

Well Good Morning

I'm very glad to be with you all today

If you don't know me already I am Joel Holdsworth

my wife, and the kids and I

have been coming here for a couple of years now

- doesn't feel very long

we still feel very new

but in that time it has been wonderful experience

to get to know so many so very well

and I want to say just how blessed we have been

by the church family here at Mercy Hill

because when you move somewhere

you never really know what you're going encounter

or who you're to meet

and I feel particularly blessed to speak you this morning

especially as our ever-reliable pastors are away in Nicaragua

we might rather take it for granted

but we are very blessed to have Nick and Joey

and particularly blessed by the effort they make

to preach to us exactly what God saying in scripture

- no more and no less

and indeed if you ever find yourself in a new place

looking to join a church

regardless of the style of the worship

or the crowd that attends

the key question to always ask is

“are they opening up the scriptures in their rich detail
in a way that I can hear and understand?”
always be on the lookout for that
it is reasonable thing to expect
we don't ask much – just give us the old gospel
tell us what the scripture says
let us hear God speak

So I am Joel, and today I have decided to preach on Joel chapter 1

Now some of you might be thinking
that me choosing the book of Joel to preach on
is all just a cheap gimmick
and very self-indulgent to boot
and if you're thinking that
then you would be entirely correct to think that

So I hope you'll forgive me

but I have been thinking about for quite a long time
In my experience the minor prophets very often get passed over
and it's for that reason I rather like focussing in on them
I go major on the minor prophets - you could say

So today we're going to be looking at Joel chapter 1

But I did think I could have some fun with it:

“Joel has a message from God”
“Joel speaks the very words of the Lord”
the jokes write themselves

But just to be serious:

I will say that it's very wonderful that as you grow
and the years pass
sometimes a piece of scripture will stay with you
and your capacity to understand it will often grow over time

So just to begin I want to say a few things about the book itself
this is the recorded Prophetic message of the prophet Joel
son of Pethuel
- as it says in Joel 1 verse 1

So what's in a name?

Now in the modern age parents have all kinds of reasons
for choosing names for their children
some names mean a whole lot more
than their parents intended

Are any of you into Football? or soccer I should say
of course it's hugely popular in England
and one of the sport's biggest stars in my lifetime
is the striker Harry Kane
(have you heard of him?)
and my co-worker, who is French,
and is also a big football fan
was remarking one day
"It's so perfect that his name 'urricane"
Did you ever notice that?

The thought never crossed my mind before

Imagine being a star football player called “hurricane” – Amazing!

Do you think his parents intended it?

by the way,

this is complete nonsense, but I'll tell you quickly that

in my town there where I grew up

there was baby girl born called

“Emma Royd”

and you really won't believe me

when I say that there was also a man in the town

had the name Robin deBank

And... not a word of a lie

he actually got sent to prison

Now, what do you think he was sent to prison for?

He got sent down for attempted murder

he actually tried to blow up his wife's car!

Anyway, a lot of people these days get their name by accident

or just because the parents take a fancy to it

But Joel's name was no accident

because the name has deep significance

Yoh-EI – means “The Lord is God”

and in this way, Joel's parents are making a **huge statement**

Just remember how many times in the Old Testament

the people of Isreal turned away

to the “gods” of the Cananite people

(who are of course, no gods at all)

Joel's name says

“down with all that sort of thing”
“Yahweh – he's the boss – the big cheese!”
“forget about all those Temu knock-off counterfit idols.”
“there's only one true God
– he's the super heavyweight champion,
it's Yahweh! Yahweh!
Accept no substitutes!”
which are words to live by
(I hope you'll agree!)

So that's Joel

Joel by name, Joel by nature you could say
and that's just about all we know about the man himself
he's not mentioned anywhere else in scripture
and there are very few historical reference points
for us to be able to date the book
so different commentators think that he might have lived
anywhere from the 9th to the 4th century BC
that's a window of 500 years
it could be before the exile to Babylon or after
it not a settled debate
and in general
if the Bible doesn't include some piece of information
then it usually isn't very relevant
because what is relevant is the circumstances it was written in
which is a moment of national crisis
something catastrophic has happened to the people

it's a moment of massive suffering
a disaster has taken place in their world
but as that plays out you will quickly see that there's
a deep spiritual dimension to all this
which is something we see all the way through the Bible
and indeed in all of life
but no less clearly in the book of Joel
and as we trace out the story of these Judeans
and their suffering
it's like lines running parallel
as we follow the journey
these people find themselves on
and God's action in the middle of all this
And because this Old Testament prophesy
again and again Joel uses poetic language
all kinds of big pictures and illustrations

So I hope you're ready for all this – you ready?

Before we begin let's pray

[Pray]

[Read Joel 1]

Now if you can keep you bibles open it would be enormously helpful
So right off the bat...

what is the situation?

locusts

a natural disaster of epic proportions

and the starvation that flows from it

So, look with me again verse 1):

The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

So it says “the Lord” in the translation

this is the name

it means Yahweh

God's special and unique name for himself

so these are words from the mouth of GOD himself

the name and title of GOD himself

and speaking through the prophet Joel

2 Hear this, you elders;

give ear, all inhabitants of the land!

Now in this passage as we'll see,

Joel is going to speak to

different groups of people one after another

four groups in all

and each time, like a layer cake

he layers together the *who*

with the *what* is going on

who, what, who, what

layer by layer

so verse 2, **who** is he speaking to first ?

(can you see?) Elders

So who is that?

We might think he's speaking to the leadership

– like the tribal elders

and indeed he is including these people

but the Hebrew word, like in English

can also mean old folk

old timers

and you can tell that's who Joel is referring to here

because of what he says next:

give ear, all inhabitants of the land!

Has such a thing happened in your days,

or in the days of your fathers?

Do you see?

These elders are the people within the community

who've been around for a while

and they've got a long memory

long enough to have seen a thing or two

and what is more,

they are remember the knowledge
that was passed down to them by their forebears
who came before them
these are the folks who are the guardians of tradition
the source of wisdom and guidance and experience

By the way, are you an elder?

Are an old timer? (Dare I ask)

Perhaps you wince at the suggestion

I was rememebering that song by The Who

(English band!)

They sang

People try to put us down

Just because we get around

Thing they do look awful cold

I hope I die before I get old

That song was released 50 years ago

and the two members of the band who still live

are indeed quite thoroughly old at this point

and of the two who have already passed away

Keith Moon only lived to age of 32

for him, his foolish wish came true!

They denigrated this vital role

in a healthy society the

you will be passing on the batton

and with it you are sharing your wisdom

you are counseling, encouraging, supporting, equipping,

resourcing, and guiding

If you're growing older

if you're an old timer – if you'll allow me say it

then don't be ashamed

be an old timer! – an old timer for Jesus

the Lord says

Has such a thing happened in your days,

or in the days of your fathers?

(verse 3)

3 Tell your children of it,

and let your children tell their children,

and their children to another generation.

4 What the cutting locust left,

the swarming locust has eaten.

Now I think we have to get our head into this

a little bit

because I don't know where you're from

You could say I've lead quite a sheltered life

but where I'm from in England

we don't really have any natural disasters

(short of maybe an occasional bit of flooding very rarely)

It's been quite an adjustment since we moved here

to live in a part of the world where there are

earthquakes and wildfires and tsunamis and such-like

I'm not used to it
Have **you** ever had to fear a locust swarm?
Have **you** ever had to fear a famine?
I certainly haven't
Indeed in the modern world we live in
filled with industrial farming
and global supply chains
I've never in my life had to worry about
where my next meal would come from
I remember COVID crisis in 2020
and there was a moment where I was beginning
to worry a little bit
and I started contemplating whether
I should start hoarding beans
but then pretty quickly I discovered that it was a crisis alright
but not that kind of crisis
I don't know about you
but even in the middle of lock-downs
I never had any real difficulty getting food
I never went hungry

But let's think about it...

Listen to these words:

Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of our fathers?

What would have to happen in your world
to make you say something like this

Most people have lived through moments in their life
where they remember where they were standing
My mother always said she remembers where she was
when the Challenger disaster occurred
are you old enough to remember that one?
I'm too young

In Britain the big one I remember was the day Princess Diana died
and the whole country entered into a state of national mourning

The one I really remember is September 11th 2001
I was in school – someone told what had happened
and I didn't believe him

And then I remember the head master of the school
called a special assembly the next day
and standing there on the stage
in front of 1000 boys gathered together
and I'll never forget what he said to us:
“the world is never going to be same again” he said
and of course looking back at that moment
25 years later
he was quite right about that

and yet you can begin to see it now
there's a generation or two who come up
we've got a few Zoomers here?
even a few from Generation Alpha

who were just too young to remember the twin towers
is that you?
(you're making me feel old
– it's a very strange feeling how quickly it comes about)

About the locusts Joel says

Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.

- that's four generations

my Grandfather fought in the second world war

so what Joel is describing would be me telling my children about it

In Britain we have **Remembrance Day**

every year

we have a national minute of silence

in remembrance of the war dead

particularly of the First and Second World War

every year of the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month

(which is the anniversary the end of World War 1)

it's always somber affair

everyone will be silent

the Last Post will be played on the bugle

and there's a poem that is usually read out

of which I will read one verse

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

*Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*

If you decide to go and visit England

in November

what would you be seeing take place?

you would be seeing a nation

passing down a cultural memory

through a tradition

there was a moment not so very long ago in Britain

that had such impact on the national mind

that the echoes still resonate with us to this day

and indeed we have committed ourselves

to keeping the memory of these events alive

that's what's going on here in Joel

that's the scale of event we're talking about

so if you're wondering what it would feel like to be in this moment

to be one of the people Joel is speaking to

just think about those moments from the past

and we're four generations on - or more

and the trauma still lives with us now!

look with me

(verse 4):

4 What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.

Now when it comes this verse the translators
clearly had a very tough time
finding the English words to match the Hebrew
because all the translations put it slightly differently
So in the ESV church Bible we have

Cutting locusts
Swarming locusts
Hopping locusts
Destroying locusts

Then there's

Great Locusts
Young Locusts
Gnawing
Creeping
Stripping
Chewing
Gobbling
Munching
Chomping

Do you see the picture here?

This is like a wood chipper

Your food supply has gone in the shredder

This is like a storm

A maelstrom of destruction

Imagine yourself seeing that

Like a black cloud on the horizon

sandstorm growing in the distance

like a hurrican sweeping over the land

Running inside

Slamming the door

huddling in shelter

While the farm lands are laid to ruin

A look again how Joel puts it (look with me verse 4)

4 What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.

What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.

So we're not just looking at a disaster that's a one-and-done

This is wave after wave after wave of destruction

Can you imagine it?

As the swarm ebbs away you peer out of the door

to get a glimpse of the destruction
And you sigh in relief
because at least the worst is over
Except before you know it
Another wave has swept in
And then the third
And just when you think the devastation is complete
A fourth swarm rolls over the land
no less ferocious than the ones the came before it
Have you ever seen anything ?
it's often hard for many of us, I think
to imagine ever being in want
to imagine ever experiencing hunger
of course there are many people in this city who live in poverty
but for many people
Silicon Valley is a place of prosperity
greater than any in the world
But look in verse 7
Joel says the locusts have “laid waste to my vine”
“splintered my fig tree”
even “stripped off the bark”
Now I'm no tree expert but to my understanding
that's where the life of the tree *is*
so if you strip off the bark that kills the tree
How long does it take for a great fig tree to grow?
It won't recover for a generation at the least

verse 10

The fields are destroyed,
the grain is destroyed,
the wine and the oil have dried up

verse 17

the storehouses have collapsed
the fields a ruined
the ground has dried up

verse 18

the beasts groan – there's nothing for them to eat
not even anything for the sheep to eat
and they can nibble the grass right down to almost nothing

verse 19

he describes a raging fire
like a wild-fire sweeping across the land

This is ecological destruction on a mass scale

If anything like this happened to today
it would splashed all over the news
all over our feeds
charities and NGOs would be making emergency appeals
we would see camps
filled with starving emaciated children
and parents wailing

If you were living through this

it would feel like creation itself was dying

Now you might be thinking to yourself

This is all very tragic but what does it have to do with me?

We don't live in this world any more – now, do we?

And praise God indeed at least that it seems unlikely

that we will ever suffer a moment

But I think the clue is in verse 4

How would you manage in the situation?

After the first wave I'm coping a bit

“well maybe I can find some scraps among the wreckage

if I get to **work** maybe there's something **I** can **do**

maybe if I get out there

maybe **I** can in some way salvage something from this”

But then what about after the second wave?

What about after the third wave?

What is left at the end after four waves?

Nothing at all Joel says

So what can **I** do?

It's hopeless

That's what this is about

That moment when we realize

that there's nothing I can do to salvage the situation

That moment when we realize

that we're totally out of our depth

we're out of control

That whatever we do

it won't help

Have you experienced a moment like this?
Some people here will have lived through
moments of deep pain and sadness
in their lives

This might be your present reality today
And you're feeling it
right here, right now
Your life has been struck by a catastrophe
It is out of your hands
and completely beyond your control

And if that's you
This is where the book of Joel connects with your life
through these words
God is meeting you today
even in the depths of your sorrow

So he was speaking to the elders
Now, who does he speak to next?
(look with me verse 5):

5 Awake, you drunkards, and weep,
and wail, all you drinkers of wine,

So who is it? Who is he speaking to there?
Drunkards
Now we've got to be a little careful

Because you'd think from the translation
that he's talking about the town drunk
which is actually is rather unfair, in my view
because I don't think that's who Joel is
really speaking to
it would be better to say “drinkers of wine”
I think
in the ancient world that encompasses practically everyone

Today there are many churches
and believers here in the US
and around the world
who teach against the drinking of alcohol in any form
and often with very good reason!
and if you know in your heart
that it is wrong for you to drink
then don't misunderstand me
or think I'm telling you to go against your conscience

Having said that

For the people in the ancient world
to drink Wine or Beer
was experienced as a blessing from God
of course we know that Jesus' first miracle

at the wedding at Cana
was turning the water into the wine!
masses of it! plenty for everyone
and of the finest quality!

That moment in Jesus's time
was a moment of joy and celebration
this moment in Joel
is of course quite the opposite

look with me, verse 5, he says:

5 Awake, you drunkards, and weep,
and wail, all you drinkers of wine,
because of the **sweet wine**,
for it is cut off from your mouth.

6 For a nation has come up against my land,
powerful and beyond number;
its teeth are lions' teeth,
and it has the fangs of a lioness.

7 It has laid waste my vine
and splintered my fig tree;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches are made white.

Now the **vine** and the **fig tree** to these people
were a picture of peace and prosperity
a picture of **contentment**

I wonder

Where's your **fig tree**?

Where's your **vineyard**?

What's your vision of contentment?

When all is well with the world?

To sit outside on a warm day?

With good friends?

And good food?

Perhaps even to share a glass sweet wine

as Joel describes it

I know that I would enjoy that

– or at least maybe not too sweet

In fact I would regard it as a great blessing to share a beer

or a glass of crisp white wine

with good friends on a sunny day

Picture me sitting in a garden chair

on a hazy afternoon

and my wonderful wife has just brought me a refreshing drink

I close my eyes

I lift the vessel to my lips

then suddenly just as I'm about to take the first sip

that glass is snatched out of my hand!

(probably the sort of thing some scaliwag like Zachary would do)

It would certainly be pretty jarring

I would not be impressed

That's the picture here

and what is Joel now saying?

“Awake”

open your eyes

sober up!

perceive!

come to your senses

he's saying to the people: see where you are

You were going along

You were enjoying life

Your life was filled with many blessings

and all kinds of pleasures

And your mind was taken up with them completely

and in the midst of all this blessing

it is as if you had fallen into a kind of slumber

as if slipping away into dream-like state

and as all this took place

slowly at first

(so slowly you didn't even notice)

you came into great danger

And what **is** that danger?

(verse 6)

For a nation has come up against my land,

powerful and beyond number;

its teeth are lions' teeth,

and it has the fangs of a lioness.

7 It has laid waste my vine
and splintered my fig tree;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches are made white.

Now there's a few strands here

We have picture after picture
what is this all about?

We see here the parallel lines

We have the line that is what is happening
in the physical, material world

But at the same time

we have the line that is the spiritual reality
where the people are at in their lives
and where they are with the Lord

So let's look at this:

in verse 6 an army has come
a ferocious beast

with razor-sharp teeth
and fangs like swords

of course, it's a picture of the locust swarm
as they strip the land of its harvest

that's the world the people are living in

but what about the spiritual reality?

if you look at the language Joel is using here

(and you can pick it up if look at different Bible translations)

this is not just any army
this is a pagan and hostile nation
a force that is profane and evil
this is like the Army of Darkness

and then there's the vine in verse 7

again the word for “vine” carries with it a certain connotation
the word is not just talking about a grape plant
he's talking also about the Lord's people
(it's a common picture for God's people Israel
throughout the Old Testament
- a people God planted in order to bear fruit)

these people...

they **loved** the sweet wine
and every other blessing the land had to offer
living their lives in this way they became **complacent**
and failed to guard against against this **spiritual enemy**
which is the temptation to Sin

And then

like a swarm of locusts
that sin took hold in the lives of these people
so that they no longer bore any spiritual fruit
they became distant from God
and their relationship with him...
...it withered away

God says, this army, it has made
my vine

my people

a festering waste - an object of horror!

Let's just take a moment to think about this

How easily we grow complacent

Think about your routines

Your goals

The things that have captured our hearts and minds

In this world there are many blessings

that are offered to us

which are indeed wonder things

but so often they become our focus

we so easily become pre-occupied

seeking ever more **leasure**

or pleasure

or treasure

It is as if, intoxicated, I have fallen into a slumber

my guard slips

the enemy is at the gate

he gains a foothold in my life

How often we fail to be watchful

How easily we leave the door open for sin to enter in

How lightly we regard the danger

Those little habits that we nurture

year after year

a private sin the noone knows

Think about it

the swarm laid waste to the fruit of the harvest

it turned it into festering horror

all that was left was the stinking, festering, rotting husks

if we can see it with God's eyes

that's the devastation that **the swarm**

- your Sin

has done in your life

converting what should rich spiritual growth

into a decaying ruin

- the pain of guilt

and the pain we cause to others

And that is just the start of the damage

this enemy plans to inflict

While I was dozing away, drunk on all the pleasures of this life

an army was closing in on me

Wake up shouts Joel! Sound the alarm!

Pick up your weapons

Man the ramparts

You didn't notice,

but there's an enemy at the gates

you are in the lions mouth

the lion's teeth are closing over you

he will have you!

Do you remember the parable Jesus told of the prodigal son?

He took his inheritance,
rejected his father
and went off
and he squandered it all
on food and drink and merry-making
the son was completely taken up with this way of life
...until the money ran out
that came as nasty surprise
a sudden jolt
he can't go on living in the way that he did
the pleasures of a self-absorbed life
have been taking away

In a way you could say that it was a mercy
because it was this that prompted the son
to wake up and see that he had no choice
but to return home

Where are we in this?

Are you awake to the Lord in your heart?
Or are just drifting away into a stupor?
on the pleasures of life?

Now these next verses are where
Joel really cuts deeps

(look with me – verse 8)

8 Lament (**Wail!**) like a virgin wearing sackcloth
for the bridegroom of her youth.

What a picture!

What a devastating scene!

I keep thinking about that song by Alanis Morissette

do you remember?

“It's like rain on your wedding day”

she sang that it was ironic

(most of the things in that song were
more just mildly vexing)

This is truly tragic

Imagine it

a sweet young girl

and she's found the love of her life

he's wonderful

she adores him

and they're to be married

they have their whole future planned out

and as the big day approaches

the excitement is growing and growing

she's picked out a beautiful white dress

she tries it on

her bridesmaids are all around her

she looks stunning
now it's the day before the wedding
and then she gets a call
there's been an accident
he's in the hospital
she rushes to get to him
it's too late
and now the love of her life
has been snatched away from her
and now what was meant to be a wedding
has become a funeral
now it's not a white dress she's wearing
her face glowing with joy
but a black mourning dress
made of sackcloth
her eyes streaked with tears
that's the picture Joel's painting
- hope and excitement
turned to grief and loss
but what is the picture about?
(verse 8)

8 Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth
for the bridegroom of her youth.

Why?

9 The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off

from the house of the LORD.
The priests mourn,
the ministers of the LORD.

Now you might well be thinking-
what's the big deal?

But of course suddenly the people are facing a famine
and with no food or drink
there is nothing for the sacrificial offering

Now we might thinking – why does that matter?

But the priests knew that it mattered
that's why they're mourning at the end of verse 9

Don't forget that in the Old Testament
the sacrifice was the only way that the people
could be reconciled with God

And so the food has been cut off
and now there's no sacrifice
and therefore there can be no relationship with the Lord

To these Jewish people
God has been cut off from them

People of Israel:
do you remember the days when the Lord...
He was your king
He was your hearts delight
you loved Him

it was you and Him walking along
He was your Father
and **you** were his sons and daughters
but the relationship faded
you drifted away
and now this disaster has occurred
and He is completely lost to you

Can you imagine what that might feel like?

Your Lord and saviour

Jesus Christ

– could he ever vanish or be taken away?

Think about it: what would you feel?

The Lord Jesus – your bridegroom – the lover of your soul

To lose him?

Can you imagine it?

Perhaps, like the people Joel is speaking to

if your relationship with Him has faded

it's worth considering what would it be to lose Him

and if that thought awakens something within you

then that is a sign of His Spirit at work

if you feel that touching your heart

then heed that call

draw back to him

Now of course

Jesus says in John 6 verse 37

“All that the Father gives me will come to me,
and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. “

so be in no doubt that if you rely on Him and love him
then he is both your Lord and saviour

Indeed these events in Joel show so clearly

why we *need* a saviour

because of the famine

the people had absolutely nothing to offer God
which has, in fact, been the case throughout all time

There's nothing God doesn't already have

God doesn't *need* anything

And so each of us comes to him empty handed

We are purely dependant Him

- His mercy, completely undeserved

in sending Jesus to be our sacrifice

and saviour

So Joel has addressed the elders – the old timers

he's addressed the drinkers of wine – the pleasure seekers

So who does he address next?

(verse 11)

11 Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil;
wail, O vinedressers,
for the wheat and the barley,
because the harvest of the field has perished.

So did you see it? who's he addressing this time?

tillers of the soil

vinedressers

Now, who are these people?

well they're farmers

and Joel says to them "Be ashamed"

because the harvest of the field has perished

Now we have to remember that in those days

there were no cushy email jobs in air conditioned offices

the majority of the population were farm laborers

of one sort or another

and indeed, in historical terms

we have a bizarre relationship with

farming

the crops

the land

and our food in general

For us today

we basically never have to worry about

where our next meal is coming from

the harvest is an afterthought

when I can buy basically any fruit or vegetable

that I want 12-months in the a year

But just imagine what it would be like to live in these times

imagine what a great moment of celebration

a good harvest would inspire in you

it would be a joyful time

it would be the high point of the whole year

a moment of feasting and dancing and celebration

So the “who” is the farmers

“be ashamed” – Joel says

why?

“because the harvest of the field has failed”

(verse 12)

12 The vine dries up;

the fig tree languishes.

Pomegranate, palm, and apple,

all the trees of the field are dried up,

and gladness dries up

from the children of man.

So Joel is using a play on words here

because the Hebrew word for “to be dry”

sounds like the word for “to be ashamed” or “confounded”

So do you see the pattern there?

Now the farmers are confounded and in despair

For these people,

The juice of all the fruits are dried up
and with it all gladness has dried up with it

Have you ever experienced a moment in your life like this?

When the all joy just seems to have dried up completely?
perhaps you're in the middle of that moment right now

And just like the farmers how do we feel in these moments?

Do we feel ashamed?

I just want to hide away from anyone knowing

Do we feel Despairing?

Confounded?

Searching for answers?

“Why did this happen?”

“Why me?” we want to ask

Indeed it's a very good question

and depending on who you listen to

you'll get many different answers

Some people will say, when we suffer tragedy

that it's all just part of nature

noone is in control

it is an accident

and it is meaningless

and yet we know when we're in the middle such moments

that there's scarcely anything more
meaningful in the whole world
try telling a grieving that mother
that her grief is meaningless
you can't say it because it isn't true
unless you're going to say that nothing in life has meaning
not even your deepest hopes or joys or loves
and in reality no can truly live by this belief

Other people go the other way and see the world
as battle-ground between forces of good and evil
bad things happen, they say
because it's not always possible for God to prevent them
because there's an enemy who is basically just as strong
and you never quite know who's going to be winning
on one day to the next
it's actually quite easy to fall into that mode of thinking
because if God is in all powerful
and He good?
and He is in control
how can He allow suffering?
perhaps then, He isn't in control

Other people say that the ones who suffer
are the ones who are especially evil
that's what Job's friends said

“It must be your fault somehow”

“God is coming after you for something you did”

and indeed God does punish evil

but also, tragedy strikes all kinds of people

In Luke chapter 13 verse 4, there's been tragic accident

a tower has collapsed killing 18 people

and Jesus says this:

“those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Which is really the point

The Lord **is** good

And He **is** just

And He is fully in control

- even of pain and suffering and evil

You might find that quite tough to hear

but the alternative is to say that God isn't

fully in control

in which case, to whom can I turn?

we are truly lost!

Instead we have to have a **Biiiiiiig view** of God's sovereignty

very often we don't get all the answers

very often we don't know why terrible things occur in our lives

and yet we know that He is king

and He is in control

and He works all things out for his glory
and for good
and so the only place we **can** go
is running into his arms
to fear God and to trust Him
and even in our darkest moments
look for the hand of God at work

So Joel has addressed the elders
he's addressed the drinkers of wine
he's addressed the farmers
and there's one final group he's going to speak to
Who is it?
(verse 13)

13 Put on sackcloth and lament, **O priests;**
wail, **O ministers of the altar.**
Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,
O ministers of my God!
Because grain offering and drink offering
are withheld from the house of your God.

So he's speaking to the priests
Now you might think that the priests
would sit in their ivory tower

and they would be sitting pretty
 high above all this disaster
- that they would float away on a cloud of holiness
 and never have to suffer judgement
 along with the rest of the people
In fact, as Joel says
 they are as much a part of this
 as any other segment of the society
 and in this moment
 there's a job for them to do

God says

 “go in, pass the night in sackcloth”

(verse 14)

14 Consecrate a fast;
 call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
 and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the LORD your God,
 and cry out to the LORD.

Now we don't have any record of what the priests actually did

 But there's good reason to think that this time
 they heeded what Joel was saying

Imagine being one the priests

 and your desperate condition before God
 suddenly becomes so clear to you

- that even food
- that even wearing normal comfortable cloths
is suddenly unthinkable

And, then imagine what it would have been like

calling all the elders

and all the inhabitants of the land

hundreds of thousands of people

from far and wide

gathered around the temple

in better times it would have been like a festival

or a concert in an enormous stadium!

with massive crowds overflowing

into all the areas around the building

but this moment

is not a moment of entertainment or celebration

this is a moment when the hearts

of thousands of people

all move as one

they fast because they know

that their most desperate need

is to humble themselves before God

Can you imagine this?

What would it look like for us to show our sorrow together?

It's tempting to think that our spiritual relationship

is completely individual
It's why it's so important
not to give up meeting together every week
and it's why we shouldn't shy about expressing ourselves
when we worship, or when we pray together
especially when we're suffering

And I wonder if we would ever be moved to fast together
where we put aside some form of pleasure
- be it food or anything else
so that we could instead focus on spiritual things for a time

Janin and I were once in a church
where they called a **media fast** for a week
no TV, no Netflix
no social media
and instead we met together
in small groups in different people's houses
every night after work
we prayed together
we worshipped together
and we read the whole book of Psalms in a week
morning and evening
it was actually amazing
seeing how different my life could be for the week
and then on the final night we broke the fast together
with a movie night with the whole church family together

God has given us to one another
to respond to Him **together**
especially in hard times

So Joel has spoken to the elders
who have never seen anything like this
he's spoken to the pleasure seekers
who are experiencing a rude awakening
he's spoken to the farmers
who are ashamed and confounded - asking why?
and he's spoken to the priests
Lead the people to turn back to God!

And now in these final verses
Joel sums up the whole scene
and there's something more important here than anything else
he says:

(verse 15)

15 Alas for the day!
For the **day of the LORD** is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Do you see what he's saying there?

Seeing the swarm sweeping over the land
It's an unimaginable vision of destruction

like a devouring fire

(he says in verse 19)

and yet it's just a **glimpse**

of a future day yet to come:

The Day of the Lord

Now there's much more about this chapter 2

and maybe we'll look at it one day

But for now, Joel is showing the people

that this generational disaster that they have experienced

is just a preview of what is yet to come

in the Final Judgement

Now I wonder what you think about the idea of a final judgement

Personally, I think it sounds terrifying

But if you look in the book of Revelation

there's a moment in chapter 5

in the prophesy where the angels in heaven

are searching for someone

to open scroll of God's judgement

and John, in his prophesy begins to weep

why?

because noone is found who is worthy
and in that case if there is no judgement
then in the end there is no justice
and evil wins

think of all the wicked things that happen in the world

look around, read the news

look no further than Epstein Island

think of all those children who were abused

will there ever be any justice for them?

there are so many examples like this

justice demands a reckoning for all the wrongdoing

(it's why the demise of Jeffrey Epstein was so unsatisfying)

But in the end, in the prophecy,

someone is found who is worthy to open the scroll

and that is Jesus, the Lamb of God

the perfect one

who has the perfect right to judge

...which is a cause of massive celebration

among the heavenly host

indeed it's easy enough for us to celebrate

the idea judgement

if it only included

the ones we think of
as beyond the pale
murderers, child abusers and so on

- easy enough to celebrate a moment of reckoning for **them**

All the while, we downplay the significance of our own Sin

But remember that famous verse in Psalm 14

the Psalmist says

“They have all turned aside;

(including all of us)

together they have become corrupt;

there is none who does good,

not even one.”

The crisis in Joel

and all catastrophes we see even today

are as nothing

compared to the final justice that God has promised

His judgement is completely righteous

and wholly justified

in this broken world

it is a cause for great celebration

And yet, as sinful people

each of us is in great danger

because a fair judgement must include our sin as well

(have you ever considered this?)

Joel says

(verse 19)

19 To you, O LORD, I call.

(in chapter 2 verse 17)

“Spare your people, O LORD,”

And if we see where we are with God

Then these words are words for us too:

(Have you ever cried out to Him?)

“Lord, I need you”

“Spare me”

“Have mercy on me”

To truly say these words in your heart

in all sincerity

is to begin to turn back to the Lord

...to let Him be your saviour

And how is that possible?

Well, we get a little peek right here in here the book of Joel

Because of course

Joel is a prophet who speaks on God's behalf

and here we have priests

who are there to intercede between God and man

these are a pale reflection

Jesus is the real thing

He's the ultimate prophet and priest and king!

He is like us in every way, and yet never did anything wrong
completely innocent

And yet he take our place

He takes the judgement we deserve

Joel says "To you Lord, I call." "Spare your people"

and in chapter 2, we'll see that that God answers that prayer
he has mercy on the people
and supplies them with all the food they could need

Suffering God's judgement

totally undeserved

Jesus cries out also

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

and yet there is no mercy given to Him

He takes takes the full force of God's wrath
as He hangs on the cross

and He did all that for you and for me

he took our place, so that we can be set free

So for these people in Israel

- they're ready to cry out Him and depend on Him once more

This isn't over

It's not the end

It's just the end of the beginning

And so it is with us when we're ready to call out to God

So maybe today it's the hundredth time

or maybe today is the very first time you've ever done that

But we're going to have a moment of quiet now

I'll lead us together in a prayer

“Lord I need you”

“I'm sorry that I have strayed so far away from you”

“I'm sorry that I have sinned against you in so many ways”

“There's nothing that I can offer to you”

“Through Jesus have mercy on me”