Joel 2: 12-17 “Now, therefore,” says the Lord, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” **13**So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the Lord your God, For He *is* gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. **14**Who knows *if* He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him— A grain offering and a drink offering For the Lord your God? **15**Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; **16**Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. **17**Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, Weep between the porch and the altar; Let them say, “Spare Your people, O Lord, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, “ ‘Where *is* their God?’ ”

We’re back in the minor prophets tonight with Joel, a short book with a lot to say about God. The book opens with a locust plague. There’s been some debate over the years of whether this involves a literal locust plague or if the locusts are a description given to the enemies attacking and devouring the land. In the end, we miss the point if we focus on the locusts and not on what God is doing in the land.

Too many times, we focus on the tool God is using rather than what God is doing. We focus on what the preacher is wearing rather than what his message is. We focus on where the preacher is standing rather than the stand he’s taking for God. We let ourselves be distracted. In John 4, Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well - “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” Jesus tells us very clearly – don’t be distracted! Look neither to the left nor to the right, but straight ahead. Don’t be confused by the people who want to debate – be led by the spirit of God.

Look at verse 12 - “Now, therefore,” says the Lord, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” The land has been destroyed by the locusts. There’s nothing left. Devastation is everywhere. Joel gives the word of God in the middle of this devastation – Turn to Me with all your heart. The children of Israel have turned away from God. God says that they have been adulterous with other nations and other gods. They’ve not turned to God for salvation, but have leaned unto their own understanding. They’ve turned to the Egyptians and Assyrians.

Do you remember a country song years ago where the man sang about he was looking for love in all the wrong places? Israel was looking for salvation in all the wrong places. We too look for salvation in all the wrong places – we look to jobs, people, places, money. We beg God to change things while we refuse to change. We know our sin. We know where we’ve gone wrong. Yet, we’ll try anything rather than simply turning to God with all our heart and repenting. Repenting isn’t telling God we’ve done wrong – He knows that. Repenting isn’t apologizing. Repenting is admitting the wrong, turning away from the wrong, and turning back to God – leaving the sin that brought us to this place behind and turning to a new path.

Listen to verse 13 - **13**So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the Lord your God, For He *is* gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. Joel is saying – change your heart. Outside showiness does not impress God. God says, “I look upon your heart and I know when you’ve really changed. You can tear your garments until you have no more to tear – I’m looking for real change in you. Nothing cosmetic – nothing outside.

Too often, we clean up on the outside. We come to church. We pray nice prayers. We say God bless you to all the right people… we have rent our garments, but we have never rent our hearts. In Matthew 23:25-26 Jesus says - “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion andself-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Jesus demands that we first cleanse our hearts. Don’t bother tearing your clothes and putting on a big show… this is all for the benefit of men. Spend your time changing your heart… allowing the Holy Spirit full control.

Let’s pick up in verse 14 - **14**Who knows *if* He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him— A grain offering and a drink offering For the Lord your God? **Now listen to the excitement, the energy, the gladness starting in verse 15** Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. There is gladness and relief when we get right with the Lord again. When we finally bow our heads, stop rebelling, and turn and admit that He is right and our way is wrong.

We can convince ourselves of all kinds of things – Proverbs 30:12 *There is* a generation that is pure in its own eyes, Yet is not washed from its filthiness. Proverbs 12:15 The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel is wise. We do not have the ability to lead a righteous life without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When we’re going one direction and the Bible is teaching a different direction, we don’t have to study very long to decide which is right. Rationalization is not reality.

Men are famous for not reading the directions before putting something together… when it won’t work, we get mad! Had we followed the directions, it would have worked! Humans are the same way with God – we have the Bible – a book of Direction – yet we go and do our own thing, we rebell, we rationalize, we won’t repent and, when things go wrong, we get upset. Follow the Bible and we won’t go wrong – don’t get distracted – stay close to His Word.

Let’s finish with verse **17**Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, Weep between the porch and the altar; Let them say, “Spare Your people, O Lord, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, “ Where *is* their God?’ ” Joel says – let the priests intercede.

In this country, many religious leaders are part of the problem, not the solution. They preach everything but what God says. They choose a single line of the Bible, out of context, and start to use it to lead the people astray. A good pastor prays for his church. He prays for his nation. He prays that there be a spiritual awakening. He longs to see people turn back to the Bible and live.

Joel prophesied perhaps as early as 800 BC, but his message still rings true even today. When we tear our hearts, and not just our garments… when we turn in spirit and truth and not just in word… our heart can be healed. God is merciful and quick to forgive, slow to anger. It starts in our home, but will spread to the nation. Cancerous tumors are made up of many cancerous cells. A sinful nation is made up of many sin stricken citizens. Rend our hearts and we can start to bring health back through God, who will spare His repentant children.