

Profit from

The Minor Prophets

3: Joel

Joel's name means 'Jehovah is God.' We know nothing else about him except that he was the son of Pethuel, whose name appears nowhere else in the Bible. There are twelve other Joels in the Old Testament. Each held a prominent position, but we cannot link any of them with the Joel who wrote this prophesy.

When Did This Happen?

We cannot be sure when Joel lived. A good case can be made for his prophesy having been written in the early years of Judah's King Joash, who reigned from 835BC to 796BC. One clue is that in the oldest Hebrew Scriptures Joel came second, after Hosea, in the collected writings of the Minor Prophets. There are other clues. Joel makes no mention of Assyria, Babylon or Persia, arch-enemies of Israel and Judah in the eighth century BC, but he does mention 'Tyre and Sidon' (3:4), Egypt and Edom (3:19), who were Judah's enemies during the reign of King Joash. In addition, the prophet Amos seems to quote Joel and we know that Amos prophesied during the reigns of Israel's King Jeroboam II and Judah's King Uzziah, whose reigns covered the period from 793BC to 753BC. All this would place Joel in or very close to the eighth century BC. Having said that, we do not need to know when Joel was written to be able to understand his message.

Locusts

Joel's prophecy was triggered by a devastating plague of locusts. Such a plague can affect as much as twenty per cent of the earth's surface. Swarms — billions of insects in each — can be several miles wide. They can cover distances of several hundred miles in twenty-four hours and travel from one continent to another. They can blot out the sun, interfere with land and air travel and can devour an entire country's food supply in a matter of hours. According to the UN Desert Locust Information Service a plague of locusts could endanger one in every ten people on earth. Augustine of Hippo (354AD – 430AD) wrote about just such a plague that hit Africa in his time. After destroying vast areas of vegetation a massive swarm drowned in the sea and when it washed up on the shore, 'The putrefaction so infected the air as to cause a pestilence so horrible that in the Kingdom of Masinissa alone 800,000 and more are said to have perished'.

The invasion cited by Joel was 'powerful and beyond number' and so destructive he suggested to his fellow countrymen that it was unique in the nation's history, asking, 'Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?'. Joel summarises the destruction graphically.

"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"

Joel 1:4

The four terms may refer to four stages in the development of a locust. It is debated whether Joel's locusts were real or just his metaphor for an army of soldiers, but it seems best to take his words at face value.

To make matters worse, a terrible fire had devoured the pastures of the wilderness, burned all the trees of the field and left the water brooks dried up. No one escaped the outcome of these twin tragedies. Joel mentions several groups that would have been severely affected. 'Tillers of the soil' and 'vine dressers' were obviously hit hard (1:11). He also singles out priests, no longer able to carry out their sacrificial duties because 'the grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord' (1:9). Eventually, the entire population was affected and life reduced to mere existence: 'gladness dries up from the children of man' (1:12). Even drunkards felt the plague's impact, 'The sweet wine . . . is cut off from your mouth' (1:5).

It was hardly necessary for Joel to point out these things, but his message went far beyond stating the obvious. It is summarised in one phrase:

"For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes."

Joel 1:15

Outline

The Locust Plague (1:2 – 20)

- The Effects and Extent of the Disaster (1:2 – 12)
- A Summons to Fasting and Prayer (1:13 – 14)
- Joel's Lament and Prayer (1:15 – 20)

The Day of the Lord (2:1 – 17)

- A Cry of Alarm — There Is Worse To Come (2:1 – 2)
- A Picture of God's Army on the Move (2:3 – 11)
- A Call to Repent — God Is Gracious (2:12 – 17)

God Will Save Those Who Call Upon Him (2:18 – 3:21)

- The Present Disaster Will Be Ended (2:18 – 27)
- God's People will be Saved in the Day of the Lord (2:28 – 3:21)
- The Nations will be Judged (3:1 – 16)
- A Vision of Eternal Blessing (3:16 – 22)

Joel's Message For Then And Now

Joel uses the phrase 'the day of the Lord' to explain the source and significance of the plague of locusts and in doing that he draws the people of Judah's attention to two very important truths.

The first of these is that God is sovereign. For many, the plague would have raised the question, How could God allow such a thing to happen to His people? Some may even have been tempted to turn from their belief in God; tempted to say, as a Daily Telegraph correspondent said about the 2004 tsunami, that God was 'malevolent, mad or dead'. Joel saw the disaster through the lens of God's sovereignty. The plague had been sent by Him.

The second important truth Joel conveyed was that in sending the plague God was shouting at His people. He wanted them to hear it telling them that God was angry because of their sin. Centuries before, God had warned Israel that if they turned away from Him,:

“You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it.”

Deuteronomy 28:38

Now, He was fulfilling that promise but God's aim was not destruction but restoration. No sooner has Joel laid out the devastating effects of the plague than he issues a call to repentance, urging God's people to consider their ways and to turn back to Him.

Joel's message then is one of warning and promise. Warning of judgement to come and promise of deliverance for those who call upon His name.

“And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Joel 2:32

Questions For Discussion

- What does Joel's prophesy teach you about the sovereignty of God?
- What does Joel's prophesy teach you about repentance?
- What does it mean to call upon the name of the Lord?
- Sometimes it is not clear if Joel is speaking about locusts or about an army. Why that ambiguity?
- What does Joel's prophesy add to your understanding of “the day of the Lord.”
- How should we respond to natural disasters today?

For Next Week

Viewing them in their context what can you learn from these verses?

- Joel 2:12 – 14
- Joel 2:25
- Joel 2:27
- Joel 3:14