

Lessons from a Minor Prophet: Joel

The Contemporary Day of the Lord

Joel 1:1-20

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Scripture

Today I am starting a new sermon series that I am calling, “Lessons from a Minor Prophet: Joel.”

The reason I picked Joel is because it is a relatively short book so that we should finish it this summer. I also picked Joel because I believe that we will find the lessons from Joel helpful to us today.

Joel is one of the Minor Prophets. That does not mean he is a “lesser” prophet. It simply means that the twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zephaniah, and Malachi) had relatively shorter books than the four Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah [who also wrote Lamentations], Ezekiel, and Daniel).

Let’s read Joel 1:1-20:

¹The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

**²Hear this, you elders;
give ear, all inhabitants of the land!**

**Has such a thing happened in your days,
or in the days of your fathers?**

**³Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children to another generation.**

**⁴What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.**

**What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.**

- ⁵ Awake, you drunkards, and weep,
and wail, all you drinkers of wine,
because of the sweet wine,
for it is cut off from your mouth.
- ⁶ For a nation has come up against my land,
powerful and beyond number;
its teeth are lions' teeth,
and it has the fangs of a lioness.
- ⁷ It has laid waste my vine
and splintered my fig tree;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches are made white.
- ⁸ Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth
for the bridegroom of her youth.
- ⁹ The grain offering and the drink offering
are cut off
from the house of the Lord.
- The priests mourn,
the ministers of the Lord.
- ¹⁰ The fields are destroyed,
the ground mourns,
because the grain is destroyed,
the wine dries up,
the oil languishes.
- ¹¹ Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil;
wail, O vinedressers,
for the wheat and the barley,
because the harvest of the field has perished.
- ¹² The vine dries up;
the fig tree languishes.
Pomegranate, palm, and apple,
all the trees of the field are dried up,
and gladness dries up
from the children of man.
- ¹³ Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests;
wail, O ministers of the altar.

Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,
O ministers of my God!
Because grain offering and drink offering
are withheld from the house of your God.
¹⁴ Consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the Lord your God,
and cry out to the Lord.
¹⁵ Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty
it comes.
¹⁶ Is not the food cut off
before our eyes,
joy and gladness
from the house of our God?
¹⁷ The seed shrivels under the clods;
the storehouses are desolate;
the granaries are torn down
because the grain has dried up.
¹⁸ How the beasts groan!
The herds of cattle are perplexed
because there is no pasture for them;
even the flocks of sheep suffer.
¹⁹ To you, O Lord, I call.
For fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness,
and flame has burned
all the trees of the field.
²⁰ Even the beasts of the field pant for you
because the water brooks are dried up,
and fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness. (Joel 1:1-20)

Introduction

If you are older than about twenty-five, perhaps the most devastating national event you have experienced is the attack on our nation on September 11, 2001. You probably remember exactly where you were when you heard that the United States was under attack. I was in my study at Oakwood church in State College, PA when I heard the news. I quickly finished a letter that had to go out that day, and then drove half a mile to Walmart to watch on their TV what was going on. I remember with horror watching the towers collapse. Then, we heard that there was a plane in the air over Pennsylvania. I immediately rushed to my son's school to get him out of the building. I still remember trying to ask the lady at the desk for my son, but I was so overcome with emotion that I could not speak properly.

In the days, weeks, months, and even years ahead this country was involved in the aftermath of that devastating attack. The stock market was closed on Wednesday, the day after 9/11. On Thursday, the market fell 684 points, 7.1% decline, setting a record for the biggest loss in exchange history for one trading day. At the close of the week, the Dow Jones was down over 14%. An estimated \$1.4 trillion in value was lost in the first week of trading.¹

If there had been a newspaper in the Prophet Joel's day, the headline might have read, in bold capital print, "LOCUSTS INVADE THE LAND!" Then, in slightly smaller capital print, "NATION FACES SEVERE ECONOMIC CRISIS." And finally, a third heading, still in large print, "No End to Drought in Sight."

¹ See <https://www.investopedia.com/financial-edge/0911/how-september-11-affected-the-u.s.-stock-market.aspx>.

The people in Joel's day had just experienced a devastating attack of locusts. So, God led Joel to use that event for the backdrop of his message to the people.

Lesson

Joel 1:1-20 teaches us to pay attention to what God is saying to us through contemporary circumstances.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Call to the Prophet (1:1)
2. The Call to the Nation (1:2-12)
3. The Call to the Ministers (1:13-18)
4. The Call to Prayer (1:19-20)

I. The Call to the Prophet (1:1)

First, let's look at the call to the prophet.

We read in Joel 1:1, **“The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel.”** There are about twelve men named **Joel** in the Old Testament. We know nothing about our **Joel**, except what we learn about him in his book.

We know: (1) that **Joel** means “Jehovah is God”; (2) that **Joel** was the son of **Pethuel** (about whom we know nothing); (3) that **Joel** was perhaps the earliest of the Old Testament's writing prophets; (4) that **Joel** probably lived in or near Jerusalem; and (5) that **Joel** probably prophesied in Jerusalem.

Scholars differ widely over the date of Joel's prophecy. My own view is that Joel wrote in the eighth century BC. However, most scholars quote John Calvin on this question of the date of Joel's writing. He wrote, “But as there is no certainty, it is better to leave the time in which he taught undecided; and,

as we shall see, this is of no great importance.”²

Perhaps the reason **Joel** did not give us many details about himself was to keep his reader’s attention focused on his message and not on himself. Moreover, Joel also stressed that the word of the Lord “**came**” to him. How did it come to him? We don’t know. Joel did not tell us. Commentator O. Palmer Robertson writes, “No true prophet of the Lord ever created by himself the divine word that he delivered. God’s word always came by the divine initiative. As a consequence, this word must be heard with the same awe demonstrated by Israel as the trembling nation stood at the foot of the shaking, smoking Mt Sinai. Whether this message appeals to us personally or not, it must be accepted as God’s word and not man’s word.”³

II. The Call to the Nation (1:2-12)

Second, let’s examine the call to the nation.

The occasion for Joel’s message was a massive and devastating invasion of locusts. Let’s notice two points.

A. *The Severity of the Devastation (1:2-4)*

First, notice the severity of the devastation.

Joel began by addressing the elders, probably for two reasons. First, they were respected citizens in the land. And second, they had lived a long time and could authenticate what Joel was saying. With their support, he was not just a lone voice crying in the wilderness. They would agree with Joel about the severity of the devastation that had come upon them. They

² John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Galaxie Software, 2002), Ho 14:9.

³ O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1995), 20.

would affirm that the nation faced a catastrophe of monumental proportions, the likes of which had never been seen. Joel said in verses 2-3, **“Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.”**

Then, Joel went on in verse 4 to describe the severity of the devastation, **“What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.”** Scholars are not clear what Joel meant by describing four different kinds of locusts. Some think that it represents the four different stages of locust development. Others think that it represents four different kinds of locusts. The point, however, is clear: there were locusts, locusts, and more locusts!

Commentator James Montgomery Boice writes:

In 1915 a plague of locusts covered Palestine and Syria from the border of Egypt to the Taurus mountains. The first swarms appeared in March. These were adult locusts that came from the northeast and moved toward the southwest in clouds so thick they obscured the sun. The females were about two and one-half to three inches long, and they immediately began to lay eggs by digging holes in the soil about four inches deep and depositing about 100 eggs in each. The eggs were neatly arranged in a cylindrical mass about one inch long and about as thick as a pencil. These holes were everywhere. Witnesses estimated that as many as 65,000–75,000 eggs were concentrated in a single square meter of soil, and patches like this covered the entire land from north to south. Having laid their eggs the locusts flew away.

Within a few weeks the young locusts hatched. These resembled large ants. They had no wings, and within a few days they began moving forward by hopping along the ground like fleas. They would cover four to six hundred feet a day, devouring any vegetation before them. By the end of May they had molted. In this stage they had wings, but they still did not fly. Instead they moved forward by walking, jumping only when they were frightened. They were bright yellow. Finally the locusts molted again, this time becoming the fully developed adults that had invaded the land initially.

According to a description of this plague by John D. Whiting in the December 1915 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, the earlier stages of these insects attacked the vineyards. “Once entering a vineyard the sprawling vines would in the shortest time be nothing but bare bark. When the daintier morsels were gone, the bark was eaten off the young topmost branches, which, after exposure to the sun, were bleached snow-white. Then, seemingly out of malice, they would gnaw off small limbs, perhaps to get at the pith within.” Whiting describes how the locusts of the last stage completed the destruction begun by the earlier forms. They attacked the olive trees, whose tough, bitter leaves had been passed over by the creeping locusts. “They stripped every leaf, berry, and even the tender bark.” They ate away “layer after layer” of the cactus plants, “giving the leaves the effect of having been jack-planed. Even on the scarce and prized palms they had no pity, gnawing off the tenderer ends of the swordlike branches and, diving deep into the heart, they tunneled after the juicy pith.”⁴

This is exactly what had happened in Joel’s day. There was a massive locust invasion of the land. The devastation caused by the locusts was extremely severe. Everything was gone.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 122–123.

B. *The Sorrow of the Devastation (1:5-12)*

And second, notice the sorrow of the devastation.

What is so remarkable about Joel's description of the severity of the devastation caused by the locusts is how he dealt with it. He did not minimize the severity of the devastation. He did not treat the disaster lightly. He understood that something terrible has struck the people of God.

And he wanted the people to understand the full severity of the devastation, and so he called on various groups in the land to mourn with him.

The first group Joel appealed to were *the drunkards*. Joel said in verse 5, **“Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.”** Interestingly, in addition to pointing out the insincerity of some of the worshipers (*cf.* 2:12-13), drunkenness is the only other sin that Joel mentioned in his book. Perhaps drunkenness represented all the careless people in the land whose primary interest was self-indulgence.

The second group Joel appealed to was *the entire nation*. The people were to **“lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.”** Instead of a young bride getting ready for her wedding, her groom has died and so she exchanges the beautiful wedding gown for the course sackcloth of mourning. And the reason is that the locusts have killed everything that will enable the nation to bring their worship offerings to the Lord, as Joel said in verses 9-10, **“The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord.”** And as bad as that was, the priests and ministers of the Lord were affected because they received a portion of each worshiper's offering. So, they were about to starve and go thirsty because there was no offering.

The third group Joel appealed to were *the farmers*. Joel said in verses 11-12, **“Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.”** The gladness and joy that is to characterize God’s people was gone.

Joel called the nation to sorrow and mourn with him over the devastation that had been caused by the locust plague. He wanted people to understand what God was saying to them through that natural disaster.

In our own day, people all over the world experience natural disasters, earthquakes, droughts, famines, floods, health epidemics, and so on. Even for ourselves, we experience personal disasters, the death of loved ones, financial setbacks, relational failures, health breakdowns, accidents, and so on. In all of the issues that come our way, Joel wants us to ask, “What is God saying to us?” Joel wrote his book so that people would know what God was saying through these critical events.

III. The Call to the Ministers (1:13-18)

Third, let’s notice the call to the ministers.

Let’s notice two points.

A. *The Need for Repentance (1:13-14)*

First, notice the need for repentance.

Joel called the ministers to lead in repentance. He said in verse 13a, **“Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,**

O ministers of my God!” And the reason for the need for repentance was not just that there was no food because of the locusts; it was because God’s worship was affected by the disaster, as Joel said in verse 13b, **“Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.”** When God’s judgment falls on God’s people, God’s ministers must take the lead in repenting before the Lord.

At the same time, however, ministers must call the people of God to repent as well. Joel tells the ministers in verse 14 to **“consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”** God’s ministers sometimes call the congregation to pray and to repent of their sins.

So, Joel issued a call to ministers to lead in repentance. However, as the children of God, Christians do not live in terror. A child who has loving parents does not live in terror of them. Even though the child may be disciplined occasionally, the child is secure because she knows that her parents love her deeply. In the same way, when God’s people go through difficulty and disaster, they have hope. “For,” as O. Palmer Robertson says, “God’s call to repentance must mean that he stands willing and ready to receive those who will return to him.”⁵ God delights to receive those who ask his forgiveness.

B. The Need for Prayer (1:15-18)

And second, notice the need for prayer.

Joel now brings us to the theme of his book. He says in verse 15, **“Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near,**

⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel*, 35.

and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.” Joel talks about **“the day of the Lord.”** Robertson says, “The Lord has his own special day, which Scripture calls the ‘Day of the Lord.’ In one sense, every day is the Lord’s. But just as men have birthdays, name days, anniversaries and holidays, so the Lord has his special days of celebration, his holy holidays.”⁶ **The day of the Lord** is a theme repeated throughout the Old Testament. **The day of the Lord** may be defined as “the time of the decisive visitation of Yahweh, when he intervenes to punish the wicked, deliver and exalt the faithful remnant who worship him, and establish his own rule. Both judgment and salvation are especially prominent aspects.”⁷

The people in Joel’s day had just experienced a contemporary **day of the Lord** with the visitation of the locusts. It had devastating effects on the land, the people, and even the animals, as Joel said in verses 16-18, **“Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels under the clods; the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are torn down because the grain has dried up. How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep suffer.”**

However, that contemporary **day of the Lord** was intended to cause the people of God to know that a future **“day of the Lord is near.”** The contemporary **day of the Lord** should cause the people to repent and return to the Lord because a day is coming when it will be too late to repent and return to the Lord.

⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel*, 36.

⁷ Greg A. King, “Day of the Lord,” ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 324.

IV. The Call to Prayer (1:19-20)

Finally, let's look at the call to prayer.

Joel himself led the people in prayer. He was not outside of the Lord's judgment and salvation. He prayed not only for the people but even for the beasts of the field because of the locust infestation. He prayed in verses 19-20, **“To you, O Lord, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field. Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.”**

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the contemporary day of the Lord in Joel 1:1-20, let us return to God in total dependence upon him.

On one occasion Jesus was asked about a human disaster against some Galileans when they were worshiping. Pilate had his soldiers kill the Galilean worshipers and then mingled their blood with their sacrifices. How could God allow such a thing to happen? And how could he let it happen when his people were in the midst of worshiping him?

Again, Jesus was asked about natural disaster when the tower of Siloam fell and killed eighteen innocent bystanders. How could that be? Were these eighteen more sinful than others that they deserved to be struck and killed by a falling tower?

How did Jesus answer? He did not say, “Well, you know, accidents happen. God can't be responsible for everything that goes wrong in the world!” We know that Jesus did not answer

in this way.

Jesus actually said, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2–5).

What is Jesus saying? He is saying that those who object to tragedies like the locust plague or 9/11 or an accident or a cancer diagnosis, etc. do so because they are asking the wrong question. They ask, “Why should disaster fall upon these people? Why should God strike innocent people?” But they should be asking, “Why haven’t these disasters fallen on us? Why haven’t they destroyed us?” You see, our problem is that we so easily forget how sinful we are. As James Montgomery Boice says, “We have forgotten that it generally takes a disaster of unparalleled proportions to wake us from sin’s lethargy.”⁸

Boice goes on to say, “This brings us to the bottom line, which is the point of Joel’s prophecy. Both the delays in God’s judgment (the periods of grace) and the previews of judgment in such catastrophic events as locust plagues and earthquakes are for our good, that we might repent.”⁹

Friends, if you are going through a difficult time, if you are experiencing what you might think is a disaster, see it as God calling you to repent and to return to him in total dependence. Amen.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary*, 126.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary*, 126–127.

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

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