



**Sermon Based Small Group
Leader Discussion Guide**

Sermon Title: "Returning To God"

**Sermon by Pastor Tom Harrington
Week of March 13, 2011**

Discussion Guide Contents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Session Objectives (for Group Leader) 2) Personal Connection (for Group Leader) 3) Icebreaker 4) Big Idea 5) Study Intro 6) Sermon Text 7) Digging Deeper 8) Taking it Home 9) Looking Ahead 10) Prayer Focus
Session Objectives (Group Leader)	<p>By the end of the session, group members should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand more fully God's forgiving nature. • Take seriously pain they have caused God and others and seek reconciliation. • Identify Satan's lies about God.
Personal Connection (Group Leader)	<p>How does my story connect to the reading? To prepare to lead this Bible study:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about how relationships are developed and nourished. Ask yourself if you are taking those steps in your relationship with God. • Consider how willing you are to act out your apology for hurting another. If more than words are needed, would you be willing to show your sorrow? • Pray for each member of your group by name.
Icebreaker	<p>Think about a vacation you have taken, one that you have greatly anticipated. What feelings surrounded the final days of the trip before your return home? Now, imagine you are the one at home, awaiting the return of a loved one. How do you feel?</p>
Big Idea	<p>God both anticipates the day when we will return to him and desires to restore our broken relationship with him.</p>

Study Intro

Study Background

Little is know about the prophet Joel, but the tone and message of this Old Testament prophet are consistent with those of Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Like the prophet Isaiah, Joel delivered the hard message that consequences are in store for those who turn from God but that those times will be followed by the blessing of restored relationship with God. Joel’s message reminded the Israelites, and all people, that God desires our best and willingly forgives our hurtful wanderings from his side, if we choose to return.

For Leader to read to group:

Let’s suppose that after Pastor Tom preached, we left the church , locked the doors, and did not return for 5 years. Not a single person set foot in Northwest Baptist Church until Lent, 2016. What would our church look like when we return following 5 years of complete neglect? The grass would be waist-high. The hedges would be overgrown and uneven. Our church sign would be full of 5 years worth of bugs and leaves. And the exterior of our building would have ugly mildew patches all over it. The mailbox would be so full of letters and bills that the mailman would have stopped trying to fill it ages ago. And because none of those bills had been paid, the electricity would be off and the entire property would be dark. In short, there would be a lot of cleaning up to do.

That gives us a good idea of the state of Temple in Jerusalem when the prophet Joel was young. Centuries of misuse and disuse had caused Solomon’s once magnificent structure to look more like a building in the slums than in the upscale section of Jerusalem. But then there was a turnaround, at least to the exterior of the building. Joel wrote the words of our text because there was still a problem; the repair was incomplete. Thing looked good on the outside, but God desired an inner change, a “U-Turn” in the lives of his people. Joel urged the people of God to turn from their sin and turn back to God: 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' (Joel 2:12).

The observance of Lent begins with Joel’s message: God desires our best, willingly forgiving our hurtful wanderings from his side, if we choose to return. God is looking for repentance from us, a change. God is not impressed by right words, by self-denial when not accompanied by the gift of our heart. Outward actions are intended to symbolize, not substitute for, an inner change of heart.

<p>Sermon Text</p>	<p>Joel 2:12-18 (New International Version)</p> <p>Rend Your Heart 12 “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” 13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. 14 Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God. 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. 16 Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. 17 Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”</p> <p>The LORD’s Answer 18 Then the LORD was jealous for his land and took pity on his people.</p>
<p>Digging Deeper</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As you read these verses from Joel, what descriptive words about God stood out to you? Were any of the words especially difficult for you to reconcile with your image of God? 2. God calls his people to return to him, people who were once close but walked away from him. What does turning away from a relationship look like? <p>Leader: (Optional follow-up question) What are the early indicators that the relationship is deteriorating?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. In this passage of Scripture, God calls the people to specific action. What are some of the things they had to do as they returned to him? <p>Leader: (Optional follow-up question) According to Joel 2:14, what is the natural, first response for those whose lives have been blessed and restored by the Lord? A close friend of yours from church confides in you that they are struggling with a habitual sin, what would you suggest that they do?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Newly married men were excused from military service for one year (see Deut. 24:5). Joel infers that the threat here is far greater than even war,

and calls for newlyweds to interrupt their honeymoon (v. 16). What kinds of competing commitments sometimes seem to cause people to put off their urgently needed reconciliation with God?

5. What are some actions you have engaged in (or observed) while seeking reconciliation for wronging another? Are there times when words are not enough? Why or why not?

Leader: The Oxford Companion to the Bible entry on repentance: “[It is] sincere contrition, involving acknowledgment of wrongdoing in the sense of both admitting guilt and feeling guilty. The sinner might signal repentance through fasting, weeping, rending garments, and donning sackcloth and ashes. Such emotional and even public acknowledgement of prior wrongdoing is but the first step toward forgiveness: remorse must be accompanied by resolve to cease doing wrong and do what is right...These ideas are summed up in the great prophetic concept *shûb*, “turn”, meaning both a turning from sin and a returning to right action (p. 646).

6. What happens to a relationship when the one offended does not receive a sincere apology from the one causing harm? What happens to the one who does not ask for forgiveness?

Leader: Our culture discourages acknowledgement of sin against God and others. We will do almost anything not to feel guilty, easily finding sources to validate and justify our actions and choices.

7. Joel tells us to “Return to the Lord, for he is gracious and compassionate.” What images of God have kept many from returning to God?

Leader: (Optional follow-up question) Where in culture have you observed such misleading images of God’s character and nature?

8. Pastor talked about lies Satan wants people to believe about God. What lies do you easily believe about God? About others? About yourself?

Leader: Consider giving this question additional response time. The answers to all three parts of the question will reveal a lot about our concept of God, others and ourselves. Joel’s prophecy reveals the beauty of God’s character.

“‘Gracious’ is the total goodwill of a superior to an inferior. ‘Merciful’ could be defined as the love of a mother for her child. ‘Slow to anger’ means that God does not immediately punish people for their sins, but waits patiently for

	<p>repentance and turning. ‘Abounding in love’ is God’s faithful, everlasting, loving observance of the covenant bond with the people. On the basis of these qualities in their God, the Judeans will be allowed to return, even though they have earlier deserted their God” (New Interpreter’s Bible, <i>Joel</i>, p. 319).</p>
Taking it Home	<p>How will I live it? Apply it?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This is the first Sunday of Lent, the time on the liturgical calendar that leads up to Easter. During this time of preparation, contemplate your heart’s posture of penitence, of sorrow for hurting God. Then, consider and act upon steps towards reconciliation. 2. Become acutely aware of half-truths or all out lies you hear about God. Are you willing to offer the truth when confronted with a lie? 3. What are some messages about Jesus Christ that you might hear during this season leading up to Easter?
Looking Ahead	<p>How can I prepare for the next Small Group meeting?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite your group members to attend “Community,” 9:00-10:00 Sundays in the fellowship hall. • The next SBSG cycle will begin the week of April 3, 2011.
Prayer Focus	<p>How can I connect with God and others through prayer?</p> <p>Leader: As you begin your prayer time today, your group might find it meaningful to say this short prayer together or taking turns, line by line:</p> <p>God, my Redeemer, Great Healer, and Restorer of lost value. You can recover a life and make the latter years more wonderful than we can imagine. You restore the years of loss and dryness with abundance of blessings and fruit. You wipe away the tears and the shame and fill us with gladness of heart, the joy of the Lord. Break my heart that I might not be able to resist You when You call. Let our relationship begin anew today! I want the prayer of King David to become my prayer:</p> <p><i>Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence; and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Amen.</i></p>
Updates	<p>Announcements from: Care Coordinator, Outreach Coordinator, Social Coordinator</p>

This is the last week of the current SBSG cycle. Join us again, beginning April 3rd, for the next SBSG cycle.