

Sermon Title:
“Returning To God”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Harrington
Week of March 13, 2011

Sermon Based Small Group Discussion Guide

Icebreaker

Big Idea:

God both anticipates the day when we will return to him and desires to restore our broken relationship with him.

Study Background

Little is known 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.

Sermon Text:

Joel 2:12-18 (New International Version)

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?’”

The LORD’s Answer

18 Then the LORD was jealous for his land

and took pity on his people.

Learning more about the lesson

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?
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?
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?
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?

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?

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

Taking it Home

How will I live it? Apply it?

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

How can I prepare for the next small group meeting?

1. Invite your group members to attend "Community," 9:00-10:00 Sundays in the fellowship hall.

2. The next SBSG cycle will begin the week of April 3, 2011.

Prayer Requests and Praises:

As you begin your prayer time today, your group might find it meaningful to say this short prayer together or take turns, saying it line by line:

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:

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.

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