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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“I WILL REPAY YOU”
Joel 2:18-32

‘That’s an hour of my life I’ll never get back.’

We say this after an activity that was, in retrospect, pointless. It could be almost anything: a disappointing TV show, a boring party, a useless meeting.

‘That’s an hour of my life I’ll never get back.’

But for some it is not an hour or two, *it is months*. Or it is *years*. It might even be *decades*.

They have not lost time and energy to bad entertainment or an ineffective task force at work. It has been devoured by chaos and death.

☑ On March 11th, 2011 a tectonic plate shifted, triggering a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and a tsunami 130 feet tall. Sixteen thousand Japanese were killed almost instantly, and the 3.11 Earthquake has consumed many more lives since then – gradually, invisibly, from the inside out. Life is eaten up by evidently random tragedy.

☑ Week by week we pray for those who battle chronic pain, physical disability, emotional disorder, mental illness, addiction, cancer, and dementia. The material, emotional, relational, and spiritual costs of infirmity are incalculable. Life is eaten up by creaturely frailty.

☑ News headlines are dominated by ISIS, mass-shootings, and high-level political garbage. The cumulative impact of ‘smaller’ injustices might be just as bad (I have in mind gossip, bullying, micro-aggressions, domestic

violence, sexual exploitation, and so forth). Life is eaten up by the evil of others.

☑ Having said all that, we are our own worst enemies. Folly and ignorance are not inherently sinful, yet they do ruin lives. Immorality, injustice, and idolatry *are* sinful – and by them we destroy ourselves. Life is eaten up by our mistakes and iniquity.

‘That’s an hour,’ ‘a year,’ ‘a decade of my life I’ll never get back.’ Our time and energy have been devoured by chaos and death.

‽ Is there hope? Can wasted life be restored? Can lost time and energy be redeemed?

☐ Please turn with me to Joel 2:18-32.

Israel is on the brink.

● {1:7} A locust swarm of massive proportions has consumed everything green. The voracious horde has even stripped the bark off the trees.

● {1:10-12, 17} The locust infestation has coincided with a severe drought. **“The ground is dried up,” “the seeds are shriveled beneath the clods,” “all the trees” are “withered.”**

● {1:19-20} The infestation and drought have been followed by wildfire. **“Fire has devoured”** what little remains of **“the pastures in the wilderness and flames have burned up all the trees of the field.”**

Israel’s very existence is in question!

And if there are survivors, what then? What can they expect besides all-consuming grief, bitter regret, and a nasty, brutish, hand-to-mouth existence?

Knowing that this could have been avoided intensifies the uncertainty, fear, anguish and loss. For

it is God who has sent the locusts, the drought, and the fires, as an act of righteous judgment against the nation's sin.

That is why Joel consistently refers to these calamities as **“the day of the LORD”**¹. It also explains why he describes the swarm as a **“mighty...army that obeys his command”**².

‡ Is there hope? Can these wasted lives be restored? Can this lost time and energy be redeemed?

These are urgent questions for ancient Israel. They are equally urgent for some of us, and for many of our neighbors.

- Let us hear the word of the LORD in verse 25:

“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten – the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm – my great army that I sent among you.”

“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.”

Of course, the LORD does not turn back the clock. Those particular moments are gone.

However, Almighty God does *redeem* the time we have lost. He draws near and, without undoing the facts of history, he transforms the loss into gain, the ashes into beauty, and the death into life.

- I speak from personal experience.

¹ Joel 1:15; 2:1; 2:11; 2:31; 3:14

² Joel 2:11

For years I was consumed by false guilt and real shame about sins that were committed against me in childhood.

During those years, I was hyper-religious. So I was also consumed by false pride and works righteousness.

Those locusts devoured my life. They literally took me to the edge of suicide, to the edge of the roof of a nine-story building.

I cried out to God. He reached down and pulled me back from the brink of death.

I do not want to give the false impression of instant restoration. Deep healing has taken decades.

But God assured me from the start that he would redeem my lost years. And he quickly opened my eyes so I could see this restoration as it gradually unfolded.

I do not wish my locusts on anyone. Yet most of the profoundest, most precious blessings I have received are the fruit of God's work to creatively redeem those years.

Take it from me. If the Lord God says **“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten,”** he will do it!

- Back to Joel. These locusts are actual insects, so repayment includes their physical destruction.

Verse 20:

“I will drive the northern horde far from you, pushing it into a parched and barren land;

**its eastern ranks will drown in the Dead Sea
and its western ranks in the
Mediterranean Sea.”**

■ It also includes agricultural restoration and economic recovery. Verse 24:

**The threshing floors will be filled with grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine
and oil.**

■ And verse 26:

You will have plenty to eat, until you are full...

This promise is for Israel in the days of Joel. It is not for us, as peddlers of the so-called “Prosperity Gospel” might claim.

★ Still, there is a universal truth here. It is that the Living God cares about our entire being, he is eager to provide for our needs, and his life-giving renewal touches every part of us: body, mind, and spirit.

But when the LORD does grant total material restoration, it is not the greatest blessing. Not by far!

■ Verse 28:

**“And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”**

■ And down to verse 29:

**Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.**

Disconnection from the LORD is the worst calamity. Separation is especially excruciating when locusts are eating away at our lives.

In contrast, close connection with the Triune God is the best blessing. We tend to be acutely sensitive to this when the locusts are swarming.

☑ As someone has said,

If God is present, nothing matters.

If God is not present, nothing matters.

If God is with us our tangible situation, though real, is not the ultimate reality. We *feel* the frustration, the sorrow, the anguish (and their pleasant counterparts), but they do not define our existence. God does.

{Eccl 1:2} If God is not with us our situation defines reality. In effect, our experience is all that is real. Yet if God is absent our lives lose their meaning. To quote Ecclesiastes: **“Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”** In other words, nothing matters.

God is the light in the darkness, the shelter in the storm, the oasis in the desert. He is the feast in our famine, pure water in our thirst, fresh air when we are gasping for breath.

Hence, the presence of God – his actual, personal nearness – is the best blessing. As recompense **“for the years the locusts have eaten,”** the blessing of the divine presence far surpasses whatever was lost in the first place.

■ We read verses 28-29 as a prophecy of Pentecost, when the Spirit filled the gathered Christ Followers. That is an accurate interpretation.

{1 Co 6:19; Eph 2:22} Yet the outpouring of the Spirit is not only an historical event. **“Do you not know that”** in Christ **“your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit...?”** This is not merely a private reality, for **“in him [we] are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”**

■ And his presence is not icing on the cake; it is the essence of salvation. Joel 2:32:

**Everyone who calls / on
the name of the LORD will be saved;
for ... there will be deliverance ...
even among the survivors
whom the LORD calls.**

Deliverance is being with the Father, Son, and Spirit!
Being with the Holy Trinity is deliverance!

■ And this divine gift of restoration empowers us for faith, hope, and worship. Verses 26-27:

**you will praise the name of the LORD...
who has worked wonders for you;
never again will my people be shamed.
Then you will know that I am in Israel,
that I am the LORD your God,
and that there is no other;
never again will my people be shamed.**

■ ‘That’s an hour,’ ‘a year,’ ‘a decade of my life I’ll never get back.’ The good news of Joel 2:25 is for us:

**“I will repay you for the years the locusts
have eaten –
the great locust and the young locust,
the other locusts and the locust
swarm –
my great army that I sent among you.”**

This is the word of the Lord!