

## **The Mercy of God and Human Response in the call for Repentance (Joel 2:12-18): A Prophetic View**

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### **Introduction**

The invitation of God or any divine agent to contrition is a familiar theme in the Hebrew Bible. From the earlier biblical times, there have been frantic efforts by human beings to obtain God's mercy through several means. Some people have always sought to do this through religious or spiritual means. The religious means here may include lamenting, fasting, weeping and mourning. Sometimes, the means seemingly proves abortive and at other times effective or even uncertain. In connection to such experience, the text of Joel 2:12-18 presents its reader with a variety of traditional ways of obtaining God's mercy and how effective they may be if one is inwardly and gratuitously disposed towards God. This probably means that participating in ritual acts by any penitent does not in itself guarantee God's mercy.

Rather than anchoring everything on human religious acts, the text speaks of the possibility of gaining God's mercy gratuitously. After all, mercy is simply "the aspect of God's love that causes him (her) to help the miserable".<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of the oracle, God's mercy is gratuitous, undeserved and unmerited. It could be best described as part and parcel of God's loving kindness towards the people of the covenant. The religious rituals are in themselves part of the Israelite's commitment to their God so that they may not simply remain passive to God's merciful disposition towards them.

Joel 2:12-18 is here considered as a single unit. One must, however, note that there is a Masoretic indication that the settings of the last four verses are different. It means that verses 15, 16, 17 and 18 could also serve as a new section. But in this paper, they are rather fused. This fusion is based on the similarity of this passage, which rests on the parallelism of literary units. Just as in Joel 1:13-14, where the prophet offers some instructions after inviting the people as a result of their misfortune, so also he offers counsel about definitive procedures following the exhortation in 2:12-14 for the people's turn to YHWH.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, other than the traditional basic unit (12-17), which is well known, some scholars have proposed an intricate relationship between verses 12 and 19. Thus, there is a plausible case... for extending it (the basic unit 12-17) through verse 18",<sup>3</sup> which is God's response.

This paper, therefore, sets out to explore the prophetic perspective of God's mercy and human response to Joel 2:12-18, in context, and its concomitant relationship to contemporary people of God in the society. It naturally relates to this year's special jubilee year of mercy as declared by Pope Francis on the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. The oracle is of importance to us as

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 822.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Trans. W. Janzen, S. Dean McBride and C. A. Muenchow; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 50.

<sup>3</sup> James Crenshaw, *Joel* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 143.

it serves as a model to anyone looking out to obtain God's mercy. It is also vital to any meaningful discussion on God's mercy, justice and human response.

## 1. The Text

12. Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; 13. Rend your heart and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relent from punishing.

14. 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?

15. Blow the trumpet in Zion; declare a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. 16. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infant at breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her canopy. 17. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

18. Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had compassion on his people (NRSV).

## 2. The Context of the Oracle

*Ab initio*, there is a kind of intermittent call for repentance throughout the biblical history of ancient Israel. God's invitation to his people "is deeply rooted in the theological conviction of God's favour toward the covenant people".<sup>4</sup> The book of Exodus testifies, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousand generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (Exod 34:6-7). This traditional conviction and confession of God's steadfast love, mercy and forgiveness of the people's transgression in the book of Exodus "serves as the backdrop for Joel's words in 2:12-17".<sup>5</sup> Verse 18 is simply a testimony to this God's gratuitous gift.

Joel had earlier announced the day of the LORD, which is apparently signaled by a locust invasion in 1:2ff. and this is followed by series of invitations: to listen, lament and repent. The text under study observes that the invading locusts of chapter one have "wreaked havoc and the unstoppable army of chapter two has gained access to the inner recesses of human dwellings".<sup>6</sup> Having recognized that calamity has struck, of what purpose is the people's repentance other than to begin life anew?<sup>7</sup> Will there be any advantage if the people change their ways? Joel 2:10, which serves as a proximate context, suggests solemnly that a more devastating catastrophe hovers over the

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah: A Commentary on the Wesleyan Tradition* (New Beacon Bible; Kansas: Beacon Hill, 2014), 199.

<sup>5</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 199.

<sup>6</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Allen, *The Book of Joel* (Anchor Bible Commentary; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 165.

inhabitants and the city. However, the context further notes that this may be prevented by prompt response.

The invitation of the entire population by the prophet that begins in verse 12 is a matter of urgency, and Joel “does so under what he understands to constitute divine initiative”.<sup>8</sup> In effect, “the community’s turning to God is possible only because of divine grace preceding human response”.<sup>9</sup> The army of the LORD that was poised to strike gives audience to his people and this emphasises the compassionate nature of God. The text is thus found in the context of the urgency and desperate situation of the city and its inhabitants.

### 3. The Structure

Verse 12-13: Admonition for genuine repentance.

Verse 14: Recognition of God’s sovereign freedom

Verse 15-17: Summon of the people to participate in formal/cultic ceremony

Verse 18: YHWH had compassion

### 4. The analysis of the Text Joel 2:12-18

The text of Joel 2:12-18 present us with three significant characters; YHWH, the prophet who is the mouthpiece of God and later in the development of the text, the entire population (who are mentioned in different categories). It is pertinent to note that both God, who is initiator and the prophet, who speaks on behalf of God are the principal actors. The third character, which is the people, remained explicitly passive. However, based on the prophetic testimony of verse 18, one can confidently presume that the people heeded to the call of God and his prophet.

Verse 12-13: Admonition for Genuine repentance.

The opening words, “yet even now” indicates at once the urgency of the situation and the need for the people to act immediately. Such transitional *waw* occurs in the book of Job 16:19 “even now my witnesses are in heaven”. The prophetic oracular formula-*neum* YHWH means utterance of YHWH. The oracle while emphasizing the exigency of the declaration, proffers hope for Zion. It is noted that the expression is rare in the book of Joel as it further “suggests that the prophet did not wish to weaken his impact by indiscriminate use”.<sup>10</sup> In these two verses, Joel records the well-known traditional ways and rituals for repentance (esp. verse 13) before he reinforces it personally in the verse 14. The imperative, “return to me with your whole heart”, reminds one of the Deuteronomic and deuteronomistic formulations “to love YHWH with all your heart” (Deut 6:5; 30:2, 6; 1 Sam 7:3; 1 Kings 8:48). It is vital to point out here that “the heart in Hebrew anthropology represents the organ of will and rational thought”.<sup>11</sup> Joel’s attempt to focus on the primacy of both the cognitive and affective nature of God is of interest to us. The words *subu adi* “return to me” have also a fundamental usage in Hosea (Hos 3:5; 14:2), and Amos (Amos 4:6-11) that is customary to Israelites. Again, the shift from first to third person in the text may require an explanation. Such apparent shifting from first to third person frequently takes place in prophetic

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<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 133.

<sup>9</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 199.

<sup>10</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 199.

liberation as there is no significant difference between the one who sends and the one who is sent, especially in the prophetic literature.

However, as motivation for a positive response, Joel reminds his audience of their covenantal relationship to God with the use of the words, “the LORD your God” and of his gracious disposition.<sup>12</sup> This description of the Lord’s character recalls the words of Exodus 34:6, which were uttered shortly after the golden calf incident. On that occasion, and as a response to Moses’s plea, the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened (Exod 32:12-14). “The characterization of God as compassionate despite the deity’s active involvement in bringing the curses upon the heads of those who violate covenant relationship accords with Joel’s guarded optimism in turbulent and perilous times”.<sup>13</sup> Hence, a true contrition of heart must be done with a undivided mind so as to attract God’s mercy and stand a better chance of achieving its set goals.

Verse 12 concludes by mentioning three cultic observances: fasting, weeping and mourning, which are linked to the expression of repentance in traditional Israel and mainly observed during threat, war, drought or plague and other calamities. The mention of their traditional formula proved that the prophet recognizes as well as he values these outward expressions of religious life but in addition did not hesitate to point out the need for a radical change in one’s innermost being. “These external manifestations are what seems to be standard cultic expression”,<sup>14</sup> which is also found in other biblical passages like Esther 4:3.

In verse 13, the prophet further admonishes the people to go beyond the merely ritualistic traditional observances.<sup>15</sup> He uses the imperative *wegir-u* in a very vital and symbolic way that is akin to customary way of ripping outer garment to signify emotional turmoil. It is commensurate with putting on sackcloth. The object of tearing is the “heart” *lebabkem* (their heart) and this re-echoes the emphasis on the inner resolve in verse 12. The statement, “not your cloths”, stresses further that Joel stands in the same prophetic tradition that ritual acts should be accompanied with inner disposition and proper action. The sense in which *Lebabkem* was used extends “beyond the organ that pumps blood through the body’s arteries and veins to include one’s inmost disposition, which must undergo a complete transformation before God may have mercy on the people”.<sup>16</sup> Joel, like many of the great 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets (Amos, Isaiah, Micah) and even Jeremiah, recognizes the deadening capacity and the glaring danger of empty rituals because it leads to a false sense of security. The repetition of the word *sub* emphasizes its importance. The subject of people’s turning is “the Lord, your God”. Achtemeier notes that these words clearly invite Israelites “to turn away from apostasy and return to God in a deliberate act of will”.<sup>17</sup> This is vital as “the divine name God and his covenant relationship in Jer 31:33; 32:38; Hos 7:10; 12:5-6) set the context for the prophet’s description of the character of Israel’s God, which also serves as the theological reason for the call to return”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic, 1990), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 135.

<sup>15</sup> G. W. Ahlstrom, *Joel and the Temple Cult of Jerusalem* (Vetus Testament Supplements, XXI; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Book of Joel* (New Interpreter’s Bible, 7; Nashville: Abingdon), 319.

<sup>18</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 200.

The oracle's focus on the changing attributes "opened the door of anxiety over divine fickleness".<sup>19</sup> The prophet finds hope in these everlasting attributes, which make up a well-known formula from the time of Exodus (Exod 34:6-7). These attributes are five and include: God's "graciousness" (*hannun*-which concerns the relationship of the superior to inferior, that is God-human relationship; "merciful" (*raham* – a word that is derived from the Hebrew *reham* (womb) indicating parental love; slow to anger (*erek-appayim* – meaning literally "long in anger"; abounding in steadfast love "(*rab-hesed* – demonstrating constant kindness, loyalty or fidelity; and relent from punishment (*niham 'al hara'a* – meaning forgiving wrong or evil action". "The five predicate adjectives in a verbless sentence indicate a character formed by regular practice; all of them stand in apposition to the preceding YHWH".<sup>20</sup> Scholars observed that Joel 2:13 is one of the eight apparent citations of this formula describing God's quality in the Hebrew bible. Others include: Num 14:18; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Nah 1:3; Jonah 4:2; Neh 9:17, 31b). Even though this formula was often used with reference to the justice of God, "the present formulation eliminates the references to punishment in Exod 36:4-7 in order to highlight divine mercy",<sup>21</sup> which is providentially a part of the contest in the paper.

Verse 14: God's sovereign freedom.

In verse 14, the prophet turns attention to God's sovereign freedom and the possibility of his positive response to his people. While God is gracious, faithful and forgiving, he is also sovereign and does whatever he wills. The very name YHWH conveys a deity "who will be what he will be". The question "who knows..." depicts a kind of uncertainty on the issue at stake. It points also to the fact that God cannot be manipulated or coerced. One can also notice that the rhetorical nature of the question "contains an implicit negative response: 'nobody knows'".<sup>22</sup> According to Sweeney, the rhetorical formula functions in a manner similar to that of the Hebrew particle '*ulay*, "perhaps" (Amos 5:15). The prophet is clearly pointing to the fact that "the people have nothing to lose as the certainty of punishment is clear even when its cause is not".<sup>23</sup> The words "He may turn" reiterate the divine freedom, which is not dependent on human beings turning back to Him.

Nonetheless, Joel is optimistic as he hopes for positive response and that God might bring blessings and not calamity. "The vivid contrast between life-death, blessing-curse, good-evil occurs in the classic call to choose life in Deut 30:15; 19".<sup>24</sup> To this end, fecundity replaces infertility and good replaces evil. God's blessing will make it possible for the people to bring both cereal and drink offering. And this put to an end what Thomas Leclerc described as "dire religious consequences",<sup>25</sup> that is, lack of grain and drink offering in sacrifices. Such offering is like a tribute, which a subject brought to his over Lord,<sup>26</sup> and is understood to be obligatory. This emphasises the fact that there is "an integral relationship between divine grace, the community's return, divine blessing and the

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<sup>19</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 136.

<sup>20</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (BERIT OLAM Vol 2: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Ed. David Cotter; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical, 2000), 165.

<sup>22</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 138.

<sup>23</sup> Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets*, 166.

<sup>24</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 200.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas L. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets* (New York: Paulist, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Rui de Menezes, *The Cultural Context of the Old Testament* (Bangalore: Theological Pub, 2009), 115.

community's worship".<sup>27</sup> They all point towards God's mercy and benevolence to his chosen people-Israel.

Verse 15-17: Summon to participate in ritual/cultic ceremony.

Joel 2:15-17 comprises a series of imperatives that are found spreading themselves through these three significant verses. The first is "blow the trumpet", which relates to the custom of blowing of the ram's horn (*sopar*). This is the standard way of signaling the people of the ancient Israel to assemble either for cultic purposes or for war.<sup>28</sup> Such blowing of horn for cultic procession is found in Josh 6:4; Exod 19:16, 19; Lev 25:9; 2 Chr 15:14 and in the Psalms. Noteworthy is the absence of any clear statement about the people's receptiveness to the invitation to repent, which has led some exegetes to remove the lacuna by emending the imperatives to narratives. Some instances of such may include; they blew the trumpet, declared a fast ..." However, this does not significantly call for emendation as "the staccato speech is just as much at home among imperatives as imperfects, and the versions provide no support for ignoring the Masoretic pointing".<sup>29</sup> The text therefore stands.

Furthermore, the imperative, "declare a fast", follows the traditional cultural observance of public confession of sin at a time of internal or external threat (cf Jer 36:6; Ezra 8:22; Esth 9:31). To call a solemn assembly "here employs the term *asara* from the root "to stop" and proposes a kind of cessation from normal daily activities. It points to the fact that there is immediate need for a national emergency. The following words "let the bridegroom leave his room" buttresses the exigency of this call. Noteworthy is the fact that the imperative gives way to a jussive and this signals an abrogation of a function, which is customary, had survived and had also the backing of ancient legal precedence (cf. Deut 20:17; Judges 15:1).

The prophet in verse 17 mentions those who are to effectively carry out the function and also locates where the priests and the temple ministers were to perform the rituals of the people's repentance. The ceremony is to take place between the porch (vestibule) and the altar. The place mentioned is where sacrifices were normally made from ancient times (1 Kings 8:64). The mention of priests and their ministers reiterates the importance of their intercessory function in remission of sins. The language of the prayer is presented in parts: firstly, urgent appeal to God so that he may have pity and spare his people whose relationship is rooted in the sinaitic covenant bond. Secondly, urgent appeal to God so that he will not let his inheritance (*nahala*) become an object of scorn, for Israel is uniquely God's possession (Exod 19:5-6). Thirdly, urgent plea to spare Israel from judgment and that God's name would not be destroyed. For if the nations of the world were to ask "where is their God?" not only would Israel's reputation come to ruin, but even more, God's name would be tarnished. What unfortunate ruins if such a thing happens.

Verse 18, God had compassion. In Joel 2:18, YHWH's response is reported. This narrative assertion must be an indication that the people heeded to the prophetic summon and carried out his command. Expectedly, the verse employed *waw*-consecutive "and God became jealous and had compassion on his people. In other words, YHWH had given his answer. This kind of construction in Hebrew language is often identified as "prophetic perfect" and properly indicates that his words

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<sup>27</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 201.

<sup>28</sup> Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets*, 168.

<sup>29</sup> Crenshaw, *Joel*, 139.

had taken effect as he the messenger is saying it. It promptly emphasises the speaker's conviction that God has spoken and that deliverance is assured. The mention of God's jealousy "may best be understood as God's zeal, his commitment to that which belongs to him".<sup>30</sup> It effectively recognises the land of Israel as the object of his jealousy and his people as the object of his divine compassion.

## **5. Lessons for the Reading and Hearing Community**

The text under scrutiny has been in use by the Church at the beginning of every Lenten season, which is Ash Wednesday. God's summons to repentance as provided by this passage has served across generations as a call to honest way of living, change of heart and staying away from evil ways. It is also an invitation to sincere confession and true contrition. Further, it invites its readers as well as the listening community to acknowledge their shortcomings before God in their relationship to Him. When a person actually recognizes his faults and inadequacies before God, there would be a motivation to declare one's utter dependence upon Him, for God is always gracious and merciful. Reading through the exegesis and the nuances of the words that the prophet used in his admonitions, the reader of the book of Joel will come to understand that the appropriate response to God's invitation is not just a simple observance of one, two or more religious customs. It does not also rest upon or only in attending the sacrament of reconciliation, which is going for confession simply as a mere Catholic ritual as embedded. It is not also a mere verbal act as observed and preached by some protestant and Pentecostal adherents. Something more is, therefore, required by the one who believes and the believing community.

According to the prophet, in as much as the traditional religious ways for repentance are not neglected and as such should be observed, it is not an end in itself. So, in addition to these customary ritual observances, the Lord requires a perfect or true contrition. Such contrition begins with the heart of the penitent. It simply means that the external observances of a penitent must have begun from the heart, which is the seat of all the cognitive and emotional actions. This internal disposition is thus the appropriate and right response to a merciful and forgiving God. The biblico-traditional practice of "fasting, weeping and mourning", as a faith act, functions as a means whereby divine grace is at work in the life of the people of God, bringing transformation to any believer who observes them. John Wesley emphasised that "godly sorrow for sin" should be associated with fasting. He also said that fasting ultimately should "work in us the same inward and outward repentance; the same entire change of heart, renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness; and the same change of life, till we are holy as He is holy..."<sup>31</sup> True contrition may be personal but at the same time reflexive.

It is the opinion of the prophet that there should be a significant balance between rituals (e.g., mourning, fasting, imposition of ashes, weeping) and the internal disposition of one who is involved.

Just like the earlier prophets, "Joel recognizes the lure and even the danger of ritual observance that is void of the inner disposition. Yet the text calls upon the audience to carry out the ritual of the fast as the ritual emerges from the depth of the inner being – the mind, or in the Hebrew

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<sup>30</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 204.

<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (vol. 1; Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 610.

thinking, the *leb-heart*”.<sup>32</sup> In one of his works, *Festal Letters*, Athanasius emphasized the call to sanctify (i.e. make holy) a fast. He observed the holy manner in which the fast must be carried out, noting that many people, though they go through the motions of a fast, are still polluted in their hearts because they do evil against their brothers and sisters or because they dare to cheat. And many, if nothing else, think more highly of themselves than of their neighbors, thereby committing a great offense.<sup>33</sup>

One finds in the text the portrait of God who permits for a divine change of action, the God who stands in authentic relationship with the community. Clearly the God of this prophet is not the stoic, non-interested immovable God whose “mind is made up”. On the contrary, he will lovingly *sub* (turn) and move into the morrow with his people and will act for their good and for their redemption. Consistent, never changing covenant faithfulness engenders graciousness, mercy and forgiveness. These in turn provide the context of the Lord to change his course of action *vis-à-vis* the covenant community. Such change is the sign of fidelity, grace and a testimony to covenant relationship. It is the embodiment of a God who is in genuine covenant relationship with his people in such away not only that he affects them but that they in turn affect him.<sup>34</sup>

In his opinion, Green maintains that the passage also “tenaciously maintains a firm understanding of divine sovereignty”.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in the midst of the invitation to true contrition of heart, the prophet himself exclaims, “Who knows...” In other words, “while the prayer of confession expresses the relational nature of the divine character, it refuses to allow divine grace, mercy and forgiveness to become an idol that can be manipulated and controlled”.<sup>36</sup> This explains in vivid terms the danger of thinking that one’s religious observances such as praying, fasting qualifies one to merit the mercy of God in payment for keeping these religious customs. This means that “fasting is only a way which God hath ordained wherein we wait for his unmerited mercy; and wherein, without any desert of ours, he hath promised freely to give us his blessing”.<sup>37</sup> The mercy of God is an unmerited gift. This is a great lesson for today’s community of God, the church and its members even in any given locality.

## 6. Posterior Considerations

Some scholars have interpreted this passage in terms of justice of God rather than his mercy. But in this paper, it is examined in relation to God’s loving kindness and mercy. One may significantly observe that a curious silence is maintained in the entire text on the specific offences or sins that the people have committed, which separate them from their God. It is these unmentioned sins that obviously brought about the catastrophe and further impending doom as announced by the prophet. Suggestions have been made, and scholars have raised some opinions, but no sufficient explicit information is given by the prophet concerning the crime of the Judeans in Joel’s time. It is

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<sup>32</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 202.

<sup>33</sup> Athanasius. *The Resurrection Letters*. Paraphrased by Jack N. Sparks. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979. 51; Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 202.

<sup>34</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 203.

<sup>35</sup> Green, *Hosea/Joel/Amos/Obadiah/Jonah/Micah*, 203.

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, 609.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, 609.



important to point out here that the people's receptiveness to the invitation is assumed. Meanwhile, God remains the one who invites. Human response, aimed at true repentance, does not in any way qualify one for God's magnificent graciousness and mercy. Very importantly, Human response is, therefore, necessary for anyone or any community that may seek God's mercy, but does not in itself guarantee God's mercy. Mercy, as an aspect of God's love, is gratuitous and unmerited by any human agent.

Apart from the Israelites, God has also shown mercy to people in past generations. In the Greek Bible, God had shown mercy by "actively helping those who are miserable due to circumstances beyond their control".<sup>38</sup> Some instances of God's graciousness include the healing of the blind men (Matt 9:27-31), lepers (Luke 17: 11-19).

## **Conclusion**

The call to true contrition is ordinarily a divine initiative. This call demands a response, which is the part that humans must play. As the church today seems to be the new covenanted people of God, the response is of utmost importance to us as it may present the condition for the relationship between God and his people. One sees that the passage focuses upon the merciful and relational character of God. It also imagines a faithful community that defines itself as a relational people, who embody the character of their covenant God in their communal life. To be a community formed by a God of this character is to be a community transformed into the character of this God himself. The paper, therefore, challenges its reader as well as the hearing community to envision their God as gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, and relenting from sending calamity to the covenanted people of God. It also propels and encourages the people of God to live towards that visionary attitude, which is primarily God's. So, while one is expected to be making effort in obtaining God's mercy, one is also called to learn and be merciful like the Father.

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<sup>38</sup> Youngblood, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 822.