evidence! And if anyone ever asks you to just take their word for something about the Bible – don’t fall for it! That is how religious error begins and spreads, both in and out of the church.

Instead, we all need to examine the Scriptures daily to see if these things are so (Act 17:11). That is why we have these long handouts – the Bereans would have loved my handouts!

And the handout I have planned for next week will be another big list about the Holy Spirit to help us get ready for the closing verses of Joel 2.

Joel 2:10, Continued

Joel 2:10 – The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

As we discussed last week, verse 10 is God's grand entrance prior to his arrival in verse 11 to utter his voice before his army.

And we also saw some other places in the Bible where similar language is used for the same purpose. For example, we saw similar language in Isaiah 13 for God's coming in judgment against Babylon, and, we saw similar language in Matthew 24 for Christ's coming in judgment against Jerusalem.

But why does God use such cosmic-sounding language to describe these times when he came in judgment? I think there are several possible reasons, any or all of which might be correct.

- First, this vivid language reminds us of the final judgment yet to come. This figurative destruction of the heavens reminds us of the day on which "the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" (2 Peter 3:10). The figurative destruction

may point to the final literal destruction yet to come.

- Second, this vivid language reminds us of the severity of these judgments. I think all of those affected by them would agree that their world came to an end in some way on that day of judgment. Everything changed for them. Nothing was the same after that day. God effectively brought their world to an end. And so perhaps God describes such events using that same kind of language – bringing the entire world to an end.
- Third, this vivid language fits well with a theme that we have been seeing ever since the end of Joel 1 – the theme of God undoing and unwinding his creation so that he can start over. We saw that theme with the plants and animals in Joel 1, and we saw that same theme with the reference to the Garden of Eden earlier in this chapter. Perhaps we are now seeing that same theme with the sun, the moon, and the stars in verse 10.

One thing is certain. The only one who can shake the heavens is the one who made the heavens. The only one who can do these things to his creation is the Creator. What we are seeing in verse 10 is the power of God, the majesty of God, the glory of God, and the judgment of God.

And, in the next verse, we will hear the **voice** of God!

Joel 2:11

Joel 2:11 – The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?

In verse 11, God steps out from behind the curtain.

So far, we have seen some hints that God is behind all of this – with some of those hints being stronger than others.

Back in Joel 1:9, we saw a strange verb stem that caused us to think that God might be the cause of all this.

And then, in Joel 1:15, we were told that the coming destruction would be “as destruction from the Almighty.” But even there, we wondered whether perhaps it just meant that the destruction would be “like” destruction from God.

And, yes, this coming event is called day of the Lord, and yes, the locusts were sent as a wake-up call for this coming event, but where is the verse that very plainly says that this coming event is a judgment sent by God?

That verse is right here. That verse is verse 11. “The LORD utters his voice before **his** army.” Yes – **HIS** army!

So, I guess that means this army can’t be the Babylonian army, right? That army was **Babylon’s** army, right? That army was **Nebuchadnezzar’s** army, right? Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

The great king Nebuchadnezzar might have thought that he was in charge of this army, but he was not in charge. Nebuchadnezzar was working for someone else.

Jeremiah 27:6 – And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, **my servant**.

King Nebuchadnezzar was God's servant! And Babylon?

- Babylon was a golden cup in God's hand! (Jeremiah 51:7)
- Babylon was sent for by God! (Jeremiah 25:9)
- Babylon was raised up by God! (Habakkuk 1:6)

The Babylonian army was **God's** army, God used **his** army as he saw fit to punish his people, and God eventually judged and punished **his** army.

"The LORD utters his voice before **his** army, for **his** camp is exceedingly great."

If the pre-exile view for the date of Joel is correct, then that exceedingly great army of God is the Babylonian army that God used to punish his own people.

And, yes, God sent his Babylonian army against his own wayward people, but that is not the only way that God used his great Babylonian army. God also sent his great army against Egypt.

Ezekiel 30:25 – I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh shall fall. Then they shall know that I am the LORD, **when I put my sword into the hand of the king of Babylon** and he stretches it out against the land of Egypt.

“When I put **my sword** into the hand of the king of Babylon.” And, yes, God is the one speaking there. The king of Babylon fought with the sword of God in his hand!

And, again, I think the pre-exile is now the most likely view for when this book was written, which would mean that we are in fact looking at Babylon here.

But if the correct view is instead the early view, then this great army would be the Assyrian army, and what we said about the Babylonian army would also apply to the Assyrian army.

Isaiah 10:5 – Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!

And the post-exile view? That view is looking less and less likely as we work through the text of Joel, but if that view is correct, then this great army would be the Greeks.

And if there is ever any doubt about who the Greeks were working for, then we just need to study the life of Alexander the Great. There is no way to explain Alexander apart from God. And, in fact, we find prophecies about Alexander the Great and his successors in Daniel 8, Daniel 11, and Zechariah 9. (We have studied each of those chapters in earlier classes.)

Verse 11 continues: **he who executes his word is powerful.**

Sometimes I think we picture God as telling us what will happen and then just sitting back with us and watching it all happen. Under that view, God is like a weather

forecaster on TV who tells us what the weather will be and then watches that weather come and go. (But, of course, very much unlike our TV weathermen, God always gets things right!)

But that is not the view of God that we see here in verse 11 or, I think we can say, much of anywhere else in the Bible.

Here God does not speak and then **watch** it happen – but rather God speaks and **makes** it happen! “He who executes his word is powerful.” (And we will look in a moment at whether that pronoun “he” refers to God or to someone working for God – but, either way, God is the one behind this execution of his word.)

Rather than picturing a weatherman who says it will rain but who does not make it rain, I think we should instead be picturing Babe Ruth, who pointed his bat at center field and then hit a home run to center field. Unlike that weatherman, Babe Ruth said it would happen, and then he made it happen.

I think this verse tells us something very important about how prophecy works.

I think we often picture prophecy as God watching a movie with the ability to skip to the end of that movie whenever he wants to. And so, when God wants to tell us something about the future, God just fast forwards to see what will happen and then God rewinds back to our time to tell us all about the end of that movie.

And perhaps there is some truth to that view. We know that God stands apart from time, and we know that we

are not able to understand what it is like to stand apart from time.

As the old saying goes, “we don’t know who first discovered water, but we are pretty sure it wasn’t a fish!”

We exist in time just like that fish exists in water. And just like that fish has trouble considering things outside of water, so do we have trouble considering things outside of time.

But I think we can say that the “movie watching” view of prophecy does not seem to be what is described to us here in verse 11.

The picture here is not of God watching a movie and fast forwarding to the end, but instead the picture here is of God producing the movie and creating whatever ending he wants. “He who executes his word is powerful.”

We are reminded of what God said in Isaiah 46.

Isaiah 46:9-10 – Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, **declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done**, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and **I will accomplish all my purpose.**’

Who is it in verse 11 who is powerful and who executes God’s word? Is it God or someone working for God?

We know that those things are certainly true of God.

Psalms 29:4 – The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

But (under the pre-exile view) God was using Babylon here to execute his word, and we know that Babylon was very powerful. So does this “he” in verse 11 perhaps refer to Nebuchadnezzar or Babylon instead of to God?

Once again, however we answer that question, we end up at the same place.

Even if verse 11 is telling us that Babylon was executing God’s word with power, we know who was pulling Babylon’s strings. We know that Nebuchadnezzar was God’s servant, and we know that the sword in Nebuchadnezzar’s hand was the sword of God. And we know that the power of Babylon was power given to them by God.

So, whichever way we jump on this question, we end up at the same place. God is the one executing his word.

Verse 11 continues: **For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome.**

For those keeping count, this is the third time we have seen the phrase “the day of the Lord” in the book of Joel. We saw that phrase earlier in Joel 1:15 and Joel 2:1, and we will see it later in Joel 2:11 and Joel 3:14. And almost everyone agrees that “the day of the Lord” is the central theme of Joel.

And what can we say about that day of the Lord based on verse 11? We can say that the day is great and very awesome! That is what verse 11 tells us here.

We will see the same phrase later in verse 31: “The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the **great and awesome** day of the LORD comes.”

And we also find that same phrase in the next to last verse of the Old Testament.

Malachi 4:5 – Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the **great and awesome** day of the LORD comes.

Are those days in verse 31 and in Malachi the same day as the one we are seeing here in verse 11? No, they are not.

And how do we know that? We know that because we never ignore time frames!

- The time frame for verse 11 is, in a word, “near.” This day in verse 11 was **near** to those who first heard about it. We saw that fact back in Joel 1:15.
- The time frame for verse 31 (as we will see when we get there) is during or perhaps after the first century AD. We know that because Peter quotes Joel 2:31 in Acts 2. (The uncertainty about whether it is in the first century or after the first century comes from the word “before.” We will talk about that issue later.)
- And the time frame for Malachi 4:5 is also during or perhaps after the first century. We know that because Jesus told us in Matthew 17 that the reference to Ezekiel in Malachi 4 was a reference to John the Baptist.

So what does that tell us? One thing it tells us is that two different days of the Lord can be described the same way – as great and awesome.

Just because two days of the Lord are described using the same or similar language is not enough for us to conclude that those two days of the Lord are in fact the same day. We would have to dig deeper to show that.

Why is a day of the Lord great and awesome?

Now there is a question that answers itself! The day of the Lord is great and awesome because it is a day of the Lord! Would we ever expect a day of the Lord to be anything other than great and awesome?

Verse 11 continues: **Who can endure it?**

Now that is the million dollar question! The day is coming. The day is near. Who can endure such a day?

In a sense, this question is rhetorical, and the answer is that no one can endure such a day.

For many, and sometimes for all, such a day is devastating and horrible beyond imagination. It changes everything about the world that existed before that day. No one is left unchanged after that day has come and gone.

But I think in another sense the question is not just rhetorical.

Why? Because while no one can endure such a day apart from God, it is possible to endure such a day with God on our side.

We often see that God provides a way of escape for his faithful people – either a way to escape when that day comes, or perhaps, in some cases, a way to prevent that day from ever happening at all.

We see the former situation with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In that case, the day came, but God provided a way of escape for his faithful people (Matthew 24:15–22).

And we see the latter situation with the threatened destruction of Jerusalem by Assyria. In that case, the day never came at all because God destroyed the Assyrian army (Isaiah 37:36) after the king turned to him in prayer (Isaiah 37:15).

And, of course, God has provided a way of escape for the final day of the Lord at the end of the world. That day cannot be prevented from coming, but God has provided a way of escape for all who obey the gospel.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 – Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

What about this day of the Lord in verse 11 that was coming and that was near? Could it be stopped from ever happening? And, if so, how? God answers those questions next.

Joel 2:12-13

Joel 2:12–13 – “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

Verse 11 ended with a question – who can endure it? I think verses 12–13 answer that question.

And the answer to that question begins with one of the most wonderful words in the Bible – the little word “yet.”

How often does the Bible describe some terrible seemingly hopeless situation where that description is immediately followed with the little word “but” or the little word “yet”?

Think about the opening chapters of Romans that describe the seemingly hopeless situation of our sin-soaked world.

Romans 6:23 – For the wages of sin is death, **but** the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Such a short word, but such an important word! Such a beautiful word! All of our hopes are in that little word “but.”

Absent Christ, Romans 6:23 would be God’s last word to us all – “For the wages of sin is death.” Period! But those are not God’s last words to us. Instead of a period, we see a comma! “**But** the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That is why Jesus came and died.

Likewise here before Joel 2:12, the situation looks hopeless. The locusts have done their terrible work, and now something else is coming that will be much worse. And that something else is near. As verse 11 asks, who can endure it?

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord! If that statement is beautiful to us as we read it today, can we imagine how beautiful it was to those who first heard Joel say it?

Absent the love of God, the book of Joel would have ended with verse 11. But because of God’s love, we have verse 12, and we have all of the promised blessings that follow verse 12 in the book of Joel – including promises about the Holy Spirit and the church!

If we have been looking for the **hinge** in the book of Joel, then I think we can quit looking. I think the word “yet” at the beginning of verse 12 is that hinge.

Prior to that little word, God has been showing his wrath, but after that word, God shows his love. That little word changes everything we are seeing in the book of Joel, as it changes everything in our own lives.

Romans 5:8 – **But** God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And what must we do to enjoy those great blessings? If we want to endure that coming day of the Lord, what must we do?

We know the answer to that question in our own day. We, like the people who heard Joel, know that a day of the Lord is coming. It is not the same day of the Lord that was near in the time of Joel, but it is a day of the Lord that is coming. It is the day when Jesus will return to claim his own and to destroy the world of the ungodly.

Who can endure it? What must we do?

That is the precise question asked by those who heard Peter quote Joel 2 in Acts 2. And so we today have the answer to that question.

Acts 2:37 – Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, **what shall we do?**” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

But what about the people in Joel’s day who were facing another day of the Lord – one that was near and one that would involve a terrifying invading army?

Who could endure it? What must they do? God answers that question for them in verses 12–13.

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.”

And the first thing they are told to do is the same thing that those in Acts 2 were told to do. That same first step has never changed. Return! Repent!

Who can endure that day? No one can endure that day absent repentance. No one can endure that day without first returning to God. Those who persist in their rebellion and who trust in themselves can never endure that coming day of the Lord.

Those locusts in Joel 1 were a warning of something else that was coming, but the fact that God gave them

a warning tells us something very important and very wonderful about what was coming – it could be stopped or avoided!

There is no need to sound a warning alarm for an event that can be neither stopped nor avoided. And yet Joel 2 starts off with the sound of an alarm.

What that tells us is that there must have been something that could be done by those who heard and heeded that alarm. And verses 12–13 tells us what that something was.

I think we see a similar warning in Luke 13 – not with locusts, but with some other terrible events that happened.

Luke 13:1–5 – There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you **repent**, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you **repent**, you will all likewise perish.”

Were those events in Luke 13 warnings from God? Did God cause those events to happen? Jesus does not answer that second question, but Jesus does answer that first question – yes, they were warnings. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Likewise today, we hear about such disasters all the time. How should we see those tragedies? How should the world see those tragedies? Jesus tells us in Luke 13 – “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

We do not know when Jesus will come again – it may be near, it may be far. But there is a day coming that we all know is near – the day when we will die and be judged by God. The day when we will close our eyes in this world and open them in the next. None of us knows how long we have on this earth.

And whether it is locusts, or Pilate, or a falling tower, or a falling airplane, God’s warning is the same: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” If we want to endure that day, we first must repent. That is always the first step.

Listen again to verse 12:

“Return to me with all your heart, with fasting,
with weeping, and with mourning”

What is involved with repentance? What does it mean to repent? How can we know that repentance has occurred? I think these verses help us answer those questions.

And the first thing we see is that a **flippant** repentance is not true repentance.

I think we can state that as an axiom: whenever we are commanded to do anything by God, our response must never be flippant or thoughtless. It should go without saying that thoughtless worship is an oxymoron. And the same is true of a flippant repentance.

This repentance in verse 12 is not the repentance that occurs when a parent tells a child to apologize to his sibling. That sort of forced apology is almost always lacking in sincerity!

God is not commanding the people to **say** that they are sorry. Instead, God is commanding them to **be** sorry.

God commands them to “return to me with **all your heart.**” This repentance involves more than just what they say; this repentance involves everything about them – it involves all their heart.

But isn't that always true? Isn't that always what God demands? Do we think God would ever accept a partial or half-hearted repentance? “Yes, I'm sorry about those sins over there, but I plan to continue with these sins over here.” That is not repentance! That is not a return to God!

When we sin, and whatever that sin may be, our sin is an indication that we are not following the “great and first commandment.”

Matthew 22:37-38 – And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.”

And so what must I do when I repent of that sin? I must renew my efforts to love the Lord my God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my mind.

If I hold anything back, then I have not repented. It is impossible to love God with with just some of my heart and with just some of my soul and with just some of my mind. That is not love!

That is why the command in verse 12 is to “return to me with **all** your heart.” That is the only way anyone can ever return to God. As the song says, “true-hearted, whole-hearted, faithful and loyal!” That must always be true about the people of God!