

# Abiding Fruit

*Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart*

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## **Rend Your Hearts & Not Your Clothes**

### **Joel 2:13**

The official way to mourn in the Ancient Near East was to tear your clothes, and to throw dust up into the air. Putting on sackcloth and ashes represented both dire mourning and anguish. It also was a way to express repentance or a change of heart or attitude.

This is why we find the King of Nineveh in Jonah's day responding to the prophet's preaching by changing his clothes and mourning (Jonah 3:5, 6, 8). It was Jacob who tore his clothes and put on sackcloth to mourn for the loss of Joseph (Gen. 37:34). The wicked Ahab responded to the dire predictions of the Lord concerning himself and his sinful family by wearing sackcloth and acting with humiliation before God (1 Kings 21: 27). The order by the wicked Haman to destroy the Jews prompted good Mordecai to tear his clothes and put on sackcloth. Jesus speaks of the wearing of sackcloth as being representative of repentance and humiliation (Matt.11:21; Luke 10:13).

Repentance and sorrow (mourning) therefore, either for sin, for death, or for a particular situation is represented by the wearing of sackcloth. In the prophecy of Joel, repentance is a major theme. It is associated with the coming Day of the Lord (see 1:5; 2:1, 2, 11, 31; 3:14 for this Day). In Judah, there had been some recent crises precipitated by the sins of the people. The land was experiencing a severe drought and locusts were causing havoc and devastation. It has often being thought that the locusts represented the nations of the earth, and since four kinds of locusts are mentioned, these represent the Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans. It is better, however to see the locusts as literal since this devastation would have a profound and immediate impact on Judah, rather than an extended drawn out kind of judgment as represented by the nations. The literal locusts also represent the locust-like army of the Lord in chapter 2 that is connected with the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord in Joel is the terrible and terrifying judgment of God that is coming upon Judah for her sins.

The judgment by the locust was a present reality for Judah, but the day of the Lord with its associated judgments was an anticipated judgment that Judah should expect. Preparation for that future time of judgment was necessary. All preparation for the coming judgment of the Lord should be characterized by both a physical preparation and a spiritual response. The physical preparation was to deal with the land as God expected them to. This meant that they should allow the land its Sabbaths among other things. God's people should always be renewing themselves spiritually. Part of this renewal process is repentance. Isaiah the prophet saw the Lord in His glory and it so staggered him that he instinctively recognized the seriousness of God's holiness. He immediately recognized that he was guilty along with the rest of the people (see Isaiah 6). It was this spiritual preparation that enabled the prophet to pronounce that God was going to harden the nation and not forgive the nation.

Repentance is a key theme in Joel. The call to repentance is given to all of God's people, both young and old. It was to be a repentance that embraced the whole person. Indeed, this is biblical repentance – a repentance that involves body and soul. This repentance would, of course, be indicated by the physical outward show – mourning, weeping, crying out to God, and by fasting (1:13, 14; 2:15 – 17). It was not, however, the external acts of repentance that God was really looking for. God was looking for the inward response to this threatening judgment.

Ritual or required observance of repentance (simply going through the external motions) is insufficient as far as God is concerned. Genuine repentance is much deeper and more painful. The sincerity of repentance is demonstrated by returning to the Lord.

Joel 2:12, 13 indicate this kind of repentance. There is to be the outward manifestation of inward sorrow – fasting, weeping and mourning, but verse 12 indicates that these are to be associated with a return to the Lord with “*all the heart*”. It is true that we can give ample supply of the outward actions, when the heart internally is untouched. There are such things as professional mourners, even among evangelical Christians. We can do the required actions but the inward motives are not connected. The physical, in other words, dominates and not the spiritual. God’s way of repentance is that the heart must be affected first, and then truly the outward expressions of sorrow will follow and be genuine.

The motivation to repentance does not lie within ourselves. It is crucial to understand this truth. The motivation to repent lies in the nature of God. Joel 2:13 tells us that God “*is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.*” The hope for any salvation lies firmly in the hands of God. The hope of any restoration to God rests completely with God. It is this truth that this largely ignored or lost among Christians today. Most believe that spiritual power lies within them, and that like a garden tap, all they have to do, is turn the knob and spiritual life issues forth. This is a fallacy and produces unbiblical Christians. It makes us shallow, and it makes us independent of God.

We are to return to the Lord our God. Though there must always be an outward manifestation of the sorrow for sin (how can there be not) in repentance – this is not what God seeks first. He is looking at our hearts. This is why in verse 13 God tells Judah to rend their hearts and not their clothes. You can engage in all the outward show you like, stating that you are sorrowful for sin, but if your heart is not rent in two, your sorrow is not genuine. The Bible is clear to point out that godly sorrow accompanies repentance (2 Cor. 7:10), but that worldly sorrow produces death.

Worldly sorrow is mere outward sorrow. The heart is unaffected or unchanged. This is the behavior of Hollywood and others – it is external. This was how Israel and Judah were. They were fixated and fascinated with the externals, because the externals are what others see, but they are not what God is looking for. We must be careful, not only with external good works to be seen by men, but also with our sorrow for sin. Godly sorrow works repentance in us. The heart is broken and contrite, and God never despises this kind of heart (Isaiah 57:15; 66:2). This is the heart that trembles at God’s Word. The Holy God receives holy sorrow for sin. We must rend our hearts. This is the word קָרַע qara`, which means to tear in pieces. God requires a broken heart. In Joel 2:13, this is an imperative – a command. This must not be ignored as if it is optional or can be put off. This is the kind of heart that Jesus speaks of in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3, 4.

The word for clothing (garments) is also the word that means to act deceitfully and treacherously (בָּגַד beged). It is possible to tear our clothes (go through all the right external motions) and yet act deceitfully and treacherously in our hearts. God does not love to pour out judgment upon His people – he relents over disaster (2:13). It is necessary for our spiritual well-being, but we can always avoid the disciplining hand of God, if we break our hearts before God. Let us make sure that the visible signs of repentance are truly genuine by ensuring that our hearts are broken first True repentance and a turning from our sins comes from the broken heart and not outward visible or expected response. Let us marry the two together. This is what is fulfilled in the hearts of Peter’s hearers on the Day of Pentecost (acts 2:17 - 21 with Joel 2:28 – 32). True biblical conversion is the result of true biblical repentance and vice-versa. Forget the clothes – we must break our hearts before the Lord. If we do this – then God will reveal Himself to us. Then we shall eat in plenty and be satisfied (Joel 2:26), and we shall praise the Name of our God who has done such great and wonderful things for us.