

RESTORING THE YEARS: JOEL 2:25-27

“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; and My people shall never be put to shame. Then you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel: I am the LORD your God and there is no other. My people shall never be put to shame.”

Did you hear about the football game between the animals and the insects? That’s right... The two squads gathered on the gridiron for a real grudge match. Dressing out for the animals were *the elephant and lion and tiger and bear...* While, suiting up for the insects was *the firefly, the flea, the gnat, the butterfly...*

Well, you can imagine the outcome. The game started out dominated by the animals. Every time the elephant ran the ball he gained 40-50 yards. The lion swept around the end for touchdown after touchdown... The defense for the insects was as weak as a flea. And the offense was no better... Every time the yellow jacket dropped back to pass he was sacked by the bulldog. (*Sorry, that just slipped out.*) The halftime score was - Animals 70, Insects 0.

Of course, you’d figure the Animals would have the game locked up... a 70-zip halftime lead would be insurmountable. But at the start of the second half a new player, *the centipede*, entered the game for the insects. And his impact was immediate and dramatic. Everything the *Centipede* did went *unimpeded*. He ran back the opening kick-off for a TD. Every time he carried the ball he scored. No one could tackle him. He ran, passed, blocked. He was incredible!

And on defense, every time the elephant touched the ball, the centipede broke through and tackled him for a loss. The centipede dominated the second half, and led the Insects in a dramatic come-from-behind victory. The final score - Animals 70, Insects 77.

After the game the elephant and lion were curious. They asked the flea, “*Hey, that centipede is a quite a player. Why did he not play in the first half?*” His teammate answered, “*Well, it takes a centipede a whole half just to put on his shoes.*” As it turned out the football playing centipede was one *big, bad bug*.

And in the days of the Prophet Joel the nation of Judah likewise faced a *big, bad bug*. Not a centipede - but a plague of swarming, grasshopper-like locust. In a day before pesticides... long before the *Orkin man...* a blight of locust swept across the southern kingdom of Judah. The locust devastated fig trees, and barley fields, and vineyards. They consumed the crops that dotted the countryside, and crippled the economy.

Once, I went to a Bible Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. While there, I learned that once every 14 years or so, Nashville is plagued by locust. The eggs in the ground hatch, and the locust start to swarm. You walk down the sidewalk, and the little critters smack you in the face. They *bugged* me the whole trip.

A locust is a dull-yellow, or red colored insect - like a short, plump grasshopper. They're about three inches long, and have two antenna another inch or so long. Locust travel at tremendous speeds, and they are most known for their ferocious appetite. A swarm of locust resembles a black cloud moving over the landscape. The insects strip every green plant of their vegetation. They leave nothing behind. Locust will even eat the bark off the trees. The locust have a nickname... they're called "**hunger incarnate.**" OT scholar, Charles Feinberg, writes, "**Locust have been known to devour every green herb and ever blade of grass in an area of almost 90 square miles, so that the ground gave the appearance of having been scorched by fire.**" Trust me, if any of us ever had to endure a plague of locust we'd be *bugged* too!

It amazes me the damage a little bug can do. I use to own a sizable sports memorabilia collection. I had several Braves programs and yearbooks from the 1960s – their initial seasons in Atlanta. I had some mint-conditioned copies of Sports Illustrated, and clippings from the Atlanta newspapers that documented the major sporting events of the mid-70s.

For several years I stored my collection in cardboard boxes in the basement of my parent's house. But when I got out the boxes, to sort through them, I made a startling discovery – *termites* had eaten away many of my prized keepsakes. *Big, bad bugs* had devastated my collection, and cost me a fortune. It reminds me of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "**Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy...**" *Termites too!*

And this is what happened to Judah in the days of Joel. Not termites or centipedes - but locust were the culprits. Joel 1:4 describes the total devastation that occurred around Jerusalem, "**What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten.**" The lush, green landscape had been ravaged.

Remember America's dust bowl days of the mid-30s. Drought, pestilence, and high winds devastated the continent's heartland. Midwestern farmers upped and left the land where they were born - where relatives were buried. They moved west in search of survival. Formerly rich, fertile farmland became worthless dust.

This was the condition of the land of Judah, in the days of the Prophet Joel... and interestingly enough this picture also resembles the condition of many people's spiritual life. A similar phenomena can occur in a person's heart. *Drought creates parched ground...* And *big, bad bugs* eat away our innocence - our joy - our contentment - our faith - our peace of mind. There are locust in life that eat up opportunities... and dry up time... and gnaw at our conscience... and wreck relationships... and chew away our reputation...

Notice in this morning's text there are four types of locust mentioned – *the chewing locust, the swarming locust, the crawling locust, and the consuming locust.* Some Bible scholars interpret these phrases as different insects. Other people understand them as references to various stages in the growth of a locust. But the point for us, is that locust come in various types. And the same is true of the locust in our lives... Difficult circumstances come from different sources.

It may surprise you, but at times **God Himself sends the locust into our lives.** He allows trials and testings. This was case with the locust in Joel's day. In chapter 1 God called them, "*My army.*" The trouble the nation had experienced was a wake-up call from God. Trials teach us vital lessons. God uses them to stretch and strengthen our faith.

Other locust in my life are **a result of the evil in the world**. Persecution, abuse, disease, spiritual attacks are all the aftermath of Adam's sin – and these evils are still around. We can't escape them. In fact, God uses this evil world to teach us to trust in His Spirit. Through faith we learn to overcome the locust.

And some locust just **swarm in from nowhere**. There's no good explanation for them – or better yet, the reason is hidden from our narrow, earthbound perspective... Surely, God has a reason, but as in the story of Job, He doesn't always communicate it to us.

It reminds me of the guy who visited his friend. The doorbell rang, his friend opened the door, and into the room walked the man, followed by a huge dog. As the two friends began to talk the dog went on a rampage. He knocked over a lamp, jumped on the sofa with his muddy paws, started gnawing on a pillow...

Finally, the owner of the home had all he could take. He rebuked his buddy, "**Hey, friend or no friend, you need to control your dog. Look at the mess he's made.**" His friend looked at him with a puzzled expression, "**What do you mean 'my dog'? I thought the animal was your dog.**" The dog was neither man's fault. Sometimes stuff happens in our lives, and we don't know who's fault it is. We don't know where the locust originate – *and in those cases it really doesn't matter* - we just need to trust the Lord to repair the damage!

But I've got to admit - most of the time the locust in my life aren't *coming from God* – nor are they the result of *evil in the world* – and they certainly aren't *swarming out of nowhere* – Hey, the locust are *my own fault*. They're the result of *some sin in my life*. When I think back on *the damage that's been done - the opportunities wasted - the blessings squandered - the hurt and pain I've caused myself and others...* I've got to confess, more often than not, it's because of my own sin. I can't blame it on anybody but me!

Sin always has consequences. Galatians 6:7 reminds us, "**Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.**" You don't sow apple seeds, and get pear trees or grapevines – you get an apple tree. It's a law that can't be violated. It holds true in the natural world, and in the spiritual world. God is not mocked – a person will always reap what they sow.

If you chose to sin against God, you're sowing seeds that will eventually sprout trouble and heartache. Those seeds may not come up tomorrow, or next month, or even next year – *you don't reap in the same season that you sow* – but those seeds will sprout.

It reminds me of the father out west who's son was busy sowing his wild oats. They lived on the ranch and the boy would drive into town and get into trouble. To make a point to his son, each time the boy broke a rule his father would drive a nail into the hitching post out by the barn. Over time the post filled up with nails.

Eventually, the boy got into serious trouble, and was sentenced to prison. He served five years behind bars. But when he got out, his father wanted to show his son forgiveness, and encourage him with a fresh start. One night the two of them walked out to that hitching post - and one by one the father removed the nails. It was a powerful demonstration of forgiveness, but what brought tears to the son's eyes was the sight of the hitching post once all the nails had been removed.

The nail holes were still there. The sin had been forgiven, but the scars remained. I look at my life and I thank God for His mercy - His full and free forgiveness. I appreciate the new start I have in Jesus – *but some of the scars still remain.*

Today, ask a little boy to name his favorite baseball player, and he'll probably answer, "Josh Hamilton," or "Derek Jeter," or "Chipper Jones." But in my day the answer from most kids would've been "Mickey Mantle." Mantle was a five tool star. He could run, throw, field, hit for average, and hit with power. He could crush a baseball. Mickey could've been the best to ever play the game if he hadn't wasted away his health on boos.

Just before he died, after a stint at a clinic for alcohol abuse, Mickey Mantle went public with his sad story. In a moving press conference, the once great player, admitted ruining his body, shattering his mental health, and shortening his career. He made the statement... "My manager, Casey Stengel, said when I came up, 'This guy is going to be better than Joe DiMaggio and Babe Ruth.' It didn't happen. God gave me a great body to play with, and I didn't take care of it."

Worse, is what he admitted about his relationships... "One of the things I messed up, besides baseball, was being a father. I wasn't a good family man." By his own admission Mickey Mantle was the poster boy for a person who threw away his God-given talent, and wasted precious opportunities, and squandered the many blessings that God had given him. When I think of the damage the locust have done in my life – all the *what-ifs*, and *could-have-beens*, and *might-haves*, and *never-wills*... *it really bugs me, too.*

Once DL Moody came home from a meeting, and his wife asked him, "How many people were saved?" He answered, "Two-and-a-half." She said, "You mean two adults and one child?" He said, "No, I mean two children, and one adult." The children had their whole life to serve the Lord, while the adult had wasted years he'd never get back.

When I looked inside my boxes of sports memorabilia, and saw the damage, I was grieved. It's the same feeling I have when I think of the poor use I've made of some of the blessings and gifts God has given me. When I see the damage the locust have done it grieves my heart and brings a few tears.

Often people ask me, "Do you have any regrets?" And my answer is always, "You bet I do." *If you're honest* – you'll admit you do too. We all have regrets.

Let me ask you today, what are your regrets? Maybe a failed marriage? Or mistakes you made with your kids? Or the pain you've caused the people you love? Or a chance to witness for Christ you let slip away? Or a business opportunity you didn't have faith enough to take? Or a special prompting from God that would've deepen your faith – or taught you His Word – or given you a place to serve... *but you ignored it!*

Well, if you have a few regrets, let me share with you an exciting promise - a thrilling promise. It comes straight from the throne of God. There's not a more encouraging promise in all the Bible, than Joel 2:25. God says to His people then and now, "I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust..." Catch the implication – it doesn't matter what caused the damage... The reason for your loss is irrelevant to the restoration God wants to work. The locust might be the result of

God's trial, or the evil in the world, or some unknown reason, or even your past sin – but no matter its cause... *If your life belongs to God, He promises you a total restoration.*

Look at what this meant for the Jewish nation, verse 26. God tells them through the Prophet Joel, “You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; and My people shall never be put to shame.” Imagine, looking over ravaged and barren fields, then reading this verse. God promises the impossible. In the end they'll eat in plenty and be satisfied.

Yes, years of prosperity and happiness had been lost to the locust. Look in the annals of history, and you'll see that there've been plagues of locust that lasted up to 20 years. Two decades got chewed up and spit out. But God promises us - in the amount of time we have left - to bless us with a bumper crop of blessing that will more than make up for whatever we've lost.

This is what God promises to people who commit their lives to Him... Maybe you didn't devote your life to Jesus until you were 50 or 60 years old. And you've mourned your late-in-life decision to follow Jesus. But God is able to take whatever time you have left, and make your final years as productive as a lifetime of faithful living. He restores years that were eaten away.

I love the story of the teenager who was mowing lawns in the neighborhood to make some spending money. He was going door to door looking for jobs. At one house a woman answered the door. When he explained his purpose, she answered him, “Oh, no thanks. My husband always mows our lawn.” But as the door shut, the boy heard a knocking on an upstairs window. A man opened it and floated down a piece of paper. It read, “Lawnmower is in the garage. Be here every Tuesday at 1:00pm before my wife comes home. \$20 under the doormat. Shhhhh.”

Here's the moral of the story... What we thought was a closed door, may not be so closed after all. Even after you think the door of opportunity has been slammed shut in your face, God has ways of opening new doors – often times, even better doors.

Remember Moses... Moses tried to deliver the Hebrews by his own hand, and failed miserably. He was banished from Egypt. God shut the door on Moses for 40 long years. God took him to the backside of the desert to humble him. Moses didn't begin his ministry of deliverance until he was 80 years old – but he accomplished more in his last 40 years than he did in his first 80 years.

Remember Samson... Oh, how the mighty man had fallen. At one point in his life God used him to kill a thousand Philistines. But Samson let compromise choke out his commitment to God. He wound up on display in the temple of the Philistines. He was mocked and ridiculed. Yet, Samson prayed for a final surge of supernatural power. He pulled down the Temple's pillars, and killed more in his dying than he had in his living.

Remember Job... The locust in his life ate everything Job possessed. He lost his kids, wealth, reputation, and his health. Yet, after his ordeal, God saw to it to bless him with twice as much as he had possessed before. God not only restored what the locust ate. He offered Job a two for one. He blessed Job with twice what he once had.

Remember Peter... Three times he denied his Lord in Jesus' most critical hour. Even after the resurrection, I'm sure Peter thought his Christian life and ministry was toast. *After what he'd done, how could the Lord want his help?* But on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the risen Lord Jesus appeared to Peter and reinstated a humbled, broken servant. Three times he commissioned Peter. God still had great things, and open doors, for Pete.

There is nothing too hard for God. He can restore broken relationships. Relationships so fractured, you thought they could never be revived. If God created a business opportunity for you once, He can do it again... If He called you to a particular ministry once, He can repeat that calling like He did with Peter... God can restore lost talents, and lost years, and lost calling, and lost opportunities...

Charles Spurgeon explained, *"Lost years can never be restored literally. Time once past is gone forever... You cannot have back your time; but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the wasted blessings, the unripened fruits of years over which you mourned. The fruits of wasted years may yet be yours."* *Our Sovereign God does have strange and wonderful ways in which He works.* Here's one of God's strange and wonderful ways...

There's a dentist who lives in Overland Park, Kansas. His name is Dr. Kim. He became *my* dentist in a *"strange and wonderful way"* orchestrated by God. One year, I spoke at a leadership conference in Kansas. After the study, a couple approached me for prayer. They were trying to have a baby, but for some unknown reason couldn't. I prayed for the couple. The next year I was invited back to the conference. I was met by the same couple, *and their new arrival*. God had heeded our prayer and given them with a baby. It was a blessing to cradle an answer to prayer.

The fellow then announced that he was a dentist, and if I ever needed any dental work, just let him know. At the time it had been eight years - and two cracked teeth - since I could afford to see a dentist. Plenty of time for *chewing locust* to wreak havoc in my mouth. Hey, the *chewing locust* are a dentist's best friend! I thought I was too far behind to ever catch up!

But God has *"strange and wonderful ways."* I flew to Kansas - had my teeth cleaned, got a root canal; then got fitted for two crowns - *and it was free!* Dr. Kim even fed me and let me stay at his house until I could fly back home the next morning. The years I lost to the locust, God restored to me in 48 hours. All it cost me was a discounted airfare to Kansas.

God wants to work in your life to restore to you *untapped potential*, and *thrown-away opportunities*, and *set-aside talents*, and *ignored gifts*, and *neglected callings*, and *an abused body*, and even *cracked teeth*. He'll make up for *the foolishness of your youth* - *or the impulsiveness of your decisions* - *or the frailty of your flesh or the weakness and fickleness of your commitments*. All you have to do is to give Him what's left of your life right now, today! Stop trying to dig yourself out of the hole. Give God whatever is left of the mess you've made of your life.

God will take it and grow a bumper crop of blessing! As God said to the nation Judah, *"You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; and My people shall never be put to shame..."* You'll be put to the test... Yes. You'll be put through the fire... Yes. But you'll be put to shame... **never!** In the end God's plan for you is restoration.

If the locust in your life are there because of your sin; then confess what you've done. Own your sin. You need to repent. You need to ask God for forgiveness and the power to change. He'll give you both. But remember even if it is your fault God still wants to repair the damage. He'll do something about the consequences. *He can undo a lot of what you've done.*

Most of you know what a big John Wayne fan I am. There's a line from an Old Duke western... He's trying to retrieve his grandson from some kidnapers. He's got his gun pointed at one of the bad guys... He warns him, "Hear me, Mister - it doesn't matter if it's your fault, or my fault, or his fault - if you make one wrong move, I'm going to blow your head off."

Hey, that's what I hear God saying – *but in reverse*. This morning the Lord Jesus is saying to you and me, "*Listen Mister - it don't matter if it was your fault, or his fault, or My trial - if you'll make just one right move, I'm going to bless your socks off.*" How about that!

Will you humble yourself and make that move today? Confess your faults, and give the Lord what's left! Once you do, you'll begin to see God work in strange and wonderful ways to restore all that *the big, bad bugs* have eaten? *Isn't it time you had some faith?*