

Lesson 3

Joel 1.1-2.17: The Day of the Lord is at Hand

Introduction

We know nothing of Joel's personal history except that he was the son of Pethuel. In Hebrew his name means "Jehovah is God." Some suggest he was a priest or the son of a priest, but no firm evidence for this assertion exists. No king of Israel or Judah is mentioned in this book, which creates problems if we wish to place a fixed date on this writing. Some scholars date the book prior to 900 B.C., while others have it as late as 350 B.C. Since no king is mentioned, some argue that this gives greater evidence to a later date (after the remnant returns to Jerusalem and finds itself under the rule of foreign powers). While that makes sense, others date the book to the period between 835-817 B.C. which would have been during the minority of King Joash of Judah. Elders seem to be the real leaders in the country during Joel's writing and would have been looked at as the leaders of the nation during the formative years of the king. Because of this and the placement of this book in the Hebrew listing of the books, we will assume that the earlier date is the best date for Joel.

The days of Joash (835-796 B.C.)

During the reign of Jehoshaphat, the kingdoms of Judah and Israel maintained peaceful relations. To solidify this relationship, Ahab gave his daughter, Athaliah, to Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram. After Jehoshaphat's death, Jehoram became king. He killed off all his brothers in order to solidify his power in the kingdom. Jehoram was a wicked king. He ruled eight years in Judah and was struck by God with a awful intestinal disease. After suffering for two years, his bowels came out and he died in great pain, 2 Chronicles 21:18-20. No one mourned his death, and he was not buried in the tombs of the kings.

Ahaziah, Jehoram's youngest son, was put into power at the age of twenty-two. He reigned one year in Jerusalem. His mother, Athaliah, counseled him to do wicked things which ultimately led to his destruction. By her influence, Ahaziah allied himself with Jehoram (Joram) of Israel. This alliance led to trouble as both countries went to war against Aram. Joram was wounded in battle and went to Jezreel to heal. Jehu had been anointed by God to cut off the house of Ahab (2 Chronicles 22:7) and killed Jehoram (Joram). While in Jezreel, Jehu found the princes of Judah, killed them, and pursued Ahaziah who fled to Samaria, only to be turned in to the forces of Jehu. As he escapes Jehu, he is mortally wounded and flees to Megiddo where he died, 2 Kings 9:27-28. Ahaziah was buried in Jerusalem in the royal cemetery.

After Ahaziah's death, there was no one left in his house to retain the power of the kingdom. Athaliah, the queen mother, rose and killed all the royal offspring. Had it not been for the providence of God working through Ahaziah's sister (Jehosheba), her vicious plan might have worked. Jehosheba took one year old Joash and his nurse and hid them from Athaliah for six years. Athaliah was overthrown and Joash became king at age seven, 2 Kings 11:17-21. In the early years of Joash's reign Jehoiada, the priest, played a significant role in influencing the people back to God, 2 Chronicles 23:16-21. With no king

mentioned in Joel some speculate that it is during this time that Joel wrote his prophecy and addressed it to the people. It could be.

As Joash grew up and began to take the reins of the kingdom, he followed the Lord. In fact, he followed the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest. God blessed him and the kingdom of Judah. But after Jehoiada's death, Joash abandoned the house of God and went back to serving Asherim and other idols. In the historical account we read: *so wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their guilt. Yet He sent prophets to them to bring them back to the LORD; though they testified against them, they would not listen,* 2 Chronicles 24:18b-19.

The message of Joel

No matter the date of the writing, the message is timeless and applicable for all generations. There is much we can learn from this collection of writing. The book begins by Joel calling the people to action. An extreme plague of locusts had overtaken the land and their destruction was to be taken as a warning from God. Repentance was a matter of urgency—if they failed to repent the “Day of the Lord” would come upon them. Repentance was something all needed to do—from the top to the bottom of society. This would be the only way to avoid judgment.

This lesson looks at the first thirty-seven verses of the book where Joel speaks. Here he talks of Judah's present circumstances, warns them of impending judgment, and encourages them to return to the Lord before it is too late. They were to return with *fasting, weeping, and mourning*, 2:12. Joel tells the people that God wanted their heart. He always has. We read, *tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the LORD your God. For he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and he relents from sending disaster*, 2:13.

The plague of locusts

All sectors of society are called to take notice and attention at the grievous situation facing Judah. The elders of the communities were the first to be summoned, and they would have been the ones over the people during the minority of King Joash. The old ones were asked to recall if they had ever seen it worse. The obvious answer is that they had not. The events they were facing were so monumental that they would need to pass along news of the devastation to the generations to come. In verse four we are finally told of what the occasion is. A swarm of locusts had enveloped itself all over the nation, wreaking havoc in its way. We are introduced to four stages of development in locusts. Each wave is followed by another one, only increasing the devastation.

- **The gnawing locust.** (Hatchling) This is the earliest part of development for the locust and at this point in its life it consumes the tender ground vegetation. At this point they look like ants.
- **The swarming locust.** (Hopper) The next stage of the development finds the locust maturing to the point where it completes the destruction of all tender vegetation.
- **The creeping locust.** (Winged Hopper) Now the locusts have grown to the point where they attack the branches of trees and plants. Winged hoppers can move around 250 feet per hour and consume everything in their path.

- **The stripping locust.** (Mature Locust) At this point the locusts can strip even the bark off trees. There is little that can stop them as they move across the landscape.

Locusts look like large grasshoppers and mature desert locusts have a four-inch wingspan and bodies around three inches long. James Smith writes that what “typically distinguishes a true locust from a large grasshopper is behavior. When conditions are right, grasshoppers that normally act as solitary individuals begin to swarm. Great clouds of insects will rise during daylight hours in search of moist green vegetation. The sky can be blackened to an altitude of five thousand feet over tens of square miles. A swarm can contain over a billion creatures that all together can weigh more than three million pounds. When a species of grasshoppers exhibits this type of behavior, they are called locusts.”¹ The message of verse four is that the locusts have wrought complete devastation. The leftovers have been consumed after each successive wave of infestation.

Not only were the elders and those who were engaged in community affairs to stand up and take notice to the words of Joel, but even the drunkards needed to wake up to what was going on around them. The locust plague was complete: they had laid the vineyards of Judah useless leaving no grapes to make wine. The locusts had stripped away the bark of the trees—exposing the white inner part of the tree, 1:7. Priests are called upon to weep and wail before God—there is nothing left for them to offer up before the Lord. The locust plague affected all facets of society. Along with the devastation created by the locusts, it appears that a drought might have settled in. The Hebrew word *yabhash* (dry up, wither) is used seven times in Joel 1.

The first thirteen verses leave us with unanswered questions. As Joel describes the devastation in the first part of chapter one, is he describing actual events that had just happened, or is he looking ahead to some future judgment? Should this be taken as a literal army of locusts, or is this language symbolic of invading armies at some point in the future? It is best to let the text speak for itself. The language indicates that an actual horde of locusts had devastated the land in the months/years preceding Joel’s writing. It was something intended as a wake-up call; something used by God to urge His people toward repentance. That these are actual events is seen in reading 1:16-20.

The call to repentance

Beginning in verse fourteen the priests are urged to proclaim a fast, gather the people together, and cry out to God. It is implied that if they will do this, and do it sincerely, God will listen and relent from a future day of punishment and judgment. While things were not good in Judah at the time of Joel’s writing, they could potentially get worse, much worse! The *day of the Lord*, 1:15, would be complete and total devastation would come on those who turned their backs on God. They needed to repent while there was still time. The events surrounding them should have been cause enough for repentance.

At this point Judah was suffering:

- 1:16 – food had been cut off.
- 1:17 – seeds could not grow because of lack of water.
- 1:17 – desolate storehouses and dried up grain.

- 1:18 – livestock suffered because of lack of pasture and moisture.
- 1:19-20 – fire destroyed grazing land and pastures in the wilderness.

It is in cases such as this that man has only one place to turn: God. It is in natural disasters that we often realize how small we are and our great dependence on God for the necessities of life. Our sterilized life here in America may shroud this reality, but there are events in life that come along to shock us back to reality—everything we have is from and because of God. We need draw near to Him with reverence and humility.

A day of destruction is coming

The first verses of chapter two introduce us to a very urgent warning. The blowing of a trumpet was a sound of warning or alarm. The Day of the Lord was near. The people needed to return to God for protection and deliverance from the enemy.

As we go throughout verses two through eleven, a future day of gloom and punishment is described. The locust plague should have gotten their attention. Just as the locust plague had been unusual in its severity and destruction, so would the Day of the Lord.

There has never been anything like it, Nor will there be again after it. . . , 2:2.

On the Day of the Lord, the people are powerless to stop the enemy from overtaking them. All they can do is hide and watch the land being destroyed in front of their eyes:

The land is like the garden of Eden before them But a desolate wilderness behind them..., 2:3.

Not only is the army unstoppable, but Joel also describes the individual strength of the warriors. They can run, climb, march straight toward their target, enter windows like thieves, and fulfill their mission of destruction and death. Nothing can stop them.

The figurative words in verse ten are used to describe the complete and destruction that would take place. In fact, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and even Jesus used this type of language to describe the destruction that took place on *the Day of the Lord*. (Keep in mind that there are several Days of the Lord in Scripture—they do not all refer to the end of time. This is a day that is used to describe days when God would pour out His vengeance on those who rebel against Him.) *...The day of the Lord is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it? (2:11)*

The people needed to repent in order to stave off disaster. Not only did the people need to realize their great dependence upon God, but they also needed to sincerely change their ways. Complete, radical change was necessary in order to avert the terrible consequences to come. *Who knows whether He will not turn and relent And leave a blessing behind Him. . . , 2:14*. The priests are encouraged to blow a trumpet again. This time, not for a warning, but it was to be blown for a gathering of the people to cry out to God for deliverance. If they would turn their hearts to God, it is implied that He would hear their prayers and relent from the impending doom.

Lessons for Today

God can use natural events to motivate mankind to repentance.

There can be little doubt that God brought about the locust plague as a warning to His people. They needed to look at the events from a spiritual perspective. Mankind is not as big and powerful as he may think, and it is often events from nature that vividly remind us of this fact. While God may not use every natural calamity to cause mankind to be more alert about His presence, we must not deny God the possibility of using such events to stir mankind to a greater awareness of Him. When these things happen, we become acutely aware of the fragileness of life and the finality of death. Let us use these times as motivation to draw near to God, realize our dependence upon Him, and repent of sin.

There is great power in fasting and corporate prayer during a time of crisis.

In Joel 1:14 the priests are urged to consecrate a fast and proclaim a solemn gathering of God's people. They were to cry out to God for deliverance. During biblical times fasting was evidence of grief and anguish. It was done in a way to "pacify" the anger of God in hopes that He would relent from punishment. Their prayer and fasting were to come from the heart—realizing their total dependence upon God. It is in these times that God listens. He wants us to reach out to Him in total trust and confidence. Do we realize the power in fasting and corporate prayer that is available to us today? James writes,

Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect, James 5:13-16.

The power of both individual and corporate prayer is seen in these verses. Let us turn to God when times of calamity befall us. He will be there for us. There is great power in prayer!

God expects true repentance...not lip service.

Even now— this is the Lord's declaration— turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the Lord your God, ... 2:12-13a. See here how it is God who is calling them to repent. Does this not teach us something special about the God we serve? What a great and awesome God He is in that He is always holding out, hoping, asking us to move toward Him.

In this is a great lesson on repentance. It involves sweeping change—not just the making of empty promises or vain words uttered up in hopes that He will relent. True repentance involves a complete and total surrender to God. What does 2:12 teach us about true repentance?

True repentance involves a sense of urgency to act.

This is indicated by the usage of the word "now" in the text. When one realizes the reality of punishment to come and the possibility that it could come at any time, there will be little delay in getting matters in the open before God. A person who moves in genuine repentance understands that time is precious and one moment spent outside of a relationship with God is one moment too long.

True repentance involves a desire to return to God.

In the case of Joel's day God's people had entered a covenant relationship with God. Through the worship of idols, trust in human alliances, and turning their back on God, they had not lived up to their side of the covenant. God is calling them to do what is necessary to return. We are the ones who destroy the connection with God through our sinful behavior, yet God always calls us back so that the relationship can be restored to its former quality.

True repentance comes from the heart.

Tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the Lord your God, 2:13. Repentance must go further than fear of punishment and/or confession of sin. It is a complete and total change. It is an inward change of the soul, and while it begins in the mind, it reveals itself outwardly.

True repentance will be seen in our actions.

Fasting, weeping, and mourning are all evidence of true, genuine repentance. However, these things do not profit the person who has not changed his will. Israel was called upon to change their will and demonstrate it in a national assembly. They needed to show God they were sorrowful for their own sin, demonstrate their submission to Him, and earnestly plead for God to turn back from his impending destruction. Fruits of repentance will be seen when it is genuine and true. See Matthew 3:8.

How great and awesome is the God we serve! Verse thirteen tells us some incredible things about the God we serve and reasons why we should move to Him in repentance. If the people would follow through, God would relent from the terrible Day of the Lord Joel warned about in chapter two.

For discussion

1. In Hebrew what does Joel mean?
2. This book best fits in what time?
3. Describe the turmoil in Judah's royal family in the years before Joash became an adult.
4. The four stages of locust development are described in 1:4. What are they and describe the potential for destruction at each stage.

a)

b)

c)

d)

5. In Chapter 1 do you believe Joel is describing an actual locust infestation or some future judgment? Why?

6. Describe the conditions found in Judah at the time of Joel's writing.

7. What can a time of crisis and devastation teach us?

8. What would happen on the Day of the Lord?

9. How can natural calamity motivate mankind to repentance?

10. What was the purpose of fasting during biblical times?

11. Why is repentance often difficult?

12. What four things are involved in true repentance?

a)

b)

c)

d)

13. What are five ways God is described in 2:13? What do each one of these mean to you?

14. How can this lesson motivate me to improve my spiritual life and strengthen my spiritual service?

(Endnotes) Smith, James E., The Minor Prophets, p. 67.