

Lessons from a Minor Prophet: Joel

The Impending Day of the Lord

Joel 2:1-17

Rev. Freddy Fritz

July 15, 2018

The Impending Day of the Lord

Scripture

We are currently in a sermon series that I am calling, “Lessons from a Minor Prophet: Joel.”

The Prophet Joel was perhaps the earliest of the Old Testament’s writing prophets. My own view is that Joel wrote his prophecy in the eighth (or perhaps even in the ninth) century BC. The people in Joel’s day had just experienced a massive attack of locusts. This was followed by an extremely severe drought, and possibly even a fire. The resulting devastation crippled the economy and caused incredible pain and suffering, not only for the people of the land but even for the animals.

God led Joel to use the locust plague as the backdrop for his message to the people. In the first chapter of Joel, he urged the people to pay attention to what God was saying to them through their contemporary circumstances. Joel identified the locust plague as the “day of the Lord.” The “day of the Lord” in Scripture was a day of judgment and blessing. It could refer to either a contemporary day, an impending day, or the future, great day of the Lord.

Even though no specific sin was mentioned by Joel in his book, his point was that God was bringing judgment on his people, and that should cause them to repent and return to the Lord their God in total dependence upon him.

In Joel 2:1-17, Joel continued to refer to the locust plague, and urged the people to be aware of the impending day of the Lord.

Let’s read about the impending day of the Lord in Joel 2:1-17:

¹ Blow a trumpet in Zion;
 sound an alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near,
² a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful people;
their like has never been before,
 nor will be again after them
 through the years of all generations.
³ Fire devours before them,
 and behind them a flame burns.
The land is like the garden of Eden before them,
 but behind them a desolate wilderness,
 and nothing escapes them.
⁴ Their appearance is like the appearance of horses,
 and like war horses they run.
⁵ As with the rumbling of chariots,
 they leap on the tops of the mountains,
like the crackling of a flame of fire
 devouring the stubble,
like a powerful army
 drawn up for battle.
⁶ Before them peoples are in anguish;
 all faces grow pale.
⁷ Like warriors they charge;
 like soldiers they scale the wall.
They march each on his way;
 they do not swerve from their paths.
⁸ They do not jostle one another;
 each marches in his path;
they burst through the weapons
 and are not halted.

⁹ They leap upon the city,
they run upon the walls,
they climb up into the houses,
they enter through the windows like a thief.

¹⁰ The earth quakes before them;
the heavens tremble.

The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining.

¹¹ The Lord utters his voice
before his army,
for his camp is exceedingly great;
he who executes his word is powerful.
For the day of the Lord is great and very awesome;
who can endure it?

¹² “Yet even now,” declares the Lord,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ and rend your hearts and not your
garments.”

Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.

¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the Lord your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.

Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,

and the bride her chamber.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep
and say, “Spare your people, O Lord,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’ ” (Joel 2:1-17)

Introduction

In his commentary on Joel, James Montgomery Boice tells about one of the great earthquakes of modern times that struck Lisbon, Portugal on November 1, 1755. The epicenter was located several miles off the Portuguese coast, in the Atlantic, so tremendous tidal waves struck the city and contributed to the damage. The earthquake came at 9:40 a.m. and lasted for six minutes. In those six minutes all public buildings and 12,000 dwellings were demolished. Sixty thousand people died, including those who were killed as a result of the tidal waves and a fire, which raged for six days. Heavy damage occurred in Fez, Morocco, to the south, and in Algiers, 700 miles to the east. On the coast the tidal waves were sixty feet high. At the island of Martinique, 3,740 miles away, which the waves passed ten hours later, the crest was twelve feet above normal.

There had been earthquakes before, of course, and there have been many since—in Europe, the Pacific, San Francisco, Nicaragua. But there were facets to this earthquake that have not been present to the same degree either before or since. For one thing, the first half of the eighteenth century had been a time of relative peace and prosperity in Europe, a condition

particularly welcome following the religious wars of the seventeenth century. Moreover, the era had been marked by a philosophy of optimism associated with the name of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz (1646–1716), who had died less than forty years before. Leibnitz argued that this is “the best of all possible worlds.” He viewed evil as mere imperfection and argued that the best of all worlds proves the existence of a wise and benevolent Creator. His view had been popular among so-called “Christian” thinkers. But suddenly optimism was shaken. How could a good God allow such an evil as the Lisbon earthquake? If God is good, he must have lacked power to prevent it; if he had power, he must not be good.¹

The people in Joel’s day believed that because they were the people of God nothing bad could happen to them. So, the plague of locusts that devastated their land, their economy, and their livelihood was incomprehensible to them. God used Joel to explain the meaning of the locusts to the people, and also to warn them of the impending day of the Lord.

Lesson

The impending day of the Lord in Joel 2:1-17 teaches us that God’s impending judgment may yet be averted by a wholehearted repentance.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Alarm Sounds (2:1)
2. The Army Invades (2:2-11)
3. The Admonition Invites (2:12-17)

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 118–120.

I. The Alarm Sounds (2:1)

First, let's notice that the alarm sounds.

Over the centuries, the people of God believed that they were special and that nothing bad could happen to them. Moreover, nothing bad could ever happen to Jerusalem, which was situated on Zion, God's holy mountain. After all, God's temple was there, and that is where God's presence resided on earth. God, speaking through Joel, said in verse 1, **“Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near.”** God was warning his people that he was threatening judgment against his own city and his own people. **The day of the Lord is coming. Indeed, it is near!**

Commentator O. Palmer Robertson writes, “It is an established principle of God's working in the world that God's judgments begin with his own people, and these judgments are always imminent. No man ever has the right to presume that judgement for him will be delayed beyond the present day. Especially God's own people must realize that judgment begins now with them.”² Robertson gets his “established principle” from 1 Peter 4:17–18, “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’ ”

Do you remember a story that took place about three years ago in Orange County, TX when a man was killed by an

² O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1995), 42–43.

alligator? Apparently, a man named Tommie Woodward, 28, and an unidentified woman were swimming in a bayou at Burkart's Marina. Later, in the middle of the night, despite the printed warning signs that read, "No Swimming Alligators," as well as the pleading of a marina employee that he not go swimming, Woodward took off his shirt, removed his billfold, shouted, "[Blank] the alligators!" and jumped in the water. Almost instantly, Woodward was dragged under the water and killed. His body was found several hours later.³

What caught my attention at the time, and I am sure others as well, was that Woodward completely ignored the written signs as well as the verbal warnings. Indeed, he defiantly jumped in the water, the danger, and to his death.

Joel's alarm here in verse 1 is like the posted and verbal warning signs at Burkart's Marina. Joel wanted the people of God to be aware that **the day of the Lord is coming**. Indeed, **it is near!** And the people better be prepared for the judgment of God that will begin with the people of God.

However, before he tells the people how to respond properly to the day of the Lord, he tells them about the invading army.

II. The Army Invades (2:2-11)

Second, notice that the army invades.

We learn two things about the invading army.

A. *A Description of the Army (2:2-10)*

First, notice a description of the army.

³ See <https://fox6now.com/2015/07/04/man-killed-by-alligator-after-mocking-it-in-texas-bayou/>.

In verses 2-10, Joel gave a description of this invading army. Commentators are divided about whether Joel was describing a future military army (like the Assyrians or Babylonians) or the plague of locusts.

It seems to me that Joel was describing the attack of the locusts in greater detail than in chapter 1. So, for example, in verse 2a Joel wrote, “... **a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!**” And in verse 10b he wrote, “**The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.**” Unlike a human military army, a massive number of locusts can block the sun and cause it to be dark. In fact, you may remember that the plague of locusts in Egypt was described just like that in Exodus 10:15a, “They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened.”

But, more significant than a description of the army is an affirmation of the Lord’s control.

B. An Affirmation of the Lord’s Control (2:11)

And second, notice an affirmation of the Lord’s control.

Robertson writes, “The completeness of the penetration of this enemy into the city of the Lord might give birth to great doubt. How could this city truly be the Lord’s if its defenses can be overwhelmed by an invading army? Joel now makes it explicit that the Lord is by no means separated from these happenings. As a matter of fact, he is in complete control of the events of this day.”⁴ Joel wrote in verse 11, “**The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the Lord is great and very awesome; who can endure**

⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel*, 48.

it?”

Clearly the day of the Lord is under his sovereign control. As Robertson writes, “It is *his* command that stirs *his* army, which then arises out of *his* camp to execute *his* word on *his* day.”⁵

The question is: how should the people of God respond to the impending day of the Lord? That brings us to our next point.

III. The Admonition Invites (2:12-17)

And third, let’s notice that the admonition invites.

This is the goal of Joel’s writing: to call people to repentance. So, in the next few verses Joel described true repentance.

A. *An Analysis of True Repentance (2:12-13a)*

First, let’s look at an analysis of true repentance.

God, speaking through Joel, said in verses 12-13a, “**‘Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’**” First, notice that true repentance is a matter of the **heart**. True repentance always affects the mind, heart, and will. There is a genuine contrition that results in outward actions, which may include **fasting, weeping, and mourning**.

True repentance is not just saying we are repenting; it involves a genuine change of heart. Charles Haddon Spurgeon tells of a woman who went to see her minister, affecting to be a great sinner in whom he should take an interest. He suspected

⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel*, 48.

that her confession was not genuine. So he said to her, “Well, if you are a sinner, of course you have broken God’s laws; let us read the Ten Commandments and see which you have broken.” He began to read, “ ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me.’ Did you ever break that?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she said, “not that I know of.”

“ ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.’ Did you ever break that?”

“Never, sir,” she said.

“Then ‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.’ ” The woman was very particular on that point. She could not think that she had ever offended by taking God’s name in vain.

“ ‘Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.’ ” She never worked on Sunday.

“ ‘Honor thy father and thy mother.’ ” She did that. So it was with the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth commandments. In the end it turned out that what her minister suspected was true. She did not really consider herself to be a sinner, and she was only “repenting” as a pious and praiseworthy thing to do.⁶

B. *The Incentives for True Repentance (2:13b-14)*

Second, notice the incentives for true repentance.

Joel wrote in verse 13b, **“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.”** What a beautiful image of our **gracious and merciful** God!

⁶ Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary*, 132–133.

Too many people have an image of God who is sitting in heaven and just waiting to judge and condemn people to hell. But that is not our God! He constantly gives warnings to his people, and he pleads with them to repent and return to him **for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster!** What a wonderful God!

Now, God's people cannot presume on God's mercy. That is why Joel wrote in verse 14, **“Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?”** One commentator wrote, “Repentance no more controls him [i.e., that Lord] than do the magic incantations of pagan priests.”⁷ And yet, while we may never presume on the Lord's mercy, there is no mercy unless we return to him.

Too many people live their lives and think that when they face God they will then plead for mercy. Friends, by then it will be too late. Now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2)!

C. The Steps to True Repentance (2:15-17)

And third, notice the steps to true repentance.

Here in this portion of Joel's text is the call to the entire assembly of God's people. Seven commands in staccato fashion are given to the people of God in verses 15-16a: (1) **“Blow the trumpet in Zion”**; (2) **“consecrate a fast”**; (3) **“call a solemn assembly”**; (4) **“gather the people”**; (5) **“consecrate the congregation”**; (6) **“assemble the elders”**; and (7) **“gather the children, even nursing infants.”** Interestingly,

⁷ Quoted in O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel*, 53.

none of these commands tells the people to deal with the invading army. Rather, the commands essentially call the people to a religious assembly where they are to cry out to the Lord seeking his forgiveness. And notice that everyone is to attend. Joel wrote in verse 16b: **“Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber.”** Even those who might be expected to enjoy their special night are required to give their hearts in repentance to God.

Finally, Joel wrote about the ministers leading the people in repentance. He wrote in verse 17, **“Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ ’ ’ ”**

James Montgomery Boice writes:

This is the essential meaning of repentance.... Repentance comes from a Latin word (*paeniteo, paenitere*) that refers to a change of mind, a change so basic that the direction of one’s life is altered. In a Sunday school class one day a little boy said that repentance was being sorry for your sins. But a little girl added that it was being sorry enough to quit. She was right. Repentance is essentially an about-face. It is a military command. One commentator writes, “A group of men are facing south and the officer gives the command. There is an immediate pivoting and the group comes to its new position facing north.” He concludes, “You, today, are facing yourself, and your hope and confidence lie in your character and your good works. Behind you is the Lord Jesus Christ, despised and rejected by you. If you hear God’s command to repent—if you are drawn by the sweet wooing of the riches of His grace—there will be an ‘about face’ that will change the direction of

your walk forever. Now you will know values in their true light. You shall put all your hope and confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in him alone.”⁸

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the impending day of the Lord in Joel 2:1-17, let us return to God by a wholehearted repentance.

The message of Joel is a fascinating message. God led Joel to bring his message to the people against the backdrop of the locust invasion. That contemporary day of the Lord was intended to cause the people to examine themselves and to see how they had drifted away from their God. And as they experienced a significant disaster sent by God, he wanted his people to return to him by a wholehearted repentance.

When I was a very new pastor, I served as an Associate Pastor at a church in Beaver Falls, PA. The church had been started by two men who had been saved and deeply impacted by a Billy Graham Crusade in Pittsburgh in 1968. One of the two men, Dr. Bob Brandt, was a retired surgeon by the time we arrived in Beaver Falls, PA. Dr. Brandt was the kind of man that when he spoke, people paid attention to what he said. I will never forget one of the things he said to me. He said, “Freddy, when you go and visit a patient in the hospital, remember that the patient is lying flat on his or her back. And they have nowhere to look but up. Help them to pay attention to what God is saying to them.”

Joel wanted the people of God to pay attention to what God was saying to them through the locust invasion. I want to

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary*, 133–134.

encourage you to pay attention to what God is saying to you through whatever difficulty, trial, or disaster you may be experiencing right now. You may have a medical issue, a relational issue, a financial issue, or any other kind of issue. The message of Joel to the people in his day is the message God to you today, **“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.”** Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
3. www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=FreddyFritz.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org