

The Worst Hard Time: Warning! Danger!

Joel 1:1-20

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,
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Black Sunday in Pond Creek

One April Sunday in 1935, while my grandpa, twenty-four years old and visiting his parents, was preparing for church, there was an unusual break in the heat that day. After church, my great grandma decided to open all the windows to let the house air out on this unseasonably cool day and then my grandpa and his family enjoyed the rare blue sky with a picnic.

They went down the creek that crossed his farm. While they enjoyed a warm, mid-seventies Sunday, a cold front was sweeping down from Canada, southwest across the great plains. With each mile the storm moved, it picked more of the loose soil. Around the mid-afternoon, my grandpa said that a black storm literally surrounded him as he made his way back to the house, rushing to beat the storm that closed in quickly and covered the farm completely. April 14, 1935, is better known as Black Sunday. The dust storm was so powerful and ferocious that it penetrated every crack in every home on the prairie, dumping buckets of sand into homes. It completely devastated both farms and livestock, choking animals and covering crops. By the time my grandpa made it to the back screen door of his parents' home, the dust and the dirt had piled up so high, he couldn't even open the door. He had to shovel the dirt away from the screen door. The windows that had been opened to air out the home, had allowed the sand and dirt to pile up and cover every piece of furniture. It would take the family over a month to remove the dirt.

It was such a powerful storm, as it made its way to the northeast, Oklahoma dirt eventually dropped on West Virginia's eastern panhandle. Thousands of plains farmers got sick from mysterious illnesses. Scores died. My grandpa told me that he would spit out what looked like tobacco juice, except it was dirt. He told me that nothing like that had ever happened before. They had no idea how to even consider preparing for it.

Consider how the nation suffered through the Great Depression when the stock market crashed. Or more recently when the housing crisis of the early 2000's caused a global financial catastrophe.

When events affect things across culture, what do we do? How do you prepare for the unknowable and unpredictable? How do you get ready for the unknown? How do you steady your hands and steel your heart to prepare for the worst hard time?

This is what drives Joel's prophecy¹. He predicts agricultural and national calamities that would have resonated with the hearers his message. Joel uses a swarm of locusts as a metaphorical vehicle to symbolize an invading enemy army. Both the locusts and the invading army are catastrophic in nature, but Joel also points to God restoring the people. I invite you to turn with me to Joel chapter one this morning. (read text)

Joel's Warning

Joel chapter one is a warning given to everyone in society. Some prophets call on leaders, others preach to common folk. Joel is warning everyone, from elders, to leaders, to the working class, to the town drunk, to generations of children to come. "Something wicked this way comes" and no human wisdom, no previous experience will be able to deal with this. No distant memory, no records kept of previous devastations will compare to what is to come. There is no precedent for what is coming. If these sorts of events are "teachable moments," then God is telling his people to get ready for the big momma of teachable moments.

This metaphorical attack is a warning of God's coming judgment. Joel chapter one tells us that God's judgment will be complete and all of the places we go for refuge will be inadequate relief: all of our self-medication won't bring relief; all of our self-hypnosis won't distract us from it; all of our therapeutic moral deism about God being love and all people being heaven bound and God wanting to make everybody healthy, wealthy and happy it won't be the ultimate truth. All of those things will NOT protect you from the judgment of the Lord.

Nourishment will be cut off and taken from the lips of the people. Four types of locusts are coming, and Joel uses the following descriptive words to describe their devastation: swarming, stripping, devouring, destroying, devouring.

¹ Not much is known about Joel other than his name and his father's name. Scholars place him in a broad range historically, but for our study, I agree with the many biblical scholars who place Joel nearer 500 BC, making Joel a post-exilic prophet. I agree with this later date because Joel makes frequent use of material from other Old Testament texts. He quotes around forty Old Testament texts. Joel is the rare Old Testament book that quotes other Old Testament sources.

This will be total and complete devastation that will bring hardship, struggle, and pain that a person couldn't comprehend or wouldn't have ever even seen before. This is a warning of the impending danger of the worst hard time a person could ever face.

God Ain't Stopping It

There is something unique in these types of lament passages. Remember, God is sovereign. God is omniscient. God is omnipotent. And God is allowing this to happen. Seventeen times in Joel God refers to the land as His. Even though God is the landowner, he is not going to defend it from this army, from this nation of locusts. In this instance, God chooses NOT to defend the land. There is an important lesson here for you and for me, for believers and non-believers alike.

There will be times in our lives in which God will choose NOT to deliver us or spare us from the worst hard time. We will be allowed to endure and experience what may seem like total devastation. Joel places this teaching in the context of judgment and the Day of the Lord. This means that if God will not give out free passes in life, he won't be giving them out when that life is over. How will you prepare for that moment?

You have a choice to make here concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. You either choose to receive Him or you choose to reject Him. Those are the choices. There is no middle ground. There is no neutral zone. There is no Christian-adjacent claim to be made. "My wife is a Christian. My grandpa was a preacher. That ought to do it." Those will not be good enough. You will only be able to claim belief and trust in Christ. That is what we depend on.

Wailing like a Desert Storm

This devastation God speaks of in Joel will cause the loud, wailing cries of grief that will sound like the shrieking desert winds. Nourishment and relief will be severed from the land just like an axe separates a tree from its roots. God is allowing HIS land to experience this devastatingly powerful attacker whose ferocity is compared to a known killer: the lion and the lioness.

The lioness uses twelve massive incisors to grab and pull food and scrape meat from bones. She will use four massive canine teeth - that can grow up to seven centimeters long - to grab hold of fleeing prey. They're not sharp like your house cat's teeth are.

Instead they are blunted and are most useful in grabbing on to the noses and the windpipes of their prey. Lionesses usually kill by strangulation or suffocation and their canines are instrumental in this. The lioness uses molars and premolars to cut meat. These have high, sharp crowns and they obscure one another. The lioness will make best use of these sharp, scraping tools by opening its hinged jaw nearly a foot wide, making its bite like a pair of razor-sharp scissors. From a completely devastating locust invasion to this painful attack, God lays out his warning in Joel.

This is an agricultural society that is hearing this message of massive devastation of its very cornerstone. These resources that provide life will be completely devastated and totally lost. God links this devastating loss to His divine judgment.

God piles up five verbs here in six and seven to emphasize the totality of the destruction that is coming. Invaded, devastated, splintered, stripped and discarded. The root word used throughout these verbs are linked with God's divine judgment in other Old Testament prophecies. God is preparing the hearers of this message of what life will look like for those who don't know Him when everything ends, either for the individual or the Day of the Lord.

Again, God claims the ruined plants, "my grapevine." And yet He does NOT protect it or restore it. If you think that everyone is going to heaven because God is such a nice old man in the sky, you have NOT read Joel. If you think you're going to eternal paradise because you've been a good person, you've not read Joel. This is the worst hard time, and it is promised to ANYone who does NOT trust God as their stronghold. Unless you make Jesus your Savior, this is what is in store. God won't protect a person from this fate. He will allow it if that is what a person so chooses. Choosing to reject Christ will ultimately bring devastating consequences.

Not too long ago, I was listening to a person, a Christian person, talk about how they would be happy when outspoken atheists die because they will finally get what they deserve. We need to understand that this grieves the Lord, and it should grieve God's people too when unbelievers pass away.

Here in Joel, God calls His people to mourn over this devastation just like a young, engaged woman whose fiancée had died before the wedding. This grief should also affect the people's religious rituals. How could it not?

Locusts gobbled up all the grain and the grapevines. Without the crops, there are no grain offerings to be made. Without grapes, there are no drink offerings. Without oil and grain, the potential for offerings fizzle away.

God is letting Israel know that these life-giving sacrifices that they had once depended on to maintain their rightness with Him will very soon not be adequate. God is letting us know that too. If your faith is based on what you do rather than Who you've trusted, you may be in for a big surprise.

A LOT of people think because they go to church, they will go to heaven. They serve. They help out. They toss a few shekels in the offering plate. They may even pray a little, sing some, read their Bible at church, know John 3:16, but without a relationship with Jesus Christ, it is all just motions to go through. Jesus said this about people who go to church but don't know Him: "Not everyone who cries 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in Heaven." (Matt. 7:21)

You read this warning, and you may be asking right about now, "Where is the hope?" This is so bleak, so awful. It is why we do so much to try to convince you to share the gospel with the people you know and love. Because life without Christ is something we should be warned about.

Joel does begin to reveal a bit of hope in verse 14. Here the Lord begins to lay out some steps are demanded to restore what is lost. We've asked several times already "how do you prepare for the worst hard time?" Well, beginning in verse fourteen God starts to answer that question.

Preparing For the Worst

Here God gives four steps in preparation.

Sanctifying a fast – announce a sacred fast. This is an act of purification and setting things apart for sacred service. In the Old Testament, fasting was mandated as either a sign of mourning (2 Sam 1:22; 1 Kings 21:27) or as an accompaniment to petitionary prayer (Ezra 8:21; Dan 9:3). It is always curious to me when people enter into a happy, celebratory fast. That isn't the context of fasting here. God says to stop eating and to set yourself apart and be purified.

Proclaim a solemn assembly – First stop eating and then stop working. That is what proclaim an assembly calls for in Hebrew. It calls people to restrain, to hold something back in the process of work.

How often do we do exactly the opposite when things get hard? We plunge into work, trying to force ourselves into rhythms and patterns of familiarity. Hoping that if we act like everything is normal, somehow everything will magically become normal. God says that the second step is to cease activities. To take a day or two or three. To stop distracting yourself so you can actually have time and silence to hear from Him.

Gather the elders. The next preparation to be made is to gather at the House of the Lord your God with those who can speak from God's truth and from Godly and righteous experience.

Cry out to the Lord. Implore God to help you. Cry out to the Lord. This disaster, this worst hard time, this warning of impending danger should drive the people to the Lord. What should our cries sound like concerning this terrible day when divine judgment will fall on people? According to Joel 1:15-20, it is to be lament. Sad prayers, sad songs, grieving, mourning. Look at the prayer, the song, that God leads the people in concerning the coming Day of the Lord for those who will be devastated by it.

These sad songs introduce us to one of the main themes of Joel. The Day of the Lord. Now, true, some prophets anticipate the Day of the Lord as positive (Amos 5:18a, Zech 14:1). For those who know and trust in the Lord, this Day will come as a relief from the locusts, a relief by God himself from this catastrophe. Joel 1 is fleshing out more fully and more completely the understanding of this Day of the Lord. This is a teachable moment for God's people, then and now. The locust army would certainly grab that audience's attention back then. In the same way that the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl or the Housing Crisis did for the 20th and for us now.

The Church must also be on the lookout for teachable moments. You don't really search them out. Teachable moments sort of crash into your lives. Still, God calls us to do some preparation for them in advance, otherwise, when they come, they crash on us with such force and immediacy that we simply cannot figure out a reasoned, right response directly after the teachable moment occurs.

Have you ever thought through the "if/then moments in your life? If this happens, then we will do that. When you make an offer on a house, you are bound up in if/then planning. Preparation includes the ability to process and deal with things theologically and emotionally.

We saw this happen with Jesus on the cross. One of the other thieves called out to Jesus to spare himself the pain and suffering and to use his so-called power to save himself. Obviously, the natural, visceral response would have been to do exactly that. But the Lord Jesus's theology did not allow his bodily pain to determine his response. The reason for His incarnation was to provide atonement for sin and reveal the victory of the Messiah over the power of sin and death. Neither of those things happen if Jesus leaves the cross. Theology won out over personal comfort and experience.

This warning of Joel 1 is a call to figure out the MOST IMPORTANT if/then moment you will ever face. How will you prepare for that? Will you base your decision on personal experience rather than on theological truth and reflection.

For too many Christians, theology is a very thin veneer – a false surface that does not allow us to address the deep questions of the heart. What do we do when we face the deepest griefs? How do we react when a child or spouse dies? How do we cope when the business fails? How do we move forward when some deep horrible act has been perpetrated against us? You need strong, deep, and PREVIOUS encounters with the Lord through your mind and heart. This prior preparation will help us, even in the worst hard times, to be able to “explain the hope that is within us,” (1 Peter 3:15).

CHALLENGE:

Read these verses each day this week before you go to work, before you go to school, before you interact with people across your schedule to remind yourself again how God feels about people who don't know Him. We are to be grieved over their lostness. Are you? Are you preparing your heart for that burden of grief over the impending judgment of someone you know who doesn't know Jesus as Savior and Lord?

FURTHER THOUGHTS:

What stories from our nation's past have that sort of devastating teachable moment for us?

What was the most difficult thing you had to overcome as a child or teenager? What did that teach you about yourself, about others, about the Lord?

What spiritual distortions are being taught about God and heaven that are not consistent with the warning we've read about in Joel?

What situations have you found yourself very prepared to face?

What situations caught you off guard, without much preparation?

As you read Joel 1, what steps of preparation does God provide? What details about difficult times does the Bible provide for us?