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Joel 2:28, ESV.

²⁸ *“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.*

I will pour out my Spirit: *The slow road to Heaven.*

Joel was a minor prophet, that is, his book is short, 72 verses broken into three chapters, written almost entirely as poetry. There is something special about the Book of Joel: it is quoted in Acts in a prominent way, and it illustrates the purpose of the early evangelists like Peter in Jerusalem and Paul out in the greater Roman Empire. The name Joel means “Yahweh is God”, and that is pretty much all we know about him. It was a common name. From the writing in the Book of Joel, we infer that he was quite familiar with worship procedures, and so we suspect he worked in the Temple or was closely associated with it. Such a Prophet is called a “Temple Prophet”. The text itself is particularly hard to date, but a common belief among scholars is that the Book of Joel was written after the return from Babylonian exile in the 5th century B.C. Joel varies

somewhat from other Prophets in his prediction of a brilliant future for all people.

Before we look at the relevance of Joel for us today, consider someone I will call Harper.

Some years ago, I had a student in a class, a young woman, who walked slowly, with a modest dependency on a cane. She explained to me one day that she had been treated for bone cancer in her spine, but that it had been caught early. They had operated on her spine, and she had had chemo. She said that she no longer had any detectable cancer, but that she was now on the long rehab road. She was getting a lot of physical therapy and had recently switched from crutches to a cane and would soon walk without a cane. She jokingly added that she was on the six-year Bachelors plan. I told her that if she needed any extra time on an assignment or any kind of accommodation, to just tell me. Our conversation then turned to other things and the topic of Heaven came up. I'll get back to what Harper had to say about this.

Here is Joel, Chapter 2, verses 28 and 29:

²⁸ *“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.*

²⁹ *Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.*

³⁰ *“And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion*

and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

This is a very famous passage because it is quoted in Acts. Our goal isn't to talk about Acts today, but for context, in the second chapter of Acts, just after the Holy Spirit has descended on the Apostles and they begin to evangelize, teaching people what is called "*the Way*", that is, the teachings of Jesus, Peter gives a speech. He explains that Jesus is the promised Messiah, that the God of the Jews is the God of all people, and that it is time to evangelize to non-Jews, Gentiles. He backs this up by quoting Joel. Something written several hundred years before, the words of a Prophet, had already said this. Joel, speaking for God, said that God would pour out his spirit on all people, and "*that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*". Joel predicts, perhaps a half millennia before Christ that anyone can be saved, that the Spirit is poured out on everyone. For Peter, this means that he is simply fulfilling an ancient prophecy by evangelizing Gentiles.

Here is a quote from another Prophet, Amos, Chapter 9:

- ¹¹ *"In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
¹² that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,"
declares the LORD who does this.*

In this passage, Amos is predicting that there will be a time of full restoration for the People of God. They will regain the land that was taken by their neighbors, the Edomites who collaborated with the Babylonians when the Babylonians invaded. This passage is quoted in Acts, by James, the brother of Jesus, in support of the effort to evangelize Gentiles. Note that Amos says that *“and all the nations who are called by my name,”* will likewise be restored. The idea in Amos is that all people, not just Israelites, will have the opportunity to live in the Kingdom of God.

For us, as modern Christians, we see that while there is a significant shift from the Old to the New Testament, from the Hebrew to the Greek Scriptures, in that all people are being welcomed into the Kingdom, this truth was proclaimed by the Prophets several hundred years before. There were theologians in the early Christian Church who took this a step further. Justin Martyr lived in the second century A.D. This is an edited version of something he wrote in the year 150 A.D.:

So also those who lived without Reason were ungracious and enemies to Christ, and murderers of those who lived by Reason. But those who lived by Reason, and those who so live now, are Christians, fearless and unperturbed.

When we read “living by Reason” in this translation, it means that people have lived in a moral fashion that is in alignment with the teachings of Jesus. It also says that people who call themselves Christians but do not live like Christians are fooling themselves: they are not believers. We see that there was a very early Christian

belief that those who live by the teachings of Jesus, even if they do not know it, are in truth Christians. This is a strong statement, and it is not backed up by Scripture. But it does show us that early believers were at least as focused on living like a Christian as they were on literally believing that Jesus is the Messiah.

A more standard, biblical way of looking at this can be seen in Paul's famous letter to the church in Rome. Here is Chapter 2, verses 6 to 10:

⁶He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

Paul means that if one calls themselves a follower of Christ, and if they are being truthful to others and to themselves, then their behavior will reflect this. But if they do evil, then any proclamation of faith they might have made is false. We could choose to read this interpretation into Justin Martyr's words, as well, at least the ones that I quoted you, and conclude that "*living by Reason*" doesn't even happen unless you already believe. But in truth, if we read Justin Martyr's words in full, he is saying that people who do not believe in God or Christ at all can be saved.

Here is something very famous from near the end of the Gospel of Matthew:

⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying,
‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in
prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I
say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’
⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal
life.”

Jesus is speaking about the final judgement here. The part that many have noted is the last half verse: *“but the righteous into eternal life.”* The word that is translated as “righteous” here is the Greek word *“dikaioi”*, and it does mean righteous; it refers to a person who is morally upstanding. It does not mean that a person is a believer. We do, however, traditionally understand this passage as saying that a person is first a believer, and then by their actions shows that they are also righteous. But notice the strong focus on simply living in a moral fashion.

What I am trying to paint here is the following: The ancient Prophets said that God would one day pour the Spirit onto all people, giving them the chance to become believers. Some early believers were convinced that salvation could come simply by living in a certain way, by only be righteous and not necessarily being a believer. Biblically, we today believe something different, and that it is faith that saves, and living morally always follows faith. Indeed, the Bible tells us repeatedly that true faith is always reflected in the way we act and live, and that having faith

is mandatory. Perhaps many of us know for sure that we do accept Jesus as the Messiah, and our lives reflect this. This does not say that we don't make lots of mistakes, of course; God created us imperfectly. Here is one reason why some ancient authors were open to the idea that non-believers could be saved: There is certainly ample ambiguity, when it comes to us knowing if someone believes, and good actions strongly suggest that someone might well believe. We know that God alone knows whether a given individual is a believer. We cannot decide this.

Could there be people who don't realize that they believe, but they do? Maybe some of us were introduced to the faith at some point and now think that we have fallen away. But something stuck, and that is why we live by reason, as Justin Martyr would say. Maybe a person who never even saw themselves as having studied the Christian faith is a believer. Maybe through the Holy Spirit, God might connect with people in ways that are not obvious to us or to them. I think that this is why the Bible speaks so much about the way we act and not just about our faith. At a minimum, none of us have any business assuming that people can't, in some unusual way, answer the call of the Holy Spirit. It can give us hope for loved ones who don't appear to believe but are deeply good and giving people. Jesus also said, in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew: **7** *"Judge not, that you be not judged."*

Harper told me that she had been raised in a Christian family but had been convinced that it wasn't real at all and stopped going to church early in high school. But a few years later, when she got sick, she began to wish that she was a believer. She worried about what would happen if she died. She wondered if she would go to Heaven. She told me that she couldn't force herself to suddenly believe. I asked her if finding out that she was sick caused her to do anything different in life. She said yes. She said that it made her realize that her parents and her younger sister were very important to her. They were there for her, making sure that she had everything she needed. Her mother was a lawyer and had taken an extended leave of absence so that she could manage Harper's care. Her sister constantly passed on things she could have done with her friends to be with Harper when she was feeling bad. Her father had been restoring an old muscle car in the garage and completely stopped the project so that every minute when he wasn't at work could be devoted to Harper. It had caused her to realize that her family was something she had taken for granted. She said that once she was better, she had found that she was closer to her sister than she had been before; they began going to concerts together and Harper started tutoring her sister in Math. She also sat down with her parents one night and told them how blessed she was to have them. They all cried.

Let's go back to the beginning of the Book of Joel. It all starts with a locust attack. It's not at all uncommon for the prophets to declare that a disaster is a punishment from God – but the reason for the punishment is almost always given. In this case, Joel says nothing about why God has sent the locusts:

*⁴ What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.*

The point is that Joel isn't concerned with specific sins of the people. His focus is on how people react to adversity. Do they turn to God? A plague of locusts, because of its prominent place in the Book of Exodus, is the classic example of an act of God forcing a challenge on humanity. Ancient people in this part of the world lived season by season: a single crop failure could cause starvation. But this is an event that doesn't need a reason. A foreign army invading would have felt like an obvious punishment from God. Using an unexplained locust invasion makes it clear that this is simply a random, deadly ordeal that the people must endure. The lesson from Joel is that God is there for everyone: we simply must take God up on the offer to accept the Spirit within us. Once we have done this, once we put our faith and our trust in God, we'll be

prepared to deal with whatever happens in life, even terribly tragic things. As Christians, we know that accepting faith will also radically alter how we live.

Harper got an A in my class by doing a very impressive project. I could tell by the end of the semester that she was walking with greater ease. She said that she had stopped taking any pain killers. One of the last things she said to me was that she still wasn't so certain she believed in a literal God. I asked her if she thought there was something out there in the world around her that she couldn't see, some power that gives us hope and courage and the desire to be good people. She said yes, and that for her, that power had communicated with her through her bone cancer. She laughed and said that it was a good thing that she had been cured of cancer, because she wouldn't have to worry about Heaven for a while. I told her that this was between her and that power, but that my guess was that she was fine. She was on the right path. Now that she was healed, she had simply moved from the fast road to the slow road to Heaven.