

The Worst Hard Time: God's Reply

Joel 2:18-27

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,
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The One Resource You Can Never Repay

Consider all of the things that are able to be restored. You can restore a painting. In fact, art galleries do this often, working meticulously to restore art. I've known people who restore classic cars. You can restore old houses and old buildings. I remember when an old movie theater in my hometown was restored back to its live theater roots from the early 20th century. Money can be restored. Relationships can be restored.

A lot of things in this world can be restored. But one thing cannot. Time. You know this to be true, especially every time you're placed on hold, and you get to listen to the same -re-recorded message assuring you how important your call is and letting you know exactly how many other people are also as important.

Time flies. It slips away. It disappears like sand through the hourglass. You can try all you want to, but it won't happen. I read recently where a millionaire spends over \$2 million annually to try to reduce his biological age. He is forty-five chronologically, but his measured biological age is thirty-six. His goal is de-age himself back to 18. While he may be able to do that through diet, exercise, sleep scheduling, and dietary supplements, he will not get a single day back, regardless of how much he spends.

You can't save time in a bottle. You can't turn back time. Time is not on our side. It is impossible to get even one minute back. And yet, here in our text, God promises the impossible. "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust ate." (2:25) This is a powerful promise and I invite you to read the text with me this morning as we consider it more fully. (read text)

I Will Restore to You the Years

In the first chapter of Joel, we see that the people of God had suffered through several harvests. It looks as if four harvests, noted by four different locust types, have been decimated. This would mean four years of this army, this nation of locusts, devouring all the grain and all the vine crops. The locusts marched like an army through the fields, gobbling up everything in their path.

They were devastating. They disrupted every aspect of life. It brought God's people to cry out to him in prayer. And God is responsive to the prayers of his people. "Then the Lord became jealous for his land and spared his people." God promised to send grain, new wine, and fresh oil. He would restore the crops that were devastated. And God's people would be satisfied.

With each line read in the remaining verses of the second chapter of Joel, we come across new promises of good things. God will remove an enemy that had taken advantage of the weakness of God's people. (v.20) God restores pastures for the animals, ending their groaning. (v.22) God's people can rejoice because He has brought the rains to water both autumn and spring harvests. (v.23) The harvests will once again be prosperous. (v.24)

These promises stack up and they undo all of the pain, suffering, torment, and agony that God's people, the land and the animals endured. And is if those promises were not enough, the good news culminates in verse twenty five: "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust ate, the young locust, the destroying locust, and the devouring locust – my great army that I sent against you."

God would give back the harvests that were taken away. Years of abundance would follow those years of locust-caused desolation. It is a powerful promise for all who read it.

God Is Responsive

It is a powerful reminder that God is responsive to the prayers of His people. In fact, has a threefold response here in the second half of Joel 2. He first responds to the mourning of "his land." God responds to our grief, our pain in loss.

Here we see God respond to the anguished cries of His people and the mourning of his land. He responds to the prayers of those who suffered under his army. The key word here is the possessive pronoun used three times. His. Do not overlook this simple and powerful possessive. It reveals God's exclusive relationship with them. And with us. The first powerful response in the text that is leading to restoration is possession. God hears and cares for His people.

We see his compassion on display here as he spares his people. God directs his compassion, his grace, toward his suffering people. He takes pity on them in verse 18.

When we are struggling with grief, with loss, remember these promises. First, remember God's possessive love and grace for you. He desires to have an exclusive relationship with you. He will be your only God and you will be his child. That possession provides compassion. God cares about his people. He spares them, takes pity on them. This leads to restoration and satisfaction.

This promise that God will restore, and we will be satisfied in Him is an extension of his gracious love. Remember, God is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love." (2:13)

Back in 2:14, restoration was possible. Here in 2:25, it becomes reality. That is a powerful drawing point, restoration. Before a person receives salvation in Christ, many are drawn simply to the possibility of restoration. Receiving Christ makes that possibility reality.

Compare verse fourteen to verse twenty-five. "Who knows? Perhaps God will turn and relent and leave a blessing?" Can you hear the uncertainty of that perhaps? Compare that to verse twenty-five: "I will." The uncertainty of "perhaps" becomes the certainty of "yes I will."

The Apostle Paul wrote, "For every one of God's promises is 'yes' in Him. Therefore, through Him we say 'Amen' to the glory of God." God's promise is certain. He will restore what seems impossible, what was eaten, devoured, by locusts. And the wording in twenty-five is potent. It is perhaps the most powerful verse in Joel. "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust ate."

Restoring What was Lost

That promise in verse twenty-five, let's consider that "Yes, I will" from God and be prepared to offer up our "amen" to God's glory. God promises to restore the lost years eaten up by the locusts. For those in Joel's audience, this meant restoring through bountiful harvests, threshing floors stuffed full, and vats overflowing with new wine and fresh oil.

Ask yourself, what might this look like for you? What do “lost years” look like for you or for me? What are the things that are gone that we are convinced we can never get back? What has the locust devoured in our lives?

What about the fruitlessness of those years God is restoring? Consider all the work that had been done in preparing, planting, sowing, pruning, and cultivation? A massive amount of time and energy was poured into the crop, only to see potential harvest after potential harvest eaten away. All of that work. Hard labor. Sweat equity. Emotional investment. Day after day, hard work piled on top of maximum effort. And then whenever a little green shoot would break the earth, the locust would come and gobble it up. All of that work, for nothing.

Have you ever felt that? Has your heart every prayed that prayer to God? “Look at all this work I put in, Lord. Consider all of the time, energy, and resources I poured into this. For what? What do I have to show for all of that? Nada. Zilch. Zip. Zero.

I remember sitting there one late Friday night, dutifully maintaining my dad’s weekend visitation during a time of economic depression of the early 1980’s in Oklahoma. My dad would lose everything and struggle to make ends meet for about four years. Each weekend, rather than staying at his apartment, we had to sleep on the couch cushions at the overnight security job he was able to land. Out in the middle of nowhere, we would sleep in an office that had closed along with a warehouse that stored oil well and drilling supplies. It was a casualty of the bust, and the banks had repossessed so many of these businesses. My dad had a friend who graciously and benevolently hired him to stay overnight and keep watch. This allowed my dad to continue to work odd jobs during the day.

On that Friday night I sat there listening to the wind howl, I heard my dad talking on the phone and he said, “I have worked so hard here and I have nothing to show for it. I put in all of that time and what did I get back? Nothing.” Have you ever felt like that about something?

What about the painful years? Joel’s audience had mapped out and planned out their lives and then, over a span of a few bad harvests, all of those plans for the future just evaporated.

I know many of you are experiencing painful years. Perhaps it was the loss of an opportunity. Perhaps it was a disappointment or a difficult diagnosis. Perhaps it was the unexpected loss of a loved one. There had been plans and a lot of time spent preparing for the future. And then, it just evaporates.

What about the loss of relationships that accompany something like that locust army? Consider all of the issues and problems that money, or the lack thereof, can raise. How many families have been driven apart over the years because of money? How can you get that back?

What about the loss of relationships that slipped away without tracking it or realizing it? Over the course of four harvests, children became adults and moved on with their own lives. That time with family, with them, evaporated. How often do we look back with regret over the time that was lost? What if the relationships were strained, how does one get those back?

The hard truth is that you don't get time back like that. Perhaps you look back at misdirected or misspent youth. You look and realize that, like the prodigal, you've wasted time and squandered your existence following some path that did not work out. What can you do? How do you get back what was lost?

There is another category of lost years. Christ-less years. If you have never received salvation by trusting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, consider how much time you've let pass. Any moment without Christ is a moment that is eaten by locusts. It is time that is lost.

But here in the text we see this promise given to restore time, to give back the years that were eaten. Except, this promise is not given to everyone. No, there is a specific group who will receive this promise of restoration. It won't happen to everyone. A specific group will receive it. I don't know about you, but I would love to be a part of that group. What about you?

God specifies who will receive this promise of restoration in verse nineteen: "The Lord answered *his people*..." God promises to restore His people. And it is in response to their prayers. Restoration is God's compassionate response to His people.

The Promise is for People Who...

God promises to restore people who understand their need for His mercy. In 2:17, the people are instructed to cry out for God's mercy. They are to ask God to spare them, to have pity on them, to extend His mercy to them.

God promises to restore people who understand their need for His mercy. And God promises to restore people who desire God's name to be honored. "Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

The people who heard Joel preach about God's promise were people who were concerned with God's reputation. Other nations were looking at Israel and the people were crying out to God to do something about His reputation, His honor.

In our hearts, in the deepest part of who we are, we must desire that God's name above all else be honored. Isaiah wrote, "Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you. Your name and renown are the desire of our hearts." (Isaiah 26:8)

We need God's mercy and his name and renown must be the very center of who we are. If those things are true, we can be restored because we are sustained as His children. And Joel promises that those who belong to God, those who are restored, they will be satisfied.

God will restore what was lost, what seems impossible to get back, by sparing us through his mercy. And those who are mourning and grieving the pain of what was lost can experience the promise that God fully, completely, mercifully satisfies the restored the soul.

Every person who wishes to be restored must pray to be spared from His wrath. And how does God spare His people? Paul said, "He did not even spare his own Son, but offered him up for us all." Yes, you can be spared. But only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God did have pity on us and chose not to spare His Son so you and I could in turn be spared, be restored. Our locusts ran over Christ on the cross so that we could be spared and restored.

God, through Christ, offers to us a promise that nobody else can make: "I will restore the years that the locusts have eaten."

FURTHER THOUGHTS:

What are the biggest time wasters in our lives?

Have you ever felt that you had lost years, time, in significant ways? Lost time with family or friends? Lost opportunities? Lost resources? Explain how that feels.

Why does a person need mercy? How does God spare a person or His people?

What does it mean to honor God and His name?

How does God restore “the years?”