

Joel – a book of doom, warning, or comfort?

Joel 2:28-32; Joel 3:16b-18a; Acts 2:14-21

Joel is the second of the twelve prophets in the Book of the Twelve. The Book of the Twelve Prophets was originally on one parchment roll because of the brevity of the text, and together formed one Book of the 24 Books of Hebrew Scripture. These twelve prophets are some times named the minor prophets, not because they are of lesser importance, but because their writings are brief. They are at the end of the Old Testament.

Joel was a prophet to God's people in Judah. At that time, the nation of Israel had split after King Solomon's death into two kingdoms. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Both kingdoms had some evil kings so God sent prophets to warn the people as well as the political and religious leaders of wrongdoing and coming judgment. But few listened. So God sent invaders

Joel was a prophet in the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the period of the Divided Kingdom (930-722 BC). We don't have an exact date for him. He is mentioned by name only once in the Hebrew Bible, in the introduction to his own brief book, as the son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1). We know little of the prophet Joel beyond a few personal details contained in the book itself. He preached to the people of Judah, and expressed a great deal of interest in Jerusalem. And he may have been a contemporary of the prophet Elisha. Joel in general he seems to understand the reality that truth must have an impact on us in the world.

The name Joel combines the covenant name of God, Yahweh, and El meaning god, & has been translated as "one to whom YHWH is God," that is, a worshiper of YHWH, or Jehovah is God. Joel may have been associated with the ritual of Solomon's or even the Second temple.

According to a long-standing tradition, Joel was buried in Gush Halav, a village in Galilee. Gush Halav, is known by Arabs as el-Jish, or simply Jish. It's a mixed village today, with the

majority of residents being Christian Maronites, living an exemplary life of co-existence with Muslims and Catholic Greeks.

The Book of Joel is apocalyptic in nature, referring to the "Day of the Lord." Chapters 1-2 refer to a plague of locusts which ravaged Judah at the time. Chapter 2 speaks of God's mercy (2:13-14), and the end reveals a future time of Divine intervention. Chapter 3 relates the Day of Judgement and the salvation of God's children.

The most noted passage is Chapter 2:28-32. It is quoted by Peter the Apostle in Acts 2:17-21. Luke, the writer of Acts sees Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, as the fulfillment of the first part of this passage. Also Romans 10:13 echoes in summary our text from Joel two. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

So what is the Book of Joel about and how does it apply to us today? This skit may help answer that question. **(Skit by Sam O'Neal)**

The Book of Joel accounts for justice over evil in a form that's unique to the other Old Testament prophets. Unlike the other Books, Joel tells us a story about a terrible plague of locusts that seems to traverse across time. No particular mention of Israel's sins is present in the book, but the consequences of the terrible events described are certainly clear: God will one day wipe out all evil & start creation over. But through this destruction also comes eternal protection for those who believe in Him.

Salvation from the Messianic King is prophesied, but this time the Holy Spirit is prophesied to come too, causing seemingly ordinary people to have visions, divine dreams, and be filled with God's Spirit. That's exactly what happened during Pentecost to Jesus' disciples after His resurrection, ensuring us that the Day of the Lord is even closer at hand today.

So Joel was one of the prophets God sent to talk to the people of Judah. Joel's message had two purposes: to warn and to give hope. The nation

of Judah faced a crisis: locusts had invaded the land, and Judah was affected by a drought. Joel told the people that these natural disasters were from God. He was judging them for their sin. But these disasters were only the beginning. Joel called the people to repent and turn back to God. He also gave hope to the people, telling them that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

One way to look at the book of Joel is to recognize these themes and what they imply:

1. The Locust Swarm
2. The Day of the Lord
3. The Nations Judged
4. A Call for mourning, prayer and repentance.
5. The Faithful Restored - a New Eden
6. God's Holy Spirit on All - Renewal

So let's dive into some of the themes. There is debate over what the locusts were – an invading army, or a symbolic warning, or an actual invasion of locusts. It seems Joel was told by God to use the well-known locust plague that had recently occurred as symbolic of what was going to happen. He has not been the first person to capitalize on a tragedy to dispense the Lord's message of judgment and the hope of repentance. In referring to the terrible locust plague, Joel was able to speak into the lives of his listeners and imprint the message of judgment into their minds, like a brand sears the flesh of an animal.

One commentator notes that the Day of the Lord, which is a reference not to a single day only but to a period of judgment & restoration, consists of three basic features:

- The judgment of God's people.
- The judgment of foreign nations.
- The purification & restoration of God's people through intense suffering.

We find each of these elements in the book of Joel, as it offers one of the most complete pictures in Scripture of this ultimately redemptive event (Joel 2:1–11; 2:28–32; 3:1–16).

Because of the locust invasion, Joel warns **pleasure seekers**. Chapter one, verse 5 & on: “Wake up you drunkards and weep. Wail you drinkers of wine.”

For it has been snatched from your lips.” And then he goes on to describe what damage the locust does to the crops. Now for you who are against alcohol, that fine and good. But this warning is because wine was seen as a sign, a symbol of God's blessing and is used in the Bible as an expression of joy in a life willingly poured out to God. This is not an affirmation of drinking as there are many warnings against abuse of wine and strong drink. But its symbolic language that life is going to be good or difficult.

A **second warning** is aimed at farmers. Chapter one, verse 11-12. You have experienced draught & starvation – including your animals. “Be ashamed, O farmers, Wail, O vinedressers, For the wheat and the barley; Because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine dries up And the fig tree fails; The pomegranate, the palm also, and the apple tree, All the trees of the field dry up. Indeed, rejoicing dries up from the sons of men.”

This is a warning to those most directly affected by a plague of locusts. Again, and added to the wine, the fig is lifted out because they symbolize the blessings of the relationship between God and Israel. And the other crops mentioned are important to the economy and were symbols of nourishment and expressive of Judah's relationship with God. But all that is in danger. The locusts are a sign of God's displeasure so “the joy of humans is withered away.” (1:12)

Then Joel **warns the priests** – the clergy. Chapter one, verse 13. “Gird yourselves *with sackcloth* And lament, O priests; Wail, O ministers of the altar!” Verse 8: “The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the Lord.”

All these warnings lead up to a **call to the nation** for a holy fast, prayer and repentance. To cry out to the Lord. Because the locust plague with economic ruin, is a precursor to the Assyrian army invading. So Joel moves from the physical to the political and then to the spiritual. Life with God is falling apart, repent. Turn around. Then have Verse 15: “Alas for the day! For the **day of the LORD** is near, It will come as destruction from the Almighty.”

Next in Chapter two Joel cries out: “Blow a trumpet in Zion, And sound an alarm on My holy

mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, For the day of the LORD is coming.” He inter-weaves the locust and the coming Assyrian army together. It’s like he’s saying – you experienced the locust invasion, but that is nothing like what the Assyrians will do. And that’s nothing like how much God is angry with you. So, again Joel cries out: “The Day of the Lord is great; It is dreadful. Who can endure it?” (2:11)

Next in chapter two verse 12, Joel urges repentance. ““Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “**Return to Me with all your heart**, And with fasting, weeping and mourning; And rend your heart and not your garments.” “Return to the LORD your God, He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness And relenting of evil.” Our Creator just never gives up on us. That was a dominate theme in Cal Peyton’s testimony. He had chance after chance. As he said, he got away with stuff when the judicial system should have been much harder on him. But it was God at work.

Then in chapter two, verses 18-27, we see **God’s response** in more detail. It’s a mirror image of the judgement disasters with the invasion of the locusts and the Assyrian army. Life will be restored because the Lord takes pity on his people when they repent.

Plus then we have the theme of the **outpouring of God’s Spirit**. Chapter two, verses 28-31. It’s picked up in Peter’s speech, at Pentecost, and by the early church. God promised to pour out the Holy Spirit in full abundance, complete refreshment and power on all his people – old, young, women and men, before the Almighty’s final triumph over human kind.

And then there is the wonderful, repeated promise, (2:32)._“And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD Will be delivered;” And for those living the events of Joel’s time, “For on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, As the LORD has said, Even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.”

Chapter three is about the nations being judged, and the blessings for God’s people is articulated again – almost like a New Eden.

Why is Joel so important? The book of Joel’s importance to the canon of Scripture stems from its being the first to develop an often mentioned biblical idea: the day of the Lord. God’s judgement. While the prophet Obadiah mentioned the terrifying event first (15), Joel’s book gives some of the most striking and specific details in all of Scripture about the day of the Lord - days cloaked in darkness, armies that conquer like consuming fire, and the moon turning to blood. Food cut off. Even for sheep and cattle. Joy and gladness is gone from the house of the Lord – meaning the temple - worship and the nation is gone.

Joel has such vibrant and physical imagery for times of ultimate judgment which is still future for us today. He makes clear the seriousness of God’s judgment on sin. (2 Thess 2:2; 2 Pet 3:10) **But all this is reversible** – because of the Creator’s grace and the Almighty’s longing for his people.

God is holy so sin against Him deserves to be punished. God is also just. Our Creator will punish sin. Like the people of Judah, our sin deserves to be punished, and the just punishment is much worse than locusts or drought or an invading army. The penalty for sin is death (Rom. 6:23) Eternal separation from God. But God would rather forgive people than punish them.

God gave Joel vivid imagery to get our attention. The Almighty loves us, and sent His Son, Jesus, to take our punishment for sin by dying on the cross. The Bible calls us to turn from our sin and turn to God, looking to Jesus for our salvation. Plus, God wants to pour out his Holy Spirit on us. This truth still stands: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:32; Rom. 10:13). This is the message of Joel. The day of the Lord is coming, for each one of us, for nations, and for the world, so repent, and receive the Holy Spirit.