

JOEL: Chose Hope

Sunday, June 2, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Joel 2:23-32

There once was a brilliant grad student who studied the literature of Charles Dickens, her mentor-professor's topic of expertise. Midway through her studies, however, she chose to branch out and write her dissertation on the work of Jane Austen instead. The student's adviser tried to dissuade her, but she held firm. Although disgruntled, the advisor still humored the grad student with guidance on how to approach her interest in Austen.

The student finished a strong dissertation and presented it to her committee for approval. Then, out of the blue, her mentor suggested that some of the student's foundational observations came from personal conversations with him. He claimed that she had taken his ideas and published them without acknowledging the source. His accusation of plagiarism jeopardized the successful completion of her degree.

The woman had two choices. She could take control of the situation, rat out her petty professor, and argue that their conversations were just one of many sources she used for her thesis. Or, she could shrink back and take the fall, accepting that their conversations had probably shaped her own observations somehow. She knew a panel investigation would make her sleepless and ill...and probably wouldn't change anything.

From deep insecurity, the student chose the second option. She never completed her degree and today works the cash register in a low-paying retail job, wallowing in despair, and withering in the heat of self-doubt and low self-esteem. Martin Seligman, the woman's therapist, knew which way the story would end before she ever made her decision. He knew her past, emotional patterns. She had learned to be helpless in such situations.

Seligman is a proponent of "positive psychology." In the 1960s, he coined the phrase "learned helplessness." Seligman writes that for every infant, "life begins in utter helplessness." As we mature, our independence and control of our world grows with us. Yet in adversity, some people fall back into learned helplessness. Seligman's research shows that people may wrongly perceive that they have no control over the outcome of a situation. Once this perception becomes a pattern, people will behave helplessly even when the chance to help themselves is available. They "learn" there is no hope.

According to Seligman the countermeasure to learned helplessness is "learned optimism." Learned optimism is the attitude that failures and negative experiences are just flukes or one-time occurrences; irregular incidents, not permanent events. Specific to one situation, failures are not relevant to success in other experiences or endeavors. So, says Seligman, we can learn either helplessness or optimism. Then, when life's difficulties show up, we'll be preconditioned for either despair or hope.

Now, if you're thinking that would be a good message for a motivational talk, you're right! TV evangelist Joel Osteen would agree with you. Osteen's weekly services are viewed by 7 million people, and he's written several best-selling books. But Osteen is under increasing scrutiny from sacred and secular sources alike for preaching a positives-only version of Christianity. A CBS *60 Minutes* report notes that "Osteen preaches his own version of what is known as the 'prosperity gospel' — that God is a loving, forgiving God who will reward believers with health, wealth and happiness. It's the centerpiece of every sermon."

According to his critics, Osteen preaches a Christianity where followers of Jesus should experience financial comfort, freedom from relational strife, and a life unmarked by lasting anxiety or depression. In his book, *Your Best Life Now*, Osteen claims, "If you develop an image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you."

But this way of thinking leaves most of us with a lot of questions. What do I do with pain in my life? Why do bad things happen to good people? How does suffering fit the Christian life? Does our obedience secure God's blessing? If so, how?

Osteen may be a Christian brother who has a gift for encouragement, but he's only telling half the story. There's nothing about sin, judgment, or consequences in his message. Learned optimism is a helpful contribution from Seligman, but it's an incomplete picture when it's the only thing preached by Osteen. In real life, "things" sometimes hit the fan.

The prophet Joel provides the other half of the equation. He agrees with Seligman and Osteen that our best days are still ahead of us, but he does so with more existential honesty. Joel offers a gritty challenge to choose hope for the future, not to learn helplessness from the past.

Joel is different from the other Old Testament prophets. His words have none of the usual indictments on the social, moral, and religious failings of God's people. There is no scathing commentary on Israel's leaders. Joel speaks instead to a community reeling in pain and in need of hope. Though everyone thought "the day of the Lord" was going to be about their deliverance, Joel says it will be about their destruction!

A massive swarm of locusts devoured the land (1:4). Some commentators believe this to be a literal plague of insects. Others see this as metaphoric of an invading army. Though real locusts are likely, the effect on the people was the same. Their food and way of life were destroyed. Feed crops were gone, and soon the herds dependent on them would die. The people's gladness and joy withered. Their worship stopped with the destruction of their grain and wine offerings (1:5-13). Now the people are left to groan out and mourn their losses. A catastrophe shattered their lives, their hope and their faith. They must pick themselves up so they could try to pick up all the pieces.

Into that bleak reality, God speaks. God wants more from the people than just weeping and wailing; God wants their hearts, their lives, their whole selves! *"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing"* (2:12-13). How utterly counterintuitive! God delivered this pain into their lives (v. 25), and now God wants them to turn to him in relationship. Their pain becomes an act of redemption, the catalyst for need, the basis for a deeper relationship with God.

The second half of the book of Joel looks to the future. What will the peoples' response be? Will it be a learned helplessness? They were "God's people" after all, and God allowed terrible things happen to them. Or would their response be a learned optimism? Would the people choose hope, specifically hope in God, in the face of overwhelming odds?

Joel, speaking for God, advocates for learned optimism. *"[B]e glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for God has given the early rain for your validation"* (v. 23). *"I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten"* (v. 25). *"[M]y people shall never again be put to shame"* (v. 27). *"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh"* (v. 28). *"[E]veryone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"* (v. 32). Sounds like hope to me! There is no room for learned helplessness with our God.

Isn't the position of Israel the same one we find ourselves in so many times? A friend falls ill, and despite the prayers of the faithful, he or she dies. A layoff crushes a promising career and brings financial crisis. The kids get bad grades despite the hours we spend helping them with homework. We work hard and put in long hours, but we never seem to get ahead. A loved one makes poor life choices and we end up cleaning up their mess. Sometimes our prayers feel as if they're bouncing back unheard and unanswered.

So, what do we do? Will we learn helplessness or choose hope? Seligman suggests the ABCDEs of changing from learned helplessness to learned optimism: Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences, Debate, and "Energization." Identify the Adversity in your life; note all the Beliefs about those events that come to mind; reflect on the Consequences of living based on those positive and negative beliefs; Debate the usefulness of unhealthy beliefs and focus on positive counterevidence; and practice "Energization" being ruthlessly committed to living life based on positive beliefs and disputations of the negative.

As we will see in the coming weeks, the story of God's people will have further turns-for-the-worse. In part, that's because Joel is offering a "someday" promise and not the immediate and incomplete blessing of a prosperity gospel. The key to Joel's text is that hope is an option. It's *always* an option because of the character and promise of our God. We don't need to learn helplessness from our past or our pain, and we don't need to resort to a rose-colored, positives-only picture of life with God. We can learn optimism by trusting God, taking every thought captive, and choosing hope.

Prayer: Merciful God, thank You for the book of Joel, which bears witness of Your goodness and grace, to all who will trust in Your word. Teach me the lessons that You would have me learn from Israel's history, and keep me from making the same mistakes. I pray that You would help me to make my outward life a demonstration of a changed, inner life, which trusts You implicitly, in thought, word, deed and motive. This I ask Jesus name, Amen.

Sources:

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