

Lessons from Joel

Key Text: And the LORD shall utter his voice before his army: for his camp is very great: for he is strong that executeth his word: for the day of the LORD is great and very terrible; and who can abide it? (Joel 2:11).

Key Thought: God can use crises to make His people sensitive to both their dependence on Him and their need for spiritual renewal and reformation.

On the massive locust plague and severe drought that were devastating the southern kingdom of Judah, the prophet Joel—a contemporary of Amos and Hosea—sees a sign of a “great and dreadful” day of judgment (Joel 2:31). Confronted with a crisis of such intensity and proportion, he calls all people in Judah to renounce sin and return to God. He describes the locusts as the Lord’s army and sees in their coming God’s punishment upon unfaithful Israel.

Joel prophesies that God’s future judgments will make the locust plague pale by comparison. But that same judgment will bring unparalleled blessings to those who are faithful to the Lord and who obey His teachings; that is, no matter how severe, judgment can lead to salvation and redemption for those whose hearts are open to the leading of the Lord.

A National Disaster

Read Joel 1:1-12. What is happening to the land of Judah?

The prophet, who lived in an agricultural society, calls upon the farmers to be dismayed at the loss of their grain and fruit harvests. The ecological destruction could cripple the nation’s economy for years. In addition to the loss of food, shade, and wood, there is a threat of topsoil erosion. Some fruit trees in Palestine take 20 years to grow before they become productive. In fact, agricultural devastation and deforestation were typical tactics of invading armies seeking to punish those they conquered by making impossible any prospect of a short-term recovery.

Read Deuteronomy 28:38. How does that help us to understand what is happening to Judah?

Joel uses four different terms for the locusts (Joel 1:4) in order to express the intensity and the totality of the plague. The destruction caused by the locusts was made even worse by drought. All of the crops that the farmers had expected have withered, and the farmers despair because they have nothing to eat or sell; they do not even have seed for replanting. A calamity of such proportions was unheard of by their ancestors and was something to tell future generations about. The fact that a similar disaster had never happened before heightens the importance of the situation.

The prophet also announces the destruction of the dietary staples in the land of Israel, such as grapes, grain and oil (Deut. 14:23, 18:4). Wheat and barley are the most important grains in Palestine. Vines and fig trees in the Bible symbolize peaceful living with abundance of God’s blessings in the Promised Land (1 Kings 4:25, Mic. 4:4, Zech. 3:10). The idyllic image of peace and prosperity is to be able to sit under one’s own vine and fig tree. All this now is threatened by divine judgment brought about because of their sins.

Harvest was a time of rejoicing (Ps. 4:7, Isa. 9:3). Although the land in Israel was a gift from the Lord, it still belonged to God. Israel was expected to be a faithful steward of the land. Above all, the people were expected to worship and obey God, because He was the One who had given them the land in the first place.

Blow the Trumpet!

When natural disasters occur, they provoke many questions, such as, "Why did God allow this to happen?" "Why have some people lived, while others have died?" "Is there a lesson here that we could learn?" Joel had no doubt that the locust plague could lead to a deeper insight into God's universal plan. In chapter 1, under divine inspiration, the prophet relates the national crisis to the spiritual situation in the land. The locusts have left nothing that could be offered as sacrifice to the Lord. The grain offering and the drink offering were part of the daily offering in the temple, in accordance with the instructions recorded in Exodus 29:40 and Numbers 28:5-8. The cutting off of the sacrifices was severe, but it should have served as a warning to the people of their grave condition. The loss of opportunity even to offer the sacrifices symbolized the breaking of the covenant between God and Israel. But, unlike many of the other prophets, Joel did not spend much time making an analysis of people's failings. He was interested far more in dwelling on the cure as prescribed by Israel's divine Physician.

Read Joel 1:13-20. What is Joel saying to the people? However unique the circumstances, in what ways is that which is being said here a plea that is commonly seen throughout the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments?

The prophet urges the spiritual leaders to call a nationwide day of prayer and fasting so that the people can search deep within their hearts, renounce their sins, and return to their God. In this way they will come out of the experience with a renewed trust in God's love and justice. In the end, this disaster might lead the believers into a deeper relationship with their Lord.

Throughout the Scripture, God is described as the Lord of nature, the One who created it, sustains it, and also uses it for His divine purposes. In this natural disaster, instead of rending their garments, the prophet Joel says that the people should rend their hearts and make them open to God's grace and compassion.

Disasters may strike us in many forms. When they do, regardless of our understanding of them and their causes, what Bible promises can we cling to for hope and the strength to endure? What promises are especially meaningful to you?

The Gift of God's Spirit

Read Joel 2:28-29 along with Acts 2:1-21. How is Peter interpreting the prophecy of Joel here?

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter announced that the Lord had fulfilled His promise, as given through Joel, regarding the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Accompanying the outpouring of the Spirit, and as a visible sign of God's supernatural intervention in the history of humankind, God will cause extraordinary phenomena to be seen in nature, both on earth and in the sky.

"In immediate connection with the scenes of the great day of God, the Lord by the prophet Joel has promised a special manifestation of His Spirit. Joel 2:28. This prophecy received

a partial fulfillment in the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost; but it will reach its full accomplishment in the manifestation of divine grace which will attend the closing work of the gospel.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. ix.

In the immediate context of Joel, repentance will be followed by a great outpouring of God’s Spirit. This will bring a wonderful renewal. Instead of destruction, God’s gift of blessings will follow. The Lord reassures His people that His creation will be restored and the nation delivered from oppressors.

The Spirit is poured out upon God’s people, just as the anointing oil was poured upon the heads of those who were elected by God for a special ministry. The Spirit is also a gift of power bestowed on the recipients so that they might do a particular work for God (Exod. 31:2-5, Judg. 6:34). Only this time the Spirit’s manifestation assumes wide proportions. At that great point in history, salvation will be available to all who seek God. God’s Spirit will fall on all the faithful—irrespective of age, gender, or social status—in a fulfillment of Moses’ wish that all the Lord’s people become prophets and that the Lord put His Spirit upon them (Num. 11:29).

What are things you can do in your own life that can make you more receptive to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Proclaiming God’s Name

“The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the remnant whom the Lord calls” (Joel 2:31-32).

The darkening of the sun and the changing of the moon to blood should not be understood as natural disasters, but as supernatural signs of the approaching day of the Lord. In Bible times, many pagan nations worshiped heavenly bodies as their gods, something that Moses said the Israelites should never do (Deut. 4:19). In this sense, Joel’s prophecy is predicting that the idols of the nations will begin to fade away when the Lord comes in judgment. Joel 3:15 adds that even the starry host will lose its power and will no longer give its light, because the presence of the Lord’s glory will outshine everything.

While Christ’s appearance will terrify the unrepentant, how will the righteous welcome their Lord? What is the crucial difference? See Isa. 25:9, Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, Rom. 10:13.

In the Scriptures, the expression to “call on the name of the Lord” does not only mean to call oneself a follower of the Lord and to claim His promises. It also can mean to proclaim God’s name; that is, to be a witness to others about the Lord and what He has done for the world. Abraham built altars and proclaimed God’s name in the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:8). To Moses on Mount Sinai, God proclaimed His goodness and grace (Exod. 33:19, 34:5). The psalmist calls on the faithful to give thanks to God and call on His name by making known to the nations what He has done (Ps. 105:1). The same words are found in a song of salvation composed by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 12:4).

Thus, to proclaim the Lord’s name means both to be messengers of the glad tidings that God still rules the world, and also to call on the people of the world to view everything in the context of God’s deeds and character. It also means to tell everyone about God’s generous gift of salvation that is offered to every human being.

What does it mean to you to “call upon the name of the Lord”? How do you do it, and what happens when you do?

The Refuge in Times of Trouble (Joel 3)

Biblical prophets compare the coming judgment from God to the roaring of a lion, a sound that makes everyone tremble (Joel 3:16, Amos 1:2, 3:8). In the Bible, Zion designates the location of God’s earthly throne in Jerusalem. From this place God will punish the enemy, but at the same time He will vindicate His people who patiently await His victory. They will share in His triumph when He renews creation.

To some people the Scripture’s portrayals of God’s final judgment are difficult to comprehend. It is good to keep in mind that evil and sin are very real, and that their forces are strong in trying to oppose God and to destroy every form of life. God is an enemy of evil. That is why Joel’s words invite us to examine our lives in order to be sure that we are on God’s side so that we can be sheltered on the day of judgment.

Read Matthew 10:28-31. How do these texts help us to understand, even during calamitous times, what we have been given in Jesus?

The Lord sustains those persons who persevere in faith. He may bring desolations upon the earth (Joel 3:1-15); yet, His people should not fear His acts of sovereign judgments because He has promised to protect them (verse 16). He has given them His word of assurance. His sovereign and gracious acts demonstrate that He is a faithful covenant God who never again will allow the righteous to be put to shame (Joel 2:27).

Joel’s book ends with a vision of a transformed world where a river flows in the midst of the New Jerusalem, the very presence of the eternal God among a forgiven people (Joel 3:18-21).

This prophetic message challenges us to walk in the Spirit, to pursue Christian living wholeheartedly, and to reach out to all who yet have not called on the name of Christ. As we do, we claim the divine promise of Christ’s abiding presence through the Holy Spirit who dwells in the hearts of His faithful people.

“We must know our real condition, or we shall not feel our need of Christ’s help. We must understand our danger, or we shall not flee to the refuge. We must feel the pain of our wounds, or we should not desire healing.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 158. What is your understanding of your own “real condition”? What pains are you suffering? How have you experienced the “refuge” promised to us in Christ?

Further Study:

The prophet’s name, Joel, was common in Bible times, and it means “The Lord is God.” This name is appropriate to the overall theme of the book: only God is completely holy and just, and His work is sovereign on earth. The history of His people, as well as that of the nations, is in His hands. The same holds true for the life of every human being.

“The tremendous issues of eternity demand of us something besides an imaginary religion, a religion of words and forms, where truth is kept in the outer court. God calls for a revival and a reformation. The words of the Bible, and the Bible alone, should be heard from the pulpit. But the Bible has been robbed of its power, and the result is seen in a lowering of the tone of spiritual life. In many sermons of today there is not that divine manifestation which awakens the conscience and brings life to the soul. The hearers cannot say, ‘Did not

our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the Scriptures?' Luke 24:32. There are many who are crying out for the living God, longing for the divine presence. Let the word of God speak to the heart. Let those who have heard only tradition and human theories and maxims, hear the voice of Him who can renew the soul unto eternal life."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 626.