

Joel 2:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

Analysis

Joel makes explicit what repentance requires: "And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil." The Hebrew veqir'u levavkhem ve'al-bigdeikhem veshuvu el-YHWH Eloheikhem ki-channun verachum hu erekh appayim verav-chesed venicham al-hara'ah וְקַרְעָוּ לְבָבְכֶם וְאֶל־בְּגִדְיכֶם וְשׁוּבוּ כִּי־חַנּוּן וְרָחָם הוּא אֶרֶךְ אֶפְיִים וְרָב־חִסְדָּה וְנָתַם עַל־הַכְּעָה demands internal transformation, not mere external ritual.

"Rend your heart, and not your garments" (veqir'u levavkhem ve'al-bigdeikhem) contrasts genuine versus superficial repentance. Tearing garments was traditional mourning practice (Genesis 37:34, 2 Samuel 1:11), but Joel demands heart-rending—deep, internal contrition. The verb qara (קַרְעַ, "rend/tear") applied to levav (לְבָב, "heart") suggests violent, painful tearing of one's inner being. God wants broken hearts, not torn clothing. This anticipates Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

"Turn unto the LORD your God" (veshuvu el-YHWH Eloheikhem) uses the covenant verb shuv (שׁוּב), meaning to return, turn back. Repentance is returning to covenant relationship with Yahweh. The motivation follows: "for he is gracious and merciful" (ki-channun verachum hu). The adjective channun (חַנּוּן) describes God's favor and grace; rachum (רָחָם) His compassion and tender mercy (from rechem, womb—mother-like compassion).

"Slow to anger" (erekh appayim, אֶרֶךְ אֶפְיִם) literally means "long of nostrils"—imagery of delayed breathing associated with anger. God's patience is extraordinary. "Of great kindness" (rav-chesed) uses chesed (צדקה), covenant loyalty and faithful love. This formula appears throughout Scripture (Exodus 34:6-7, Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, Jonah 4:2), forming the foundation of covenant relationship. Knowing God's gracious character motivates genuine repentance.

Historical Context

Joel's exact historical setting is debated, with proposed dates ranging from the 9th to the 5th century BC. The book contains no references to specific kings or datable political events. What is clear is that Joel addresses a community experiencing devastating locust plague, which he interprets as divine judgment and a harbinger of the coming Day of the LORD. The book moves from describing literal agricultural catastrophe to prophesying the eschatological Day of the LORD when God will judge nations and pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:16-21) applies Joel's Spirit-outpouring prophecy to the church age, showing the book's prophetic scope extends from Joel's time through Christ's first coming to His return.

Joel's prophecy of the Spirit's outpouring found initial fulfillment at Pentecost and continues in the church age, while his Day of the LORD visions await ultimate fulfillment at Christ's return. The book emphasizes genuine repentance ('rend your heart, not your garments'), God's character as gracious and merciful, and the call to corporate fasting and prayer in times of crisis.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does Joel 2:13 deepen your understanding of God's character, particularly His holiness, justice, and mercy?
2. What specific attitudes, thought patterns, or behaviors does this verse call you to examine and change in light of the gospel?
3. How does this passage point forward to Christ and His redemptive work, and how should that shape your worship and obedience?

Interlinear Text

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 86:15 (Grace): But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.

Psalms 34:18 (References Lord): The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.

Isaiah 57:15 (Parallel theme): For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Micah 7:18 (Grace): Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.

Psalms 86:5 (Grace): For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.

Isaiah 66:2 (References Lord): For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

Psalms 103:8 (Grace): The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

Jonah 4:2 (Grace): And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

2 Samuel 1:11 (Parallel theme): Then David took hold on his clothes, and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him:

Psalms 51:17 (References God): The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.