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Joel 2:25, **NRSV.**

25 *I will repay you for the years*
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

Restoration: *The Hopper, the Destroyer, and the Cutter*.

Recently, I spoke with a man who, like many trauma patients, had just spent several years in a series of surgeries. He was near the end of the healing process. He was back to hiking, biking, and although he couldn't run yet, his life was active again. He was in his mid-forties. As always, I am changing details to protect his privacy. He had been in a rollover, with no single devastating injury. But he had had a few broken vertebrae that did not need surgery, and other, varied orthopedic injuries that did need extensive surgery. He said something to me, with an optimistic smile, that made me think of the Prophet Joel. We'll call him Reynold. Reynold told me that he never lost hope, that once the doctors told him that all his injuries were treatable, that his limbs and ribs could be repaired, he remained optimistic. Reynold said that with the good news from the docs, he turned to God, offering up his broken body, and asking for strength as he healed.

The following is from Joel, a minor prophet in Judah, who served before the rise of the Assyrian Empire, which conquered the north, and before the Babylonian Empire, which conquered the south. Joel prophesizes about a future when God's people will be restored. Joel called this time the "*day of the Lord*".

23 O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the LORD your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
24 The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
25 I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.
26 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 again be put to shame.

Before these verses, Joel describes a vast devastating swarm of locusts that will strip bare the southern kingdom of Judah. We believe that this describes an actual event that was a true ecological disaster for Judah, including Jerusalem. Joel interprets this as a divine judgement by God. He calls upon the people to fast and to repent. In these verses, he prophesizes restoration, whereby God will supply heavy rain and great crops of grain, oil, and wine. God will restore his

people from the shame of being conquered by what God calls his "*great army*" of locusts:

> [25] *I will repay you for the years*
> *that the swarming locust has eaten,*
> *the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,*
> *my great army, which I sent against you.*

This is a powerful symbolic passage for Christians. It tells us that God can restore not just lost possessions, not just lost spiritual years, but also lost physical years. This isn't a literal statement, as if God will roll back time. This means that when we have gone through times that are fruitless, painful, misdirected, specifically times that we have spent away from God, he can bring us to a place where we will recover all that we lost or missed during those pointless years. In fact, God can bring us to a better place than before the lost years began.

We talk a lot in Christianity about God restoring us after we have fallen, after we have then confronted our limitations and come before God for forgiveness. Restoration, in a broad sense, is a fundamental focus of the New Testament. From the Old Testament to the New Testament, we tend to see a shift from the restoration of land, worldly freedom, and physical health to the restoration of one's spiritual life. So, we see the New Testament as a story of

divine restoration. But the division is not that clear cut. This is a significant misconception about restoration in the Bible. This from Acts Chapter 3:

[19] Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, [20] so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, [21] who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.

This is the Apostle Peter speaking. He is delivering what amounts to a sermon outside the Temple. He is telling the people to turn to God and to ask for repentance for their sins. He is offering them a clean spiritual slate. Note the phrase "*Jesus, [21] who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets".* This is a reference to multiple prophesies made by the Hebrew Prophets, predicting a future time of physical and spiritual restoration. Consider this from the Prophet Ezekiel 36:

[24] I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. [25] I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. [26] A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. [27] I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. [28] Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Ezekiel is offering a future where the land of Israel is restored. Ezekiel lived and prophesized during the Babylonian exile. But he is promising more than a physical restoration of the land of Judah, the southern kingdom. He is promising

"*a new spirit*", and that God will remove from his people "*the heart of stone".* Ezekiel, speaking for God, promises that the Israelites shall be his people, and that he will be their God. This is a combined promise of physical and spiritual restoration. The point is that there isn't a difference in the nature of the restoration promised in the Old and New Testaments. It is always a combined restoration. But we tend to interpret the Bible from our perspective today. So, we see the Old Testament prophesy of restoration as being physical, largely the restoration of land, and the New Testament notion of restoration being spiritual. This is because today, we don't think in terms of physical restoration. We only look therefore at the non-physical part of New Testament restoration.

Remember that Jesus performs many miracles of physical restoration, and that they are not simply symbolic. He heals the blind, the disabled, those who cannot hear. He heals a withered limb. Peter and Paul go on to perform physical restorations, healing people who are sick and disabled. Consider this, from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15, a letter written by Paul the Great Evangelist:

53 For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:
"Death has been swallowed up in victory."
55 "Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

This closely associates physical and spiritual restoration. This relates to the return of Christ. All our fragile human bodies, which are subject to sickness, aging, and death, will go away. We will be given eternal, indestructible bodies. We don't know the nature of these new bodies, and this is not important. This passage is quite subtle. "*Where, O death, is your sting?"* is both a physical and a spiritual statement. The point is this: Throughout the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures, we are told that God understands that human life can be tough, that there is suffering involved. But trusting God and having faith in God means that we will have a combined spiritual and physical life, both of which are in the presence of God and both of which will be eternal. The Bible's description of the nature of this new life in intangible. We trust God to take care of the details.

Jesus focuses heavily on restoration in his teachings. In Matthew, Chapter 15, we read the parable of the Prodigal Son. There are two other parables, the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, that are told in a series with the Prodigal Son, and they are all about restoration. Parables were an existing Hebrew literary technique. In 2 Samuel, the Prophet Nathan tells a parable to King David, and Ezekiel tells parables. Parables and parable-like constructs were also popular in the greater Greco-Roman world, specifically used as a device by philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle. They tended to use images from everyday family life,

agriculture, and trade. Jesus presumably used the parable concept because it was familiar to his people. It's widely believed that Jesus did personally teach using parables. But do remember that the Gospel authors, whenever they quote Jesus, were doing their best to say what Jesus would have said in a given situation. In a "red letter" Bible like the KJV, ESV, NIV, NLT, and NKJV, the words of Jesus should thus always be taken as approximations. It's also likely that the parables were adapted to suit specific theological lessons that were taught by Jesus. He most likely did offer these parables himself, but perhaps not in exactly the words that appear in the Bible. What's important for our discussion is the common focus on restoration in the parables of Jesus. Consider that parable trilogy from Matthew, Chapter 15:

In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus is engaging a group of tax collectors and other sinners. (Remember that the tax collectors worked for Rome). Jesus challenges them by saying that surely, any one of them would leave 99 sheep alone temporarily while he goes off to find a single sheep that has wandered away. When he finds the sheep, he would put it on his shoulders and rejoice. Then Jesus concludes with:

7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Notice that if we view the Lost Sheep parable only from an earthly perspective, it might not make sense. A true shepherd, depending on the circumstances, might well not risk 99 sheep to go off looking for a single one. But from the perspective of our spiritual lives, God knows that the 99 who are not lost will be just fine for a bit on their own, and that they, since they are true believers, would want God to go looking for the believer who has wandered away.

In the Parable of the Lost Coin, a woman has ten silver coins. She loses one, and so she neglects all her household duties while she searches for the lost one. When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate. Jesus concludes with this:

[10] Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Again, Jesus brings this back to our spiritual restoration. Notice that it makes perfect sense that she would stop her daily chores while she looks for the lost coin. But in both the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, there is great rejoicing – not just relief. If I lost, say a hundred dollar bill in the sofa, and then found it, I wouldn't start calling my neighbors to tell them what happened. But in this parable, Jesus is showing us that physical restoration is accompanied by spiritual restoration, and together, this is certainly well worth celebrating.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is much longer and more complicated. A man who is apparently very well off has two sons. The younger one decides to cash in his inheritance and then take off and have a good time. He squanders his assets and finds himself desolate and hungry. When he gets back home, after defiling himself by being paid to feed pigs – remember these are Jews – he goes home to beg his father to take him back. He is going to admit that he isn't worthy of forgiveness. This is what happens as he approaches his old home:

[20] So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. [21] Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' [22] But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. [23] And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; [24] for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

The father couldn't care less what his younger son has done. Even though his son dishonored him, he celebrates. He worries about no expense to welcome the son back, and in fact, when the elder son hears about this and reacts with jealousy, and proclaims that he has worked hard for his father nonstop, and it's not fair for the younger son to be forgiven so readily, we read this:

[31] Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32] But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "

The father wants the elder son to take part in the celebration. The younger son has come home. He will be restored financially, and to his family. He says that the younger son was dead, and he doesn't mean this literally, of course. But from the father's perspective, he has been brought back to life in both a physical and a spiritual sense. Jesus is making the point not that physical restoration can be seen as a metaphor for spiritual restoration, but rather that God does both of these things together. This is a major promise of the New Testament and of the Old Testament. God comes to our rescue and brings us into a new combined physical and spiritual life. To both Old Testament and New Testament writers, the two forms of restoration are deeply connected. When Jesus is resurrected after his crucifixion, he invites his followers to touch his physical scars and he eats food. He is telling us that someday we will have a similar restoration.

Getting back to Reynold, the man who offered up his broken limbs to God and proceeded through a many-year-long process of healing. He knew that God would take him to a new place in an earthly and an eternal sense. Reynold said that God had restored his body, and he was deeply grateful. But, he added, all of us are living two lives at once and we need to evaluate the combined value of this total life. His new combined value was greater than it was before. This is a relatively common comment for a believer who has been through a physical

trauma. After healing, they discover that while God was busy working on their bodies, God was working on their souls, too. That is the lesson of both the Old and the New Testaments. It is a key principle of our faith, that God allows us to face physical challenges for a very real and a very good reason. One day, we will be restored in a truly eternal and magnificent way. Reynold was confident that God would restore him so that the years that were lost would be more than made up for by his new life. Here are our words from Joel:

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that the swarming locust has eaten,
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