

THE CHURCH AWAKENING AN URGENT CALL FOR RENEWAL STUDY NINE

It's Time to “Restore the Years”

Ezekiel 33:30–33; Amos 8:11–12; Joel 2:21–27

The job of God’s spokesman isn’t to shape his words so that they’re easy to hear. They need to be accurate and relevant. But they must not be compromised.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

JESUS founded the church with this bold pronouncement: “I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it” (Matthew 16:18). We can be certain that the church will survive any attack, natural or supernatural. Even with all his might, the devil cannot overpower and vanquish Christ’s church . . . but that’s not to say he won’t try!

The devil may not be able to destroy the church, but he can demoralize its leaders, divert it from its mission, dilute its soul-saving message, or distract its members with worldly pleasures. He used these strategies on ancient Israel, enticing God’s people into idolatry and corrupting their leaders.

In those days, God sent prophets to awaken the nation spiritually. These courageous prophets stood alone against the winds of corruption in society. Fearlessly, they pointed bony fingers of conviction at powerful rulers, exposing their sins and consequently enduring severe persecution, even martyrdom.

If these dauntless prophets stepped off the pages of the Old Testament into our world, what warnings would they give today’s churches and pastors? In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we’ll listen to the messages of three prophets—Ezekiel, Amos, and Joel. We just may see ourselves in the people they rebuked, and, if so, we will know what we must do to return to Christ’s right way.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you turn to God's Word, open your heart to receive His message for you. Pray the following prayer and invite the Lord to reveal areas of your life that need attention.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life. (Psalm 139:23–24)*



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Of the three prophets we'll study, Joel might have prophesied earliest, perhaps as early as the ninth century BC, in the southern kingdom of Judah. Later, Amos ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam in the mid-700s BC. The prophet Ezekiel appeared much later, during the exile in Babylon after the nation had been conquered and the temple reduced to ruins.

We'll look at the issues these prophets addressed in reverse chronological order: first, Ezekiel's message for a complacent people, then Amos' message for immoral leaders, and finally Joel's message of hope for the nation suffering under a terrible plague.



Observation: The Words of Three Bold Prophets

Observe the main points of the prophets' messages. Look for the core issue they addressed and the graphic ways they described the problem. Israel's prophets painted vivid pictures with their words, much like Jesus did with His parables and similes. The purpose was not only to make a lasting impression but also to spark a flame of repentance and to inspire life-change.



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Ezekiel Speaks to a Fickle Congregation—Ezekiel 33:30–33

Ezekiel was a priest who had been deported along with thousands of Jews to a settlement in Babylon near the Chebar River. He was an eloquent speaker and respected spiritual authority. According to [Ezekiel 33:30](#), what did God tell Ezekiel about the people to whom he ministered?

The people seemed sincere, but how did their behavior betray their true nature, according to [33:31–32](#)?

What would be the tragic result ([33:33](#))?

Worship isn't a dead-end street. It isn't about being entertained or impressed. It's about changed lives. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Amos Warns of Coming Famine—Amos 8:11–12

God had called Ezekiel out of the priesthood, but He called Amos out of the fields. Amos was, in his own words, “a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs,” not a prophet (Amos 7:14 NASB). God sent this simple man into the palace to confront Jeroboam, one of the richest and most wicked kings of Israel. He called Israel’s corrupt upper class “fat cows,” indulging their appetites while they oppressed the poor and crushed the needy (4:1).

Amos prophesied during a period of unparalleled economic success . . . and unsurpassed debauchery. What was his message to the leaders who had turned up their noses to God’s Word, according to [8:11–12](#)?

*The famine has come! We are in the midst of it! Listen to the religious comments made by so-called professionals. Listen for the truth. Are they teaching the Word of God?
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

Joel Promises a Hopeful Future—Joel 2:21–27

We dial back the clock to hear Joel’s message, but Joel’s prophecies pointed forward in time. He envisioned renewal and restoration after God’s purifying judgments. How did he describe this period of the Lord’s blessing in [Joel 2:21–27](#)?



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What did God require of His people for restoration, according to *Joel 2:12–13*?

The Lord was saying to His people, “Turn to Me, trust Me, rely on Me. Break your heart before Me. I will be gracious and compassionate. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Path to Restoration

The context of Joel’s judgments was a devastating famine. Calamity had struck the farming culture of Judah in waves of natural disasters—drought (Joel 1:12) followed by wildfires (1:19). These disasters were awful, but the most destructive calamity was the swarms of locusts that stripped the spirit of the people as bare as the landscape, leaving the nation in complete ruin.

For an explanation of the shocking effects of a locust swarm, read the description under the heading “Locust” in the Animal Kingdom article in *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. An online article on locusts in biblical times is at *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* at biblegateway.com.

What strikes you about the devastation of a locust plague?



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In chapter 2, Joel compares the locust swarm to an army of soldiers who “leap along the mountaintops” (Joel 2:5) and “break through defenses without missing a step” (2:8). As they charge, “the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars no longer shine” (2:10). It’s an apocalyptic nightmare, and who was “at the head of the column” leading the advance (2:11)? The Lord Himself and His righteous judgments.

Why was the Lord’s discipline so severe? Only a heavy battering ram could break through the defenses of the people’s stubborn will. God’s purpose, however, was not to destroy but to call His people to repentance and to set them on a path of restoration.

After the people turned from their sin to the Lord, restoration would descend like refreshing showers on a parched landscape. The blessings culminate with this wonderful promise: “The LORD says, ‘I will give you back what you lost to the swarming locusts’” (2:25). What does that mean? Look up the verse in various *versions of the Bible* to help you define Joel’s meaning and metaphor.

God promised to restore the years when His people followed Joel’s spiritual remedy:

*“Don’t tear your clothing in grief,
but tear your hearts instead.”
Return to the LORD your God. (2:13)*

What spiritual practice was Joel describing? What was he telling the people of Judah to do?



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It's time for there to be repentance from the phoniness, the greed, the perfunctory spirit, the lack of diligent and devoted prayer. We in ministry need to return to study, to meditation, to seeking God's mind, and to courageous and contagious preaching. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: A Prayer of Repentance

Review *Psalm 139:23–24* under the “Prepare Your Heart” section above. How did David model a repentant spirit in this prayer?

Identify four steps of repentance based on the verbs at the beginning of each phrase. Write them below and explain their meaning.

With hearts open and willing, we receive the Lord's corrections. The prophetic voices of Ezekiel, Amos, and Joel still ring today. If they were to come to our churches, how might they lead us in God's path of life? What might they say to help us restore God's favor upon the church? Let's consider some action steps we can apply.



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Application: Three Changes That Must Occur

Pastor Chuck Swindoll draws together the passages from our study with three pointed applications.

First, *the people of God must return to a hunger and thirst for righteousness*. Ezekiel's flock nibbled at the edges of God's truth when they came to hear Ezekiel's eloquent messages, but they returned to their worldly banquet when they left. What stirs in you a hunger and thirst for righteousness and an aversion to the things of the world? What whets your spiritual appetite to crave authentic exposition of the Scriptures?

Second, *the ministers of God must repent of their failure to fulfill their calling*. If you are a minister, have you been serving hearty meals from God's Word? Have entertaining stories been coming from your pulpit more than biblical exposition?¹ If so, perhaps you need to ask the Lord to forgive your lack of serious study. Confess your need for change in the space below.



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Third, *the house of God needs to represent its biblical purpose for existence*. Remember the four functions of the church outlined in *Acts 2:42*? Teaching. Fellowship. Worship. Prayer. How does your church measure up to these standards? How might you join efforts to help your church represent its biblical purpose?

We close with Pastor Chuck’s inspiring definition of the house of God and a final call to the people of God:

It is a house of prayer, not a house of business. It is a place of worship, not a place of entertainment. Jesus is our Savior whom we worship, not a brand to market. The body of Christ is a sanctuary of protection for the vulnerable—for children, single women, the abused, and the bruised and broken in life. . . .

The marvelous opportunity that lies before the church awaits only one thing: the church’s awakening. Stated simply, *the people of God* must return to a hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . *the ministers of God* must repent of their failure to fulfill their calling . . . and *the house of God* needs to represent its biblical purpose for existence. In spite of all the spiritual devastation and famine in our land, it is not too late to turn it around—by God’s grace.²



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I ask Your Spirit to do a work in my heart, to satisfy my hunger with Your Word, and to fill my mind with a true vision of Your church. Give me the integrity and courage to come to terms with the things that require attention. May good come from my repentance. May I know truth, fellowship, worship, and the free flow of peace that comes only through prayer. In Jesus’ name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. For an explanation of biblical exposition, see Charles R. Swindoll, *The Church Awakening: An Urgent Call for Renewal* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 257–61. For help in preparing expository sermons, read his books, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* and *Saying It Well: Touching Others with Your Words*, available at insight.org.
2. Swindoll, *The Church Awakening*, 261–62.

