

Joel 2.18-3.21: The Need for True Repentance

Introduction

The first half of Joel speaks of a locust plague that had devastated Judah. The people are urged to repent and turn to God before the coming of the great Day of the Lord. Because of the destructive power of the locust plague, every facet of society had been affected. The people were urged to turn to God, seek His deliverance, and repent from the heart.

2.18-27: The blessings of repentance

Beginning in verse eighteen and continuing through verse twenty we can imply that the people repented. Sometimes it takes people reaching the lowest depths to be shaken to the point of repentance. Could that have been what happened here? In these verses God promises to restore grain, wine and oil to the point that they would be satisfied in full, 2:19. God promises that His people will never be a reproach among the nations again. According to some commentators, the *northerner* mentioned in 2:20 is the locust plague. God would drive the plague into desert areas, toward the eastern (Dead) sea, and the western (Mediterranean) sea. The death of so many locusts at the same time would cause a terrible stench. Just as God brought about the locust plague to stimulate the people to repentance, when they followed through, He removed the plague to give His people relief.

Verses twenty-one through twenty-seven describe in detail the complete restoration of the people's material blessings. God promised to make up for the years that the locusts had destroyed their crops so that the people would praise the name of God. The contrast between 1:14-20 with 2:21-27 could not be greater. Weeping, mourning, and lamenting over sin are given over to rejoicing, relief, and restoration.

2.28-32: The outpouring of the Spirit

This is a good time to review the near view / far view section in the first lesson that discusses the way the prophets looked forward to future events. In this part of Joel, the prophet is looking out into the distance to the establishment of the church of Jesus Christ. After the restoration of physical blessings, Joel speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit in verse twenty-eight. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter points to this passage, outlining its fulfillment by the gift of the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:17-21.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the Spirit Himself, who in our baptism, takes up residence in our heart bringing spiritual life and eternal salvation, Titus 3.4-6. The gift is available to all: men, women, old, young, rich, poor, slave, free, etc., see Acts 2.38, 5.32; Joel 2.32a. This is the main emphasis of the Acts 2 passage.

To prove the validity of the salvation message, on Pentecost, Peter and the eleven other apostles received the ability to work miraculous signs and wonders. Later, to prove salvation was for the Gentiles,

Cornelius and his family received miraculous gifts of the Spirit in Acts 10. Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied through the Spirit, Acts 21:9. This is in great contrast to the Old Testament times where only certain ones received miraculous gifts of the Spirit to lead God's people, etc. Supernatural spiritual gifts were a first century phenomenon. In 1 Corinthians 13:8, Paul tells us that these would pass away.

2.30-32: A Time of Judgment

Verses thirty through thirty-two speak of a coming judgment by God. The coming age of the church would also include a time of judgment. Most Jews rejected Jesus Christ and His message. These would be left to experience the great Day of the Lord. *Wonders in the sky* is like the language Jesus used in Matthew 24 in describing events just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Matthew 24:29. *Blood, fire, and smoke* are all representative of the destruction the Jews suffered and indicate the tremendous price they paid for rejecting God. This type of language is quite common among the prophets as they look for vivid ways to describe the power and effects of the judgment. One can find similar language speaking of the Day of the Lord in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos. We also see it used in Revelation speaking of the destruction of those who oppressed and killed the early Christians.

There can be little doubt that the Day of the Lord mentioned in Joel 2 references the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Most Jews living in this time could not imagine any other way than for God to operate through the physical nation of the Jews. Not only were they not open to conforming to God's new way, but they also actively sought the destruction of those in the church who clearly taught that the law had been fulfilled through Jesus Christ. The destruction of Jerusalem was complete and total. Some have suggested that the destruction of Jerusalem is only a forerunner of the final judgment when God will judge all those who reject Jesus Christ and His way.

Verse thirty-two speaks of hope of deliverance from this Day of Judgment. *Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered....* This has a dual meaning. Spiritually, the call of salvation was available to everyone. Calling on the name of the Lord involves faith, repentance, and baptism. This is the only way to avoid the great Day of the Lord at the end of time. We must prepare for that event now.

Physically, those living in and around Jerusalem were warned to flee Jerusalem when they saw various signs coming to pass as outlined by Jesus in Matthew 24:15-21. Many Christians followed through and escaped to the east to Pella during Jerusalem's overthrow by the Romans. The Mount Zion and Jerusalem in verse thirty-two are best understood in a spiritual context. They are used to describe the spiritual dwelling place of God and His people. See also Hebrews 12:22-23. Obadiah also mentioned about those who had escaped the judgment of God as dwelling on Mount Zion. Obadiah 17 says, *But on Mount Zion there will be those who escape, And it will be holy....*

3.1-16a: The enemies of God will be destroyed

Chapter three opens with the statement, *For behold, in those days and at that time....* This connects the chapter with the events of the last part of chapter two. A period of time is under consideration here, not a specific point in history which makes it impossible to tie in the prophecy with specific events. It is

important to read chapter three with a spiritual view in application. Tying in physical events and fulfillments will cause one to lose the point: God's people (spiritual Israel) would experience great and wonderful blessings while the enemies of God would suffer the consequences of their evil rebellion. For example, verse two mentions how God will bring all the nations to the valley of Jehoshaphat and judge them there. How is a physical application possible? How could all nations be literally gathered in one valley? Is there room for such? Obviously, the best explanation is something symbolic. 2 Chronicles 20:1-30 speaks of a battle where enemy forces were destroyed by God. This valley of Jehoshaphat represents the ultimate defeat of God's enemies and the deliverance of His chosen ones. An interesting twist on this is that in Hebrew, Jehoshaphat literally means "Jehovah judges." Understanding this "valley" in verse two may help us better understand the "valley of decision" mentioned in verse fourteen. The "valley" is symbolic in describing a time of God's judgment against His enemies. Their misdeeds will not go unpunished. There seems to be an overlying principle here and throughout God's word: God will be there for His people, and He will deal out vengeance on those who seek harm on them. See Psalm 94:1-4; Nahum 1:2-3; and Romans 12:18-19.

3.3-8 – Judgment on Israel's Oppressors

In verses three through eight God is listing out His judgment on all those who persecuted God's people and sold them into slavery. The judgment will be swift and certain. It is extremely difficult to place a physical date of fulfillment on these verses. One reason is because of what we read in verse one that ties the contents of this chapter to the time of the outpouring of the Spirit. We have no historical account of these events taking place after the first century. We do know that in the period after Joel that Uzziah and Hezekiah fought against the Philistines. Secular history also points to a war between the Maccabees and Philistines in the centuries just before Jesus. During this time, Phoenicia was totally dominated by Judea and the Phoenicians were subdued by Alexander in 332 B.C. The best interpretation seems to be that God will render judgment on those who oppress and despise His people. This is certain. Verse eight concludes with the statement, *for the Lord has spoken.*

In verses nine and ten the focus shifts back to a universal judgment on all the nations as outlined in verse two. The enemies of God are told to prepare themselves for war. They are going to war with the forces of God in the valley where God judges. In essence God is calling them to their doom. Smith notes several different pictures of God's judgment as seen in verses twelve through fifteen.

3.12: The courtroom of God's judgment

The location of this courtroom is the "Valley of Jehoshaphat." From there God will sit to *judge All the surrounding nations.* The Hebrew word that is translated "to judge" means to pronounce a sentence and execute judgment. Those who warred against God and His ways would suffer the consequences of total annihilation from the forces of God.

3.13: A great harvest

Joel points to a ripe harvest and a full wine press. The nations were ripe for judgment and had been gathered for God to execute justice. Just as grain would be threshed and grapes smashed so would be the

punishment exacted by God. This punishment would be just because *the vats overflow, for their wickedness is great*, 3:13.

3.14: Multitudes of people would be at this great judgment

Many people would be gathered, and the size of the number would be great as the word “multitudes” is repeated in this passage. This represents the largest possible gathering of people. The Hebrew wording points to a noisy, tumultuous crowd that is agitated and anxious. They are here to experience the Day of the Lord.

3.15: The heavens give no light

The sun, moon, and stars grow dark. This terminology always accompanies the great judgment of God. All of creation seems to tremble at the coming judgment and vengeance of God. If the powerful forces of nature pause in recognition of the power of God, who is man to think that he can have success against the righteous retribution of God?

The pending judgment of God and the execution of the sentence is a terrifying thing. So terrifying, in fact, that *The Lord will roar from Zion and make his voice heard from Jerusalem; heaven and earth will shake, ..., 3:16*. This reminds us of the words of the Hebrew writer who speaks *a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries. For we know the one who has said, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, and again, The Lord will judge his people. It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God*, Hebrews 10:27, 30-31.

3.16b-21: The blessings of being in Mount Zion

While this judgment is going on, God’s people will find refuge. *But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the Israelites*, 3:16b. He sustains His people through His grace, mercy, and love. Because of God’s judgment and safety for His people, all will know that Jehovah is God. Note how in 3:17 God says, *I am the LORD your* (emphasis added) *God*. See the special relationship God has with His people. Again, it is important to view Jerusalem and Zion in a spiritual sense here. It is a mighty city where no stranger will pass through it. It is a special place reserved only for the redeemed.

At the beginning of verse eighteen we find the phrase *in that day*. The context suggests that day is during the time after the church has been established. Joel is communicating these things in what we might call “Old Testament Language.” He is speaking in terms that the people of His day would readily understand. It is important to view these verses with this in mind. During Joel’s time, God’s people lived in an agrarian society, so he speaks of the bounty of the times to come in terms they would readily understand:

- Freshly pressed grape juice in abundance.
- No scarcity of milk.
- Streams flowing with fresh, abundant water.

During Old Testament times, physical images were often used to portray spiritual blessings in the age to come. Smith writes, “Old Testament prophecy symbolized the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant age.”

The people of Joel’s day would have associated Edom and Egypt with the great enemies of God and His people. While the people of God will be blessed immensely, enjoying peace and security, those who stand against God will become a waste and a desolate wilderness. This would happen because of their violence against God’s people. God says that Judah would be inhabited forever for all generations. The people of Joel’s day would have interpreted this as a great contrast between eternal life and death. These verses speak of the day when God would establish a spiritual nation (the church) and dwell among them. The ungodly would be judged and destroyed for their wickedness.

Lessons for Today

God wants a relationship with His people.

Joel 2:26-27 speaks of God’s great desire to have a relationship with His creation: mankind. God wants to bless His people bountifully and has through Jesus Christ, Ephesians 1:3-4. Indeed, God has dealt wondrously with us, 2:26. In verse twenty-seven God identifies His desire to be in a personal relationship with us, *I am the Lord, your God*. It is as if God always has His hand reaching out to us, earnestly desiring us to draw near to Him. He holds out for our repentance and cannot wait to dispense His lovingkindness and mercy upon us. How thankful are we that we serve a God who is willing to take a personal interest in every person living on the face of the earth? See Romans 5:8-10; Psalm 103:1-13; and John 3:16. The blessings that God bestows on us, especially the spiritual, are dependent on our repentance and obedience to His expectations.

God shows His mercy and grace by offering mankind an escape from the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

Joel 2:32 speaks of those who are delivered from destruction. Just as God promised deliverance from those who would have to experience the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, so He promises deliverance from the great Day of the Lord at the end of time. This deliverance comes through Jesus Christ and the salvation found through Him. The final judgment will come, Hebrews 9:27; 2 Corinthians 5:9-10. Deliverance from this great day will only be possible during a person’s physical life. There will be no escape after death or when the Lord returns to execute judgment.

God will always protect His people, 3:16.

This is an underlying theme in the second half of this book. Even if God’s people find themselves subjected to suffering and persecution during this life, they can rest assured that God will not leave the wicked unpunished. This is also one of the principal messages of Revelation. God and His people will be victorious. There are many passages that speak of God as our Rock of refuge. See Psalm 61:1-8 and 62:1-9. Those who trust in Him will be delivered, and even if they lose their physical life, eternal life will be theirs.

For discussion

1. To what extent did God promise to restore the physical needs of the people (2:19)?
2. Describe the contrast between 1:14-20 and 2:21-27.
3. How does the near view / far view understanding of how the prophets looked to future events help you to better understand 2:28-3:17?
4. When was 2:28-29 fulfilled? Cite scripture for your answer.
5. The Day of the Lord in 2:30-32 refers to what event?
6. What is involved in calling on the name of the Lord?
7. How are Mount Zion and Jerusalem used in the context of Joel?
8. What is the Valley of Jehoshaphat in 3:2?
9. What does Jehoshaphat mean in Hebrew?

10. Why is it so difficult to link 3:3-8 with specific events in history?

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12. Describe the judgment in 3:12-16a.

13. Why is it important to view 3:17-21 in the context of how the people of Joel's day would understand it?

14. What are some additional lessons you can learn from this lesson on Joel?