

Written for Our Admonition: A Survey of the Old Testament

Lesson 16

Joel

OUTLINE:

- I. Background
- II. Structure
 - A. A recent locust plague as a harbinger of the Day of the Lord (1:1-20)
 - B. The impending Day of the Lord reversed (2:1-17)
 - C. The distant Day of the Lord (2:18–3:21)

I. Background

It is difficult to assign a definitive date for Joel. That his book is addressed to “elders” (1:2) seems to indicate that Joel preached during a period when there was no king on the throne of Judah. In keeping with the book’s location in the canon, the traditional conservative position is that Joel ministered during the childhood of Joash, while he was under the tutelage of Jehoiada (1 Kings 11). The date would be around 835 B.C., making Joel one of the earliest prophetic books. This position is based on several arguments from silence, especially the fact that the book mentions various enemies of Judah but not the Assyrians and Babylonians (Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 339-41). However, 3:2-3 may well be referring to the Babylonian captivity as a past event—in which case Joel could be one of the last of the prophets, ministering after the construction of the post-exilic Temple (Robert Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets*, 51-54). Thankfully, the book’s date does not have a significant impact on its theme. The key

background point is that Joel's message was precipitated by an invasion of locusts that devastated Judah—an event with ancient associations of judgment (Deuteronomy 28:38, 42).

II. Structure

Joel divides into three primary movements.

A. A recent locust plague as a harbinger of the Day of the Lord (1:1-20)

The prophet laments an unprecedented invasion of locusts that has devoured the land's vegetation in waves (vv. 1-13). He calls on everyone to weep with him—whether drunkards (v. 5), farmers (v. 11), or priests with nothing left to offer as sacrifice (vv. 9, 13). The second part of the chapter (vv. 14-20) calls the people to fast and cry out to God, providing more details of the locust invasion and an accompanying drought. Joel is terrified by the locust plague because he sees it as an foreshadowing of a much greater Day of the Lord on the horizon (15).

Note: The phrase “the Day of the Lord” is a common prophetic expression used for various periods of direct divine intervention in human history, whether for judgment of the wicked or blessing of the righteous. The culmination of the concept comes with the cataclysmic events of the Tribulation and the Second Coming of the Messiah. But throughout history and prophecy there is a series of Days of the Lord leading up to these final events.

B. The impending Day of the Lord reversed (2:1-17)

Joel describes the coming Day of the Lord as a dark and fearful time that would bring total destruction (vv. 1-11). He continues using locust imagery, but this seems to be representative of an actual army invading Judah from the north (vv. 2, 11, cf. v. 20). In spite of the severe warnings, however, verses 12-17 hold out the possibility of averting the judgment. Here Joel urgently pleads for corporate, heartfelt, God-centered repentance in hopes that Yahweh would relent and send blessing instead of calamity.

C. The distant Day of the Lord (2:18–3:21)

The opening section here (2:18-27) describes the resolution to Joel's warnings. It is preferable to translate the first four verbs in verses 18-19 in the past tense, indicating that the original audience responded with repentance to the prophet's appeals and the Lord reversed the judgment. He promised not only to send away the invading army, but also to send rain and restore all that the locusts had destroyed and deliver His people from shame. The Judeans are commanded to rejoice and praise God for His mighty acts. His deliverance would produce a deeper knowledge of Him.

This reversal of the Day of the Lord leads to a heightened development of the concept in 2:28–3:21. Joel anticipates a future Day that brings climactic blessing to the Judeans and judgment on their enemies. In terms of blessing, this Day will bring (1) a widespread outpouring of God's Spirit that will enable people of all classes to prophesy (2:28-29); (2) Judah's prosperity and vindication

among the nations (3:1-2, 16, 18-21); and (3) the deliverance of those who call on name of the Lord (2:32) and the eventual restoration of God's people to holiness and a knowledge of Him (3:17). In terms of judgment, the Day will bring (1) cataclysmic displays in the heavenly bodies (2:30-32); and (2) the utter destruction of Judah's enemies in a dramatic military conflict (3:1-16, 20-21) held at an unidentifiable place called "the valley of Jehoshaphat" (= the valley of "Yahweh judges," 3:2, 12) and "the valley of decision" (= the valley of what has been decided by God, 3:14).

Note: The predictions in 2:28–3:21 are an example of "prophetic telescoping." Joel strings together a series of interrelated future events that are separated by great gaps of time. This has often been compared to a man standing on a mountain and describing the mountain peaks in front of him but not mentioning the valleys in between. In Acts 2:17ff Peter indicates that the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost began the fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29. He mentions the signs in the sky so that he can get to the application in verse 32 ("whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered," cited in Acts 2:21) and urge the people to repent and accept Jesus as the Messiah. However, those cataclysmic signs and the destruction of God's enemies will not occur until the Tribulation period and the Battle of Armageddon, as detailed in the Book of Revelation. In other words, Joel's prophecy is fulfilled in several stages.

III. Theme & Application

The theme of Joel can be summarized in these terms:
The Day of the Lord demands repentance. It is easy for believers to miss this practical emphasis in our

fascination with the pneumatological and eschatological implications of Joel. We might become frustrated at Joel's silence regarding the timeframe of the book and even the specific sins that the Judeans were committing. But these omissions only add to the timelessness of the book's message—the teaching on the nature and possibilities of repentance apply to any time and situation (Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 368). Joel's key passage, 2:12-14, summarizes in the following points the book's theology of repentance.

1. Repentance is especially motivated by divine judgment.
2. Repentance is a turning from sin to God.
3. Repentance includes sorrow for sin.
4. Repentance must be internal.
5. Repentance can bring restoration because of God's character—His grace, compassion, exceeding patience, covenant loyalty, and willingness to relent from sending calamity (the actual meaning of the KJV's "repenteth him of the evil").

These ideas hold true for the repentance that both the lost and the saved must exercise in order to be forgiven. Much like Joel, Peter urges believers to holiness in response to God's ultimate destruction of this sinful world (2 Peter 2:11-12). But it is not only these apocalyptic events that should move us to repentance. We should follow the pattern Joel set in reflecting on the locust plague in his own day. Any type of disaster in our personal or corporate lives should move us to self-evaluation.

