

# Joel

M. W. Bassford, 6-20-10

There's an old saying that goes, "There are no atheists in foxholes." I've never so much as set foot in a foxhole, but I'd imagine there's a lot of truth to that. Most people, most of the time, are pretty confident in their own abilities. They think that they can manage just fine on their own and they don't need God. However, once those same people get in a situation they don't think they can handle, the change that comes over their personalities is amazing. We hear a lot less about how they can do it all, and a lot more humility, prayer, and giving God the glory.

Now, that's all well and good. The problem is that most of those converts to foxhole religion don't stay with their new-found zeal. Instead, just as soon as the immediate crisis is over, they go back to their old arrogant ways. This is something that can be a problem for Christians just as much as anybody else. Very often, when God allows us to go through hard times in our lives, it's because He wants us to learn to rely on Him and His power instead of on our own strength and wisdom. If we learn that when we're suffering but return to the status quo afterward, the lesson is wasted.

In a nutshell, this is the problem that the book of Joel is written to address. We don't know exactly when the book was written, although it was obviously written to the nation of Judah because of its emphasis on temple worship. However, that doesn't really matter, because the people of Joel's day had the same spiritual blind spot we struggle with.

Just like we do, they needed to learn to see God's hand in the events of their lives, and repent so that they could endure the tribulations of the repeated days of the Lord. However, if they were willing to do that, God was willing to forgive them, and even speak of a distant time when His salvation would be freely available to all who sought it. We need to understand these things, so let's spend some time this evening delving into the book of Joel.

## The Judgments of the Lord

The book begins with a frightening description of a plague of **LOCUSTS**. As an example of the description in this section, we need go no further than Joel 1:2-4. This is an image that we have some trouble understanding. Today, if the grasshoppers in a farmer's field get too bad, the farmer just sprays the field and eradicates the grasshoppers. Back then, of course, that wasn't an option, and once a locust plague got going, it really got going. A locust female can lay a hundred eggs at once, so if the food supply is rich enough, the numbers of the locusts can take off exponentially in a very short time. Nor were their depredations limited to wheat and other annual crops. Joel continues to speak of grapevines destroyed and fig trees splintered. The locusts would eat everything that grew, sometimes for an area of hundreds of square miles. When that happened, unless the Israelites could buy grain or leave, they starved.

Today, thankfully, we've risen above subsistence-level farming. If a plague of locusts showed up in the Joliet area, we'd probably be mostly upset about what they were doing to our lawns. However, passages like this should still remind us of the fragility of our existence. We may have outgrown some natural disasters, but our own foolishness is often every bit as destructive. I would imagine that the people who live on the Gulf Coast would happily accept a horde of locusts in exchange for getting rid of BP. On a personal level, neither we nor our families have any guarantees of security. We may think we've got it all figured out, but our continued prosperity is the result of many factors beyond our control.

With this in mind, Joel prescribes what the people should do in **FACING THE LOCUSTS**. Part of this advice appears in Joel 1:13-15. First of all, notice that the text makes clear that the locusts aren't some random natural disaster. Instead, Joel describes their coming as the day of the Lord. This doesn't mean that Jesus appeared in the skies along with the locusts. Biblically speaking, in fact, there are a number of days of the Lord, not just one. It is Scripturally correct to speak of any time God judges and punishes the nations as a day of the Lord. Thus we can rightly describe this locust plague, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the return of Jesus at the end of time as different days of the Lord.

In response to this particular day of the Lord, the Israelites needed to recognize the part their own wickedness played in it and repent. From the priests to the elders of the people, all needed to gather in the temple and mourn before the Lord. Today, of course, we don't have a prophet like Joel to announce which of our problems have been sent against us by God, but it's often not too hard to pick out. Take, for instance, our recent recession. It happened basically because Americans from Wall Street to Main Street got greedy, foolish, and materialistic, and now we're suffering for our evil mindset. It's often the case that when we suffer, we need only look back to see the sin responsible for the suffering.

Joel leads us to focus on this idea and then moves on to another, future event he also calls **THE DAY OF THE LORD**. Some of his thoughts on this appear in Joel 2:1-2. Notice that we're no longer talking about locusts. Instead, Joel has switched topics to a future invading army that will come from the north. His description of this army is clothed in apocalyptic language, about supernatural darkness and wonders in the heavens. This doesn't mean, for instance, that Joel expects for the stars to go out. Instead, he wants to emphasize the ominous nature of these invaders. In context, Joel is saying that it's not good enough to repent temporarily because of the locusts. More judgments are on the way.

That's why Joel takes this moment to emphasize the sort of **REPENTANCE** that God wants to see, and what He will do in response to it. We read about this in Joel 2:12-14. First of all, Joel makes clear that God is not going to be happy with some sort of perfunctory acknowledgment of sin. Instead, the people of Israel must return to Him with all their hearts. Likewise, they can't get away with tearing their clothes. They must tear their hearts instead.

This is the same sort of repentance that God expects from us today. When we sin and it gets us in trouble, we can't just be sorry about the trouble and not about the sin. We can't just mouth a prayer for forgiveness without any real intention to change and live more righteously in future. That's not good enough. We have to be grieved by the hurt our sin has caused to others and to God, and we have to be committed to removing that sin from our lives. This doesn't mean, of course, that we will never sin again. It means that in our inmost hearts, we hate the sin and don't want to.

If we repent in this way, we can expect to see the same God that Joel describes. Even though God is just, even though His nature demands that He punish the wicked, that's not what He delights in doing. He doesn't enjoy being steadfast in anger. He would much rather be steadfast in love, and if we come to Him seeking that forgiveness and love, He will be merciful and gracious. No matter what disaster comes, as long as we live, it's never too late to repent.

That's why the advice that Joel has already given about facing the locusts is strikingly similar to his advice about **FACING THE DAY**. He tells the people what to do in Joel 2:15-17. Before, the people were in the midst of the disaster of the locusts, so Joel instructed them to have a solemn assembly at the temple. Now, the trouble hasn't arrived yet, but Joel encourages them to have the same kind of temple assembly anyway. The people didn't repent in time to avoid the locusts, but they still have the opportunity to repent and avoid the disaster of the invading army.

Likewise, friends, we should remember the importance of repentance not just with respect to current calamity, but with respect to future calamities. The recession has been hard on a lot of us. Whatever private trouble we've gotten into because of our sin has been hard on many of us too. However, the pain that we've faced from those judgments is nothing compared to the pain that we will face if we are eternally condemned by God. We should mourn when our sin catches up with us, but far more than that, we should mourn so that it won't catch up with us on the day of judgment. We should learn from the light punishments we endure now so that we will be spared the heavy punishment later.

### **The Mercies of the Lord.**

Joel then proceeds to explain what **GOD'S REACTION** will be to continued, heartfelt repentance on the part of Israel. This appears in Joel 2:18-20. Even though the invading army from the north is so big and so frightening, they aren't a problem too large for God. His power is so great that even while He provides for His people in the aftermath of the locust plague, He can also divert this enemy horde into a barren land where they will pose no threat for His people.

In the same way, when we mourn and repent and return to the Lord, we can expect Him to deal with our enemies. None of us have ever seen the devil or the stain on our souls from our sins. We can't even begin to fight those things. However, the Lord can. Just as was true for the Israelites, He can defeat our spiritual foes while still providing for us physically. No matter what the battle is, we don't have to worry as long as He fights for us.

After this, Joel shifts gears yet again to describe a third series of events, this one revolving around an outpouring of **THE SPIRIT**. We see his presentation of this time in Joel 2:28-32. This, of course, is the most famous quotation in the entire book. Peter quotes it at the very beginning of the first gospel sermon in Acts 2. He and the other apostles have just been blessed with the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues, some of the Jewish bystanders have begun to mock them, claiming that they're drunk, and Peter rebuts the mockers by describing what has happened as a fulfillment of this prophecy from hundreds of years before. It's a sign that now all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

We don't have to wonder, then, what this text is about. It predicts the outpouring of spiritual gifts that would mark the establishment of the church to which we belong today. However, there are still some things worth noting here. First of all, notice that Joel mentions yet another day of the Lord. So far, he's dealt with the current day of the Lord, as shown by the locusts, a near-future day of the Lord, shown by an invading army, and a far-future day of the Lord after the outpouring of the Spirit. This could refer either to the destruction of Jerusalem or to the return of Jesus in the skies.

Second, notice once again the use of apocalyptic language in this passage. Peter really did have the Holy Spirit poured out on him. He really did prophesy. However, there was no eclipse of the sun or moon, and neither Peter nor his audience expected that there would be. The Jews understood that apocalyptic language wasn't to be taken literally, and we need to understand the same thing, particularly in our dealings with heavily apocalyptic books like Revelation.

Finally, Joel reveals that all of these frightening events just pave the way for **GOD'S SALVATION**. Joel 3:16-17 does a good job of epitomizing this final section of the book. As we've seen, God is capable of some amazing and terrifying things. When He roars, the earth shakes. However, His people don't have to be afraid of Him, because the same power that routs all of His enemies is the power that will protect them forever. We can have this same confidence in our Creator today. If we choose to oppose Him, yes, we should be scared to death of Him. However, if we repent and return to Him, we don't need to fear anything in this world or outside of it. He will keep us safe.