

## **The Worst Hard Time: Do You Know that You Know, You Know?**

***Joel 3:14-21***

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,**

**March 12, 2023**

### **What Do You Know?**

What do you know about God? Or better yet, what kind of knowledge of God do you have? Do you have a head knowledge – an intellectual knowledge of God; do you have a cognitive awareness of facts about God? Or do you know God with an experiential love down in your soul, in your heart?

This is a deep question to start on. But I want us to consider just how exactly do we know God. Do you consider yourself a thinking thing, like Descartes? “I think, therefore I am.” Are you simply a brain on a stick? A lot of Christians limit their knowing God to a head-based, cognitive knowledge. And they pour books and theological studies, and they stockpile a lot of facts about God, about Jesus, about the Scripture. But that head knowledge doesn’t always work itself down into our hearts in an experiential knowledge. I am not saying that discipleship isn’t important. It is. You need to read God’s Word. You need to study the Bible both alone and in small groups. You need to be challenged to think rightly about the Lord.

However, God redeems our heads, our hearts and our hands – the whole person. Head knowledge must work its way down into our hearts for experiential knowledge of who God is.

A person, as smart as they may be, cannot merely *think* their way to right worship. A Christian must know in their guts, what the Apostle Paul calls our *splagchna*, our “inner parts.” Deep down, in our guts, the seat of our affections, we are to know God there. That only comes through repentance, forgiveness, time spent in God’s holy presence being strengthened. Joel 3:14-21 encourages us in this regard. I invite you to read it with me this morning.

### **God is Our Refuge and Strength**

Last week we considered God’s judgment on the sin of the nations. The wickedness was extreme and God will meet them for judgment in what Joel refers to as the Valley of Decision. Earlier, it was called the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Now the word “decision” is used.

It is a word that refers to “decisive action.” We encouraged everyone to take decisive action in receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord.

We understand that the Day of the Lord is approaching, and we get a picture of what God provides for us when that day arrives. We have already considered the massive turmoil that will be facing those who don't know the Lord, the nations. We see that God will stand firm on behalf of His people. God's people will be spared. While the natural elements of the weather caused great harm earlier, we see things have changed. Heaven and earth will shake but God promises to be a refuge and a stronghold.

This is not just a place of hiding. This is a stronghold, a place of strength. You can see the contrast between the security of those who trust in the Lord and the insecurity of those who do not.

This is a reminder to believers whose faith sometimes wavers a bit. Maybe that is you? You've made some poor choices, or you've wandered a bit from the Lord. Hebrews 2 calls it drifting. Joel 3:17 is a good place to start today because it reminds us, again, of the certainty and security we have in our relationship with the Lord.

Joel 3 allows us to see the identity of God as well as glimpse His relationship to us. He is our refuge. He is our strength. He is not a temporary source of strength either.

### **A Present Help in Times of Trouble**

Next, we read that God dwells in Zion, his temple mount. The verb and the participle used here shows us that God is not a temporary resident. He is not an alien. He is not a stranger.

This promise of the Day of the Lord is a promise of a permanent source of strength and refuge for His people. God is sinking down roots with His people.<sup>1</sup>

This will be a place that is set apart. God will be with us forever in this sanctuary, this holy place. This sanctity comes from God's presence within and it extends to the entire city. This will be a place marked by God's holy presence and people who don't know the Lord will be kept away forever.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 7:10, Psalm 102:28

We see a new time stamp here in v. 18. This continues the theme of restoration. Look carefully at the promise and encouragement God gives his people. They have been encouraged in terms of eternity and in personal holiness and inner strength. But God also has another level of promise here. God promises that the physical world that was torn apart from the locusts of chapter one will now produce significantly. That worry of the crops failing will pass away too.

The mountains which had been the location of an earlier call to prayer for aid from the advancing army is now dripping with new wine, like water poured out of rain clouds. The new wine had previously been cut off from people's lips in Joel 1:5 is now restored in abundance. The other half of the common Old Testament word paired with mountain, the hills, will flow with milk. God replaces the earlier usage of the word we translate as "flow." The first time it was used, the encroaching locust army was "flowing." Now only promise, not pain, will flow with milk, perhaps reminding Joel's audience of the first hint of the wonder of the promised land that "flowed with milk and honey."<sup>2</sup>

On the Day of the Lord in the valley of decision, God's people will be delivered into promise and those who don't know him will be judged and separated away. Like Amos 9, Joel promises God's abundant restoration after a time of hardship and pain.

And not only milk, but a more valuable commodity in Palestine will flow: water. Israel was a semiarid agricultural country. It was dependent on a water supply that was only somewhat regular. Also, they needed to find a way to have limited water supplies to meet both their drinking needs as well as their irrigation purposes. This meant careful conservation. If the wadis were dry or river channels low, it meant huge problems for Israel, particularly Judah in the south. But now we see that the streams will flow. Not only will there be sufficient water for Israel's needs, but its fountain or spring<sup>3</sup> will become a source of fresh water for others.

I am reminded of an old song we used to sing a lot when we were children at VBS and kids camp. The lyrics read, "I've got a river of life flowing out of me. Makes the lame to walk and the blind to see. Open prisons' doors, set the captives free. I've got a river of life flowing out of me."

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers 13:27; Deuteronomy 6:3.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 18:5; 2 Kings 3:19; Ezekiel 47:1-12.

From there it devolved into a chorus of silly words and motions. And it seemed like one of those songs that is fine to sing with kids but you dismiss it later on as you mature. Except Joel reminds us that song is true. We have a river of life springing up with our hearts in Jesus Christ. “There is a fountain, who is a King.”<sup>4</sup>

Drink in this promise, especially if your soul, your heart is parched and dry. What was once dry and devastated will be a source of blessing for others. That pain you endured as a child can be a testimony that can lead others through the same darkness you traveled in. That painful loss can comfort others. That disappointing setback can be the encouraging word that helps someone get back up. God will redeem what was once painful and use it as a testimony of living, refreshing water.

Sadly, those without Christ, represented here in Joel as the nations, receive no blessing. Places that were once considered world powers become desolate and uninhabited. Those places represented here by Egypt, Edom, Tyre, Sidon and Philistia will share in judgment. God’s people won’t.

It isn’t because God’s people are perfect. They’re not. We’re not. Joel recognizes it in the last verse. We are not absolutely free from sin. But our “blood” is innocent, not guilty. Because it isn’t our blood. It is the blood of the One who took our place. Before Christ, we were not innocent. But now in Christ, we are declared or made right. Because of Christ and the cross, we are released from any obligation or guilt brought about by our wrongdoing.

God calls us to repentance. This is the promise that forgiveness is granted to those who truly repent. Do you see the two statements with which God declares to end Joel’s prophecy? “I will forgive you.” “I am with you.”

### **Just Plain Hard to Get**

Sometimes the Old Testament prophecy books are hard to work through. Joel can be too. But despite all of the locusts and the pain and hardship, there is a promise or restoration extended to all who repent. And if you truly repent, you can be forgiven, And God will be with you. Through locusts, droughts, enemies, and devastation, from natural causes or from our own guilt, God forgives us, and God is with us.

Among Israel’s polytheistic neighbors – meaning they worshiped many, many gods – it was important to know one’s personal deity.

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<sup>4</sup> Lyrics from Dennis Jernigan’s song *Who Can Satisfy My Soul Like You*

You would have needed to know the god you were looking to help. For all of those polytheistic peoples, uncertainty was a troubling part of life. You see that through a 7<sup>th</sup> century BC “Prayer to Every God” found in the library of Ashur-banipal and written in interlinear Akkadian and Sumerian. Part of it reads: *O Lord, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.*

*O my god, (my) transgressions are many; great are my sins.*

*O my goddess, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.*

*O god whom I know or I don't know, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.*

*O goddess whom I know or I do not know my transgressions are many; great are my sins.*

*The transgressions which I have committed, indeed I do not know;*

*The sin which I have done, indeed I do not know.*

*Man is dumb; he knows nothing.*

*Mankind, everyone that exists – that does he know?<sup>5</sup>*

At this level, knowledge is simply intellectual awareness of a fact. The one praying does not even know to whom he is praying or for what he might be praying. This is the foundational level of awareness God is dealing with and addressing to the grumbling, grumpy Israelites when God provides meat and bread for them in the desert in Exodus. He provides the meat and the bread for a specific purpose: “Then you will KNOW that I am the LORD your God.” (Exodus 16:12)

God reminds his people that He is their deity, not any of the numerous gods and goddesses that they left behind in Egypt or whom Abram may have known in Mesopotamia. Eventually, Israel is also turning to unknown gods so God forced the Israelites to live among those people in Babylon. God expects his people to know him. Despite Israel having a covenant relationship with God, Israel knew less than a dumb animal. “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” (Isaiah 1:3)

God calls his people to a deeper level of understanding, beyond the simple knowing of a fact. God calls his people to know that He exists and further that his people might experience and appreciate God's character and God's very being. Joel 3:17 quotes Exodus 6:7: “Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.” This won't be simple intellectual awareness. This will be a personal encounter.

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<sup>5</sup> ANET, 391-92, II 21-27, 51-52.

Part of this experiential knowledge will help a person distinguish God from all other competing gods and extend to the Lord their attention and their worship.

God calls us to know him on a deeper, experiential level. He wants us to have a deeper experience of His grace. Jesus would, on several occasions, highlight the difference between knowing God cognitively and knowing God experientially. He tells the Samaritan woman, “You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know because salvation is from the Jews.” (John 4:22) Jesus later anticipates a day when all people will worship in spirit and in truth. This means a day when people will have a fuller awareness and a deeper knowledge of God.

### **Head and Heart**

Evangelism Explosion is an evangelism program that has refined the use of a basic evangelistic question: “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into My Heaven?’ what would you say?” The question was intended to nudge a person towards thinking through their life and their future. The answers tended to range from, “I am a good person”, “I pray to God”, and “I go to church.” Sadly, if the same questions was asked in many churches, I would assume the same range of answers would come back.

The goal isn’t to know about God. We are to know God. That is our aim. True intimacy. That is not something you get quickly. Eugene Peterson called it “a long obedience in the same direction.” You spend enough time with an acquaintance, and they develop into friends. Spend enough time with a friend and they can become like family. Spend enough time with God and He will transform into the love of your heart. To do this you must move your knowledge of God from your head down into your heart.

That is what Joel 3:17 is geared toward: “Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.” Are you purposeful in spending time with God? Is he your acquaintance? Make him your friend. Is he your friend? Make him your beloved, your loving Father.

Through discipleship, experience holiness, forgiveness and His presence.

What about you? Who is God to you? Do you know that you know that you know?

**FURTHER THOUGHTS:**

What is a relationship that you have where you can clearly see the progression from acquaintance to friend to close like family? How did that relationship build?

Think about something that you believe down to your guts, a deeply held conviction. Without focusing too much on whatever the viewpoint is, how did it become such a deeply held belief? What did you do to cultivate that, to move it from head knowledge to heart knowledge?

Joel talks about restoration for believers. What promises through the book comfort you as a believer?

Joel 3:16 reminds us that God is our refuge and strength. In what ways in your life has God been your refuge? In what ways has God been your strength?

If you were to go to heaven and God did ask you why you should gain entry, what would you say? Why should you get to enter heaven?

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:****SILVER WINGS SPRING SPUDS: Wednesday March 15<sup>th</sup> at noon.**

Join us in room 101 at noon as we gather for lunch together and a surprise game. We will provide cheese, sour cream, bacon, chives, and butter for the potatoes. If you would like a different topping and can provide enough for everyone, please note it on the sign-up sheet!

**WE NEED CANDY DONATIONS for the Easter Hunts we are having this year!** Individually wrapped candies, please. Bring them to the church and drop them off in the buckets provided! We also need non-candy prizes for families who are careful to avoid specific dyes and ingredients that may be counter-productive to their children. We need either all natural fruit snacks or toys, bouncing balls, fidgets etc. If you need some ideas, call the office or Pastors Craig or Jason.

**Easter Egg Hunt Outreach for Families of Special Needs Children.**

**March 25<sup>th</sup> at 10:30AM.** Sign up to volunteer today! All ages are encouraged to help! Come serve alongside your children and teenagers!

**EASTER FLOWER ORDERS.** Orders will be taken through Sunday March 19<sup>th</sup>. Order forms are available and can be turned into the office or prayer boxes. 6 1/2" flowers are \$10 each: Tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils are available.

**VBS VOLUNTEER MEETING: MARCH 26<sup>th</sup> at 10AM in the Fellowship**

**Hall.** This will be a brief information meeting for all who are interested in serving during Vacation Bible School on June 19-23.

**CHURCH SOFTBALL TEAM!** Come out and enjoy a season of softball and fellowship as the FBC Martinsburg softball season is about to begin. This is a competitive softball league with church teams throughout our area. Practices will start April 1<sup>st</sup> and season games begin the week of April 17<sup>th</sup>. The season runs through summer and ends in August with a tournament between all teams in the league. Games occur during the week and are played at our Ridge Road field, IBC, and Johnstown in Hedgesville. Games begin at 6:15pm. Both new and experienced players are welcome to join the team, however you must be 18 years or older to play. There is a one-time signup fee of \$23 per player, which is used to cover umpire fees. Sign up at the welcome center if interested.