

Lesson 16

Joel 2:12-13, Continued

Joel 2:12-13 – “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

Verse 11 ended with a question – **who can endure it?** As we saw last week, God answers that question in verses 12-13.

And, as we also saw last week, that little word “yet” at the beginning of verse 12 is the hinge of the book of Joel. Before that word, there is judgment and wrath, but after that word, there is hope and restoration.

The first thing God tells the people to do in verse 12 is to **return** or **repent**. We looked last week at what it means to repent. It is not just saying, “I’m sorry,” but rather it is truly turning back to God with everything about you – with your whole heart, as we read in verse 12.

God does not command the people to just say they are sorry or even just **be** sorry, God commands them to **show** that they are sorry.

And how do we know that such repentance has occurred? We can know by looking at the evidence.

Yes, only God can see our hearts, but everyone can see the evidence of our hearts. Our lives will show whether or not our repentance is genuine.

God commands both the inner change and the outer evidence of that change. But, of course, those changes do not occur independently. When the first change occurs (the commanded change to **be** sorry), then the second change will always follow (the commanded change to **show** that you are sorry).

True repentance will always be accompanied by external evidence.

Matthew 3:8 – Bear fruit **in keeping with repentance**.

Acts 26:20 – ...that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds **in keeping with their repentance**.

And what are those deeds? What is that evidence? Here in Joel 2 that evidence is fasting, weeping, and mourning.

And what do those three actions all have in common? They all involve **sorrow**.

While we know that fasting was not always associated with sorrow, we know that sometimes it was.

2 Samuel 1:12 – And they **mourned** and **wept** and **fasted** until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

Nehemiah 1:4 – As soon as I heard these words I sat down and **wept** and **mourned** for days, and I continued **fasting** and praying before the God of heaven.

I think that is also why we see fasting here – as an indication of sorrow.

And why do we see such sorrow? Because it shows that the people who are repenting here are aware of the depth and magnitude of their sin.

They are aware of what they have done to God, and they are sorrowful because of what they have done. They understand that they are presently living through the curses of Deuteronomy 28 because they have turned their back on God and on their covenant with God.

When we return to God, we experience great joy, but that great joy is preceded by great sorrow – what the Bible calls “godly grief.”

2 Corinthians 7:9-10 – As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a **godly grief**, so that you suffered no loss through us. For **godly grief** produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

This sorrow in verse 12 is not worldly grief – this sorrow is godly grief. It is the grief that produces repentance and that always accompanies that repentance.

And, once again, we have a link with Acts 2, something we have already seen in Joel 2 and will certainly see again in Joel 2. Here the link with Acts 2 is this sorrow. We see this same sort of godly grief in Acts 2.

Acts 2:37 – Now when they heard this **they were cut to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

And we also see that godly grief in another great prophecy involving Acts 2.

Zechariah 12:10 – And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

Pouring out a spirit of grace? Mourning and weeping bitterly? We see both of those things in Joel 2 and in Acts 2! Let’s keep Zechariah 12 in mind as we proceed. (See www.studyjoel.com for a complete set of notes on Zechariah.)

Verse 13 continues this same thought: **“rend your hearts and not your garments.”**

What God is telling us here is that true repentance is something that happens on the inside rather than just on the outside.

While it is easy to put on a show and rend our garments, it is not as easy to rend our hearts. But God requires

that we rend our hearts when we turn back to him. Our change must be on the inside, not just on the outside.

We are reminded of what God said through Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Jeremiah 4:3-4 – For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: “Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

Ezekiel 36:26 – And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

These verses are all telling us the same thing: repentance is impossible for those with a hard heart.

Jeremiah 5:3 – ...They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent.

Psalms 51:17 – The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Verse 13 continues: **Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.**

What would the people find when they returned to God? Would they find someone who was reluctant to forgive them? Someone who wasn't really all that sure he wanted them back at all? Someone who would enjoy telling them, "I told you so!" Someone with his hand on a trapdoor just looking for their next mistake?

No. Not at all. Instead, they would find a God who is gracious, who is merciful, who is slow to anger, and who is abounding in steadfast love.

And, of course, the same is true today.

Hebrews 4:16 – Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

When someone returns to God, God runs to meet him!

Luke 15:20 – And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And that is not just the God of the New Testament, as we sometimes hear. There is one God – and that one God is both the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament. God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love – and that has always been true of God and will always be true of God.

Malachi 3:6 – For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

We can learn about God from his word, and we can trust that what we will learn about God in the Bible has not changed and will not change. God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Verse 13 concludes: **And he relents over disaster.** Let's combine that phrase with verse 14 and consider them both together.

Joel 2:14

Joel 2:13b-14 – And he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

The end of verse 13 tells us that God relents over disaster. What does that mean?

The Hebrew word translated “relents” is the word *naham*. Let’s start our investigation by looking at some other verses that contain that same Hebrew word.

Genesis 6:6 – And the LORD **regretted** that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

Exodus 32:14 – And the LORD **relented** from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

1 Chronicles 21:15 – And God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, but as he was about to destroy it, the LORD saw, and he **relented** from the calamity.

Jeremiah 15:6 – You have rejected me, declares the LORD; you keep going backward, so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you – I am weary of **relenting**.

Jeremiah 26:19 – Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD **relent** of the disaster that he had pronounced against them?

Amos 7:3 – The LORD **relented** concerning this: “It shall not be,” said the LORD.

A moment ago we also read Malachi 3:6 – “For I the LORD do not change.” How do we square that verse with the verses we just read, each which might suggest that God changed his mind about something?

Does God, who does not change, ever change his mind?

That is a tough question! But if we think that question is tough, things are about to get worse! What did God say to Samuel about King Saul?

1 Samuel 15:11 – I **regret** that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.

But what did Samuel then say to King Saul about God?

1 Samuel 15:28–29 – “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have **regret**, for he is not a man, that he should have **regret**.”

If God never has regret, as we just read in verse 29 of 1 Samuel 15, then why did God say “I regret” in verse 11 of that same chapter?

As, I said, these are tough questions – really tough questions!

So, when faced with a tough question such as this one, here are our choices – we can tackle that question, or we can just skip over it. Which door should we choose? Door 1 or Door 2?

I have been a member of the Lord’s church for over half a century, and do you know what my experience is? My

experience is that we most often choose Door 2. When we get to a hard question, we just skip to the next verse. (If your experience has been different, then that is wonderful, but mine has not.)

What is the biggest problem with skipping the hard parts when it comes to Bible study? In a word, the biggest problem is **credibility**. We lose credibility when we skip the hard questions.

I think most people understand that problem outside of a religious context. If you called a medical specialist for an appointment involving a difficult diagnosis, how would you react if you were told to call someone else because this particular specialist treats only easy diseases? How would you react to a tax lawyer who told you that he specializes in non-complicated tax questions?

If we spend all our time in the shallow end of the pool, people are going to start wondering whether or not we can swim! And maybe we can't if we never leave the baby pool!

And this is hardly a new problem. I think the writer of Hebrews faced this same problem long ago. In Hebrews 5, he was just about to answer all of our questions about the mysterious Melchizedek, but he didn't do that – why not?

Hebrews 5:11–14 – About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food,

for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

If we throw up our hands when we get to the hard questions, why should anyone trust our answers to the easy questions? When that medical specialist tells you to go elsewhere if you have a hard question – don't you think you would likely go elsewhere for **ALL** of your questions?

And do you know who will be the very first to question our credibility when we skip the hard questions? Our children.

In fact, very often they are the ones who are asking those hard questions. And when our children ask questions and get no answers, they will go elsewhere for answers – or worse, they will just quit asking those questions altogether!

So, I ask again – which door? The difficult door or the easy door?

Let's try that difficult door and do our best to rightly handle the word of truth! Isn't that what God **commands** us **all** to do?

2 Timothy 2:15 – **Do your best** to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

So, then, once again, here is our question: **Does God ever change his mind?**

I think many people upon first hearing that question will immediately respond with an answer – either, “yes, of course God does,” or “no, of course God does not.”

Those in the “yes, of course” camp would likely point to verses such as the one we read earlier:

1 Samuel 15:11 – “I regret that I have made Saul king...”

And that verse does seem pretty definitive!

But those in the “no, of course” camp would likely point to verses such as this one that we also read earlier:

1 Samuel 15:29 – “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.”

And that verse also seems pretty definitive!

But maybe the answer is context. Are the contexts different? No. As we said a moment ago, those two verses are describing the same event in the same chapter. The context for each is the same.

We will look later at what I think is going on in those verses, but for now I think we can say this based on those two verses: this a difficult and complicated question, and a difficult and complicated question deserves much better than a knee-jerk, off-the-cuff answer such as “of course, he does” or “of course, he does not.” Instead, we need to roll up our sleeves and dig deep in God’s word.

Does God ever change his mind? We may after studying the Bible find that the answer is “yes” or we may find that the answer is “no,” but I can guarantee that the answer to that question is not “yes, of course!” or “no, of course!”

And as we think about that one difficult question, we are quickly confronted with many other related and equally difficult questions:

- Does anything in the universe actually occur by chance, or is every event, no matter how seemingly minor, part of the preordained plan of God? I flip a coin – was the outcome of that coin flip determined before I was even born? Some would say yes.
- Does God know our actions and thoughts before we even do them or think them? If so, how long in advance does God know these things? Did God know all of my thoughts and all of my actions before I was born? Some would say yes.
- Do we have free will? Can a belief in free will be reconciled with a belief that every action and every thought we have ever had or will ever have were all known to God before we were born?
- Is it possible for God to create beings with free will and simultaneously know beforehand every action and every thought that those free will beings will ever do or think?
- And, most importantly, what does the Bible tell us about free will and God’s foreknowledge? Does

the Bible ever depict God as changing his mind?
Does God ever speak about the future in term of possibilities rather than in terms of certainties?
Is God ever disappointed about how things turn out?
Does God ever experience regret? Does God ever experience surprise?

How are we to go about trying to answer those questions?

First, we must confront the possibility that some of these questions may be unanswerable.

We dislike labeling any question unanswerable, but it may be that we are just not in a position to answer some or all of these questions given what we are and where we are.

A famous mathematics book is entitled *Flatland*, and it deals with creatures that inhabit a two-dimensional world having width and height, but not depth. In effect, they are living on a sheet of paper. The book describes how such creatures would perceive other creatures such as ourselves who inhabit three spatial dimensions, and we quickly see in that book how there would be some things about the three-dimensional creatures that could never be explained to or understood by those two-dimensional creatures.

Now, I am certainly not suggesting that God occupies extra spatial dimensions because we know that God is spirit. But I am suggesting that we may be living in a **spiritual** flatland in which there are some things about the spiritual realm that can never be explained

to us or understood by us while we live in this **physical** universe.

But, with that said, I think we need to avoid two pitfalls in looking for answers to these questions about God.

The first pitfall is **anthropomorphism**.

This pitfall leads to the danger of presumption. We tend to exaggerate our ability to understand God. We insist that God conform to our ideas about him and about his creation. We see God as being just like us.

The Bible condemns that view of God.

Psalms 50:21 – These things you have done, and I have been silent; **you thought that I was one like yourself**. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.

The second pitfall is **agnosticism**.

This pitfall leads us to exaggerate our inability to understand God. We avoid studies such as this one because we view God as beyond all human thought.

The Bible also condemns that view. All throughout the Bible we find God telling us about himself through his word. We can know everything about God that is revealed to us in the word of God.

And, if it is possible to answer these questions, then those answers will be found only in the Bible. Not in science or philosophy or any human wisdom, but only in the word of God. If we are able to make any conclusions about these questions, those conclusions need to be based on chapter and verse.

Before we tackle the main question head-on (does God ever change his mind), let's start with a possibly easier related question: **what is free will?**

We are often told conflicting things about our free will. I think that most people would say that we have it, but some philosophers and theologians say that we do not.

The Texas criminal code certainly thinks that we have free will: "A person commits an offense only if he **voluntarily** engages in conduct, including an act, an omission, or possession."

But before we look at whether we have it, let's look at what it is – what is free will?

At the very least, free will requires an absence of external compulsion – my will must be **free**.

But free will requires more than just an absence of external compulsion. Free will also requires the presence of genuine alternatives.

I am perfectly free to live on any planet I want to live on!

Yes, but that decision has already been made for me, and there are no genuine alternatives. Living on planet earth is not my free will decision.

So what are we saying? We are saying this – to have free will, I must be able to act in a way that renders **definite** something that would otherwise be **indefinite**.

Choosing to live on planet Earth does not do that, but choosing to live in Houston does do that.

But now we are back to the big issue – what if everything is already **definite**? What if everything has already been determined? What if I am unable to render something definite that would otherwise be indefinite?

What if the fact that I live on planet Earth and live in Houston are in the same category? What if both were determined before I was even born as a part of some eternal unchanging plan? I think that is true of the “Earth” part. What if it is also true of the “Houston” part?

Then wouldn't I lack free will? Or at the very least, wouldn't my supposed free will just be an illusion?

What does the Bible say about free will? Do we have it?

Yes, we do. And I think we can see that by once again thinking about the Texas criminal code and comparing it with what we find in the Bible.

If I commit a voluntary action that is a crime in Texas, then I may face punishment for that action. Why? Because it was **voluntary**. I could have chosen not to do it. But I made the wrong choice and did it. And the state of Texas will hold me accountable for my voluntary actions.

What about God? Would God send me to Hell for effectively just reading a script that he wrote long before I was born? No. I think the Bible tells us that he would not.

Ezekiel 18:20 – The soul who sins shall die.

Romans 7:7 – What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet **if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.** For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

Romans 4:15 – For the law brings wrath, **but where there is no law there is no transgression.**

James 1:14–15 – But each person is **tempted** when he is lured and enticed by **his own desire.** Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

I sin when I am tempted by my desire to transgress the law of God and when that desire gives birth to that sin. That process in James 1:14–15 is describing a **voluntary** action, just like the Texas criminal code.

And it is that voluntary action that is the basis for the punishment. “The soul **who sins** shall die.”

And we see that fact all throughout the Bible with many verses that directly call for people to make free will choices.

Deuteronomy 30:19 – I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore **choose** life, that you and your offspring may live.

Joshua 24:15 – And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, **choose** this day whom you will serve...

God commands me to choose? Do I have the ability to obey that command or not? If I do not have free will, then how can I choose anything?

God commands me to choose! How can that be the command if God has already made the choice for me?

But perhaps I just **think** that I have free will.

Perhaps the answer is that God knows everything I will ever do and ever think, but I don't know all of those things yet. So maybe it just seems to me that I have free will even though God has a hidden copy of the script that I am performing on the stage that he created.

In short, did God really create people with free will or did God just create people who think they have free will?

Is free will an illusion? Some would say yes, but how can free will be an illusion when Hell is not? We are held eternally accountable for our choices in this life – how is that just if our free will is an illusion? How is that just if we, in fact, made no choices in this life because those choices had already been made.

Do we prosecute an actor for playing a criminal in a movie? How can God prosecute us if we are simply actors in a movie that he wrote long ago?

Well, maybe that question about free will wasn't as easy as we thought it would be! So let's come back to it later and look now at another issue – the omniscience of God.

And I think one thing we can say right from the start is that these issues are NOT about the omniscience of God. Everyone who believes the Bible agrees that God is omniscient.

Psalms 147:5 – Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

Hebrews 4:13 – And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

1 John 3:20 – For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, **and he knows everything.**

But what does it mean to be omniscient?

Yes, it means that God knows everything as 1 John 3:20 tells us, but I think that has to mean that God knows everything **that is knowable.**

And why must it mean that? Because if there are some things that are not knowable, then **by definition** God does not know those things, because if God knew them, then they would not be unknowable. God knows everything that is knowable.

Now, it may be the case that nothing is unknowable, but that is a different question. For now, I think we can say that God knows everything that can be known – that is what it means to be omniscient. God knows everything that is knowable.

So, if we were to conclude that some future events are not knowable prior to their occurrence, then it would not contradict the omniscience of God to say that God does not know those **unknowable** future events.

Yes, God is omniscient, but God is also omnipotent. Can an omnipotent God create free will human beings who are able to sometimes surprise him with what they do or with

what they think? Do we see any examples of that in the Bible?

I think we will see later that there are some suggestions of that in the Bible, but for now let's ask this question: why would there be such events? Why would there be unknowable future events?

About five years ago, I was walking in the parking garage at work very early in the morning, and I slipped on some painted concrete, breaking my wrist in several places.

Was it God's will that I brake my wrist that morning? I don't think so.

But I do know something that was most definitely God's will that morning – it was God's will that I live in a universe that operates according to the law of gravity.

And do you know what? There are consequences to the law of gravity, and one of those consequences is that we sometimes brake bones due to the effects of gravity.

I don't think my broken wrist was the will of God, but I do think it was a **consequence** of the will of God.

Now, that is what happens with God's creation of gravity. Let's look next at another of God's creations – free will.

God created an entire world that is now populated by billions of people with free will. Billions of people

with an ability to make choices. Are there any consequences of that? Gravity has consequences. Does free will have any consequences?

We know that it does. Evil is a consequence of free will. Evil is not the will of God, but evil is a consequence of the will of God.

God could have created robots who would never make a wrong choice, but God did not do that. In fact, the Bible opens with a wrong choice made by the free will humans that God had just created – and there have been many more wrong choices after that one.

Those wrong choices were not the will of God – but they were a consequence of the will of God. God cannot make free will humans who lack free will! And once we have free will, wrong choices will follow as a consequence.

So, back to our question – why would there be unknowable future events? If there are such things, then perhaps they, too, are a consequence of free will.