

Labor Day is past. Summer is on the wane. And not just any summer. Two articles, one from *USA Today* and one from *The Telegraph*, claim that “It’s being called the worst summer in modern history.” Wonder why that is? It began in June with a massacre at a gay nightclub in Orlando—the worst mass shooting by a single gunman in U.S. history. Before that horror could even be processed, terrorists with bombs and guns slaughtered 41 people and injured 100 more in an all-out assault at the airport in Istanbul, Turkey.

Only a week later, we were confronted by a video of a white police officer firing into the chest of a 37-year-old black man—Alton Sterling—outside of a convenience store in Louisiana. A single day later another video was broadcast on Facebook Live by the girlfriend of Philando Castile, a beloved cafeteria worker in Minnesota, chronicling her eerily calm explanation of her boyfriend being shot by a police officer during a traffic stop. Castile was lying slumped next to her in a bloodied shirt with a gun outside the car window.

There was more. The next night, during a peaceful protest against police brutality, a sniper in Dallas gunned down five cops and injured 11 more. It was the deadliest day for law enforcement since 9/11, which by the way was exactly 15 years ago today. And then came France. At a celebration of Bastille Day along the banks of the French Riviera, a man drove a truck through the crowd along a promenade. 84 were killed. Hundreds were injured.

The summer of 2016 wasn’t over. At the end of July came the murder of an 85-year-old Normandy priest, Father Jacques Hamel, by an ISIS terrorist who slit his throat during mass. Do I need to mention the Zika virus? With the advent of social media, not to mention the internet itself we could say there is a greater awareness of the kinds of violence that has plagued humanity since the fall. But to be sure, it was not a good summer. And I’m not particularly optimistic that summers will get much better. No matter your view of eschatology (i.e. the end times), the words of Jesus make it patently clear that as we approach that end things will not get better (Matthew 24). There is no utopian existence awaiting the ever-growing intelligence and technology of humankind. Rather, there is an ever-advancing march toward the dominance of evil, culminating in the rule of the anti-Christ.

Sorry to give you such a heavy-laden, almost archaic message of doom. But it’s deeply biblical. And it’s true. And in many cases, it’s exactly the kind of message the prophets were called to deliver. So what to think? What to do?

There have been many books, movies, and TV shows that deal with the end of the world. During the Cold War, along with fire drills, students in school had to practice what they would do in the event of a nuclear attack from the Soviet Union. At different times, such as September 11, 2001—15 years ago today—or with tsunamis and earthquakes, we have worried about our physical safety, and the threat of destruction. These threats are possibilities that might or might not happen in our lifetime, and might or might not happen at all.

As Christians, though, we should be much more concerned about a day that God has promised is coming. It’s not a matter of if, it’s a matter of when. Joel calls it “*the day of the Lord*” in verse 1 of chapter 2. He

depicts it with *“darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.”* When we see the inevitability of the day of the Lord, we have to ask ourselves, “What can this mean for me?” The Bible is unambiguous in stating that we have one of two choices: either we are with God or we are against God.

Most of us recognize Revelation 3:15 & 16: *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”* No matter what our intellectual preferences, someone is sitting on the throne. If God isn’t sitting on the throne, someone else is. Most often, we put ourselves there. So trying to be lukewarm towards God, to sit on the fence, often results in hostility or resentment towards God.

Repentance, however, is what the prophet Joel is calling for. Repentance exudes the words of the prodigal son, *“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”*

God embraces true repentance. The prophet Joel describes what God wants from us in repentance. God says, *“Return to me with all your heart.” “Rend your heart.”* God doesn’t demand that a person never make a mistake, only that they give their whole heart. It’s hard for us to know what it means to do anything with *“all our heart.”* In reflecting on our culture, one person said, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* are a great series of fantasy books, full of deep Christian imagery. In *The Silver Chair* Lewis depicts exactly the struggle we’re talking about. In Narnia there is a great lion named Aslan who Lewis portrays as the Jesus figure. A girl named Jill bursts into an opening in the forest. She is very thirsty, and she sees a running stream close by. Even though she’s dying of thirst, she doesn’t rush into the stream and put her face in its refreshing current. Instead, she stands there in fear, because there is a large lion sitting on the ground just this side of the stream. It speaks to her. “Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion. “I’m dying of thirst” said Jill. “Then drink” said the lion. “May I—Could I—would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. “Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?” said Jill. “I make no promise,” said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now, that she had come a step closer without noticing it.

“Do you eat girls?” she said. “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, not as if it were sorry, nor as if it were hungry. It just said it. “I dare not come and drink,” said Jill. “Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion. “Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.” “There is no other stream” said the Lion.

There are people who spend days and months and years of their lives absolutely dying to have the mercy of God, to drink at the stream of his love, the only place where there is real healing, but what holds them

back is a great fear of what might happen. What guarantees do we have that in repenting and returning to God we will be accepted by God and we will be safe?

Joel offers a lot of encouragement in this passage. Joel actually borrows from Exodus 34 when God gave the commandments to Moses for the second time on new tablets, and God came down, and stood beside Moses, *“And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.’”*

If we repent, we have hope because forgiveness and mercy are in the very nature of God. Joel tells us that if we return to God, he is waiting to accept us. There’s something very interesting we also see in Joel. After returning to God, and experiencing his love and forgiveness, look what Joel mentions as an added bonus. When we return to God, we know he is anxious to forgive us, just as the father of the prodigal son. We know he loves us and has been waiting for us, but what he wants to give us in return for repentance is what we need in order to continue living in his presence.

Joel says of God’s mercy, *“Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing?”* That is, he may have pity and provide us with the offerings we need to continue worshipping him. God wants our joy and pleasure to come from a relationship with him. If we *return* to God, he will continually supply our needs, so we can live in a loving relationship with him.

Why is God so desperate to have a relationship with us? We’re sinners...we’ve botched everything up...what can God possibly use us for? Yet God has given us the greatest compliment, and the greatest responsibility. He has chosen us as his people, as his representatives, so that through us the world can see what God has done.

I am certain there are some of you who need to repent, to return to God, and to experience God’s mercy, and have relief from the burdens you are carrying. Do you feel guilt and regret about how you’ve been living? Do you wonder what God will think about you if you come to him for forgiveness?

To answer that, I want to read you the words of Jesus in Luke 15: *“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”*

Joel reminds us of a number of important points. God is at work in the world, there are consequences to human behavior, lament and repentance are appropriate responses to disaster, and hope is always the last word. I can’t imagine a more timely message for the 15th anniversary of 9/11.

“Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love...” Amen.