

The Book Of Joel (Part One)

Joel 1:1 - 2:17

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Given 24-Dec-16; Sermon #1356

Most people in ancient Judah during the time of the prophet Joel were facing a matter of life and death. Joel talks about it here, but instead of saying, as some of us might say under those circumstances, “Well, every cloud has a silver lining. Things will get better. Don’t worry about it,” Joel actually says, “As a matter of fact, things are going to get worse. Judgment by locusts is only a foretaste of a greater judgment to come.”

In the middle of his very gloomy book Joel talks about a blessing that is to come in the latter days. He says that God is going to restore and bless His people so that they will be satisfied. They will be fulfilled and contented by what God has in store for them.

It is at this point in the prophecy, as Joel begins to speak comforting words, that Joel’s words became Peter’s first text in his sermon on Pentecost AD 31.

Acts 2:16-21 But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke. 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.’

Was Joel’s prophecy fulfilled in Acts 2, as some theologians believe? Peter distinctly states that he is referring to the prediction of Joel. However, that fact alone does not constitute a fulfillment.

In the first place, the customary formula for a fulfilled prophecy is entirely lacking in Acts 2:16. Even more telling is the fact that much of Joel’s prophecy, even as quoted in Acts 2:19-20, was not fulfilled at that time. We cannot take the position that only a portion of the prophecy was meant to be fulfilled, because this would wreak havoc with Bible prophecy.

Peter used Joel’s prophecy as an illustration of what was transpiring in his day and not as a fulfillment of this prediction. In short, Peter saw in the events of his day proof that God would yet completely bring to pass all that Joel prophesied.

Joel’s prophecy then was pre-fulfilled, it is, as the Old Testament passages on the outpouring of the Spirit show, yet to be fulfilled.

Now Joel began his prophecy, as did Hosea and Micah, by identifying himself and his lineage. More important, he declared the divine source of his prophecy and the resultant need for the people to pay attention to his God-inspired warning. The message is to be followed wholeheartedly and every single word of it is important to each and everyone of us

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

The name Joel means “YHVH is God” and therefore constitutes a short declaration of faith, somewhat like the primary New Testament declaration “Jesus is Lord.”

There are at least twelve other men in the Bible called Joel. All we can assume is that this Joel lived in Jerusalem and appeared there as a prophet of God. Little is known about the prophet Joel, although his concern for Judah and Jerusalem suggests that he ministered in the southern kingdom, which was Judah.

Joel was probably one of the earliest of the Minor Prophets. While the date of the book is debated, its message is valid for all times and is important to us today.

Joel told of a locust plague which had struck Israel and which, he said, foreshadows the Day of the Lord. This locust plague without parallel that had descended on Judah ruined all the crops. Not only was the basic economy of the country disrupted, but all levels of society were deeply affected.

In these catastrophic circumstances Joel saw the judgment of God on Judah. Although God had abundantly blessed Judah, the people had taken God and His blessings for granted, similar to what we are seeing in our nation today.

The many parallels with our nation today are not a coincidence. The message was not limited to national affairs but took the entire international scene from Joel’s own time to the culmination of the Day of the Lord.

The Day of the Lord was a time greatly anticipated by the people of Judah because they believed that God would then judge the nations and restore Israel to her former glory. Something that they looked forward to because it meant blessings for them.

Joel urged everyone to repent, and told of a day when God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Despite tremendous blessings and success in the nation, faith had degenerated into an empty formalism and their lives into moral decadence.

Now under divine inspiration Joel told the people that the locust plague was a warning of a greater judgment that was imminent unless they repented and returned to full fellowship with God. If they did, God would abundantly pardon them, restore the health of the land, and give them again the elements needed to offer the sacrifices so they might restart their relationship with God.

By their sin they had forfeited any right to worship God. What was needed was a repentant heart. The thought of further judgment led Joel also to reveal God’s intentions for the Day of the Lord.

Joel had insightful faith in God, and he taught reliance on the sufficiency of God in every section of the book. Joel focused on the basic principle that God is sovereignly guiding the affairs of earth’s history toward His preconceived final goal.

Joel’s message was very strong and direct. He reminds us that God is the God of grace and mercy, of loving kindness, patience, and of justice and righteousness, and he calls for true and vital worship on behalf of His followers who have trusted Him for salvation by grace through faith. In view of that, Joel emphasizes the place of prayer and repentance.

He taught that when sin becomes the dominant condition of God's people, they must be judged. God may use natural disasters as in chapter 1; or political means as in chapter 2, to chastise His people. For a repentant people there will be the blessing of restored fellowship and restored blessings in nature also because the sins of mankind or the sins of a nation affects everything in that nation, even down to the smallest animal.

Joel had witnessed a devastating invasion of Judah by locusts and he had recognized that God Himself, and not mere chance, was responsible. Today in America, where a locust invasion is quite remote, we can hardly imagine the desolation and desperation that would accompany a locust plague. But there have been similar invasions in relatively modern times from which we can make an assessment.

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. They immediately began to lay eggs by digging holes in the soil about 4 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. 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 and all 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. He says: "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. Whiting says: "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 sword-like branches and, diving deep into the heart, they tunneled after the juicy pith."

This is precisely what Joel and his contemporaries experienced in their day, and the various stages of the molting insects probably explain the four different Hebrew terms Joel uses in his description.

In the KJV the words are: “palmer worm,” “locust,” “cankerworm,” and “caterpillar.” The NIV uses the words: “locust swarm,” “great locusts,” “young locusts,” and “other locusts” for lack of adequate English words. These are probably all stages of the same insect, and if so, Joel certainly captures the nature of the utter destruction by reporting with perfect accuracy.

Joel 1:4 What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten.

Whiting, who quotes this and other opening verses of Joel’s prophecy in his article, writes: “We marvel how this ancient writer could have given so graphic and true a description of a devastation caused by locusts in so condensed a form.”

However, the most remarkable thing about Joel’s prophecy is not that he describes the locust invasion so accurately, but rather how he deals with it. To begin with, he does not treat the disaster lightly, as some people tend to do. God’s prophets described evil as evil, and far from playing down the disaster, they actually magnified it. As far as the locust invasion is concerned, Joel calls it the worst thing that has ever happened to Israel and Judah.

Joel 1:2 Hear this, you elders, and give ear, all you inhabitants of the land! Has anything like this happened in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?

The answer clearly is no! In Joel’s mind the invasion is an unprecedented and unmitigated disaster. Additionally, Joel is concerned that everyone sees the disaster as he does, which means that he would not even have sympathy with an optimistic philosophy. Instead of slighting the problem, he accepts it in its full horror and calls on various groupings of people within the land to mourn with him.

The first group he calls on is the elders. “Hear this, you elders!” They are the leaders of the people. They are to take the lead in facing up to the enormity and meaning of this disaster. They are to measure it fully and then remember it so they can tell it to their children that they in turn might tell it to their children.

Parents, as the leaders of their household have this responsibility to teach and warn their children what happens when they disobey God. Otherwise, bad history repeats itself very badly.

Joel 1:3-4 Tell your children about it, let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten.

Several theories have tried to account for the four different Hebrew words for “locusts” that appear here in verse 4. The point is that the various Hebrew words are used to indicate the intensity of the locust plague. There had been a successive series of locusts that had made a thorough devastation of the land, a destruction indicated rhetorically by four distinct names.

In biblical numerology, the number 4 represents the world. The four different locusts chew, swarm, crawl, and consume and this is the type of judgment God will bring upon the world. It will be totally

devastating. The four successive invasions bears a relationship to the concept of thorough judgment against the world for its sins. For example, there are four kinds of punishment mentioned in Jeremiah 15:3 and four types of judgment in Ezekiel 14:21.

In Amos 4:9, Amos, Joel's contemporary, mentions the utter destruction left behind by a locust plague, and it is very likely the same locust plague that Joel mentions, but he noted that there had been no turning to God by the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. Joel recognized the seriousness and solemnity of the situation. The locusts were God's army in judgment on Judah.

The second group Joel appeals to are the drunkards. At first sight this seems strange, but it is soon clear that the appeal is made ironically. The drunkards are called upon to awake out of the stupefying effect of their intoxication with wine.

Joel 1:5-10 Awake, you drunkards, and weep and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the new wine, for it has been cut off from your mouth. For a nation has come up against My land, strong, and without number; his teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he has the fangs of a fierce lion. He has laid waste My vine, and ruined My fig tree; he has stripped it bare and thrown it away; its branches are made white. Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth. The grain offering and the drink offering have been cut off from the house of the Lord; the priests mourn, who minister to the Lord. The field is wasted, the land mourns; for the grain is ruined, the new wine is dried up, the oil fails.

Now others might shrug off the disaster, but the drunkards at least will not do this since the invasion means the destruction of the tender vines from which come the grapes to make wine that they hold up as their idol.

The drunkard, who is known for his song and raucous laughter, is to weep, because his delightful wine has been destroyed. But Joel's concern is broader than this because, as he points out, it is not only the vines that are affected; the fig trees are also destroyed; the grain is devoured; the oil of the olive is lost; the pomegranate, palm, and apple tree are ruined.

The third group Joel appeals to is the farmers and vine keepers. They are humiliated because of their lack of ability to protect their crops. They are responsible for feeding their families and their nation, yet they have nothing left. Continuing on in Joel here:

Joel 1:11-12 Be ashamed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley; because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine has dried up, and the fig tree has withered; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree—all the trees of the field are withered; surely joy has withered away from the sons of men.

Everything had undergone the blighting effect of the locust scourge. Even the ground is dried up. And it is not only the fields that are affected; it also cuts to the heart: "Surely the joy of mankind is withered away."

The gravity of the situation is brought home to us by the accumulation of words describing ruin and desolation in verses 9-12: cut off, mourn, wasted, ruined, dried up, fails, perished, and withered. This far surpassed the severity of typical locust plagues.

The fourth and last of the groups addressed by Joel are the priests. He calls on them to lead the nation in mourning.

Joel 1:13-15 Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; for the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord. Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as destruction from the Almighty.

Why this bitterest of all weeping? Because the offerings of the house of the Lord, the grain offering being dependent upon the fruit of the field and the drink offering being dependent upon the produce of the vine, were cut off. Even the worship in God's house was affected by the desolation. This meant the setting aside of the covenant relationship between God and His people. This was like the setting aside of that relationship but not the annulment of it.

Joel exhibits the immediate judgment, as if it were already fulfilled. He illustrates it in detail for them to imagine. Continuing on in verse 16,

Joel 1:16-18 Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels under the clods, storehouses are in shambles; barns are broken down, for the grain has withered. How the animals groan! The herds of cattle are restless, because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep suffer punishment.

The joy in the abundance of the harvest was expressed in one universal thanksgiving to God, by fathers of families, sons, daughters, menservants, maidservants, with the priest and Levite. All this was to be cut off together.

The courts of God's house were desolate and silent, and joy and gladness were turned into sorrow and weeping. Not only was all to be cut off for the present, but with it all hope for the future. The beasts' groaning, seems to Joel, to be beyond expression. The beasts cried to God, but even their cries did not awaken His own people, so Joel cries for them.

At the end of the chapter Joel, who was perhaps himself a priest, leads the way with a sample prayer of mourning, here in verses 19-20.

Joel 1:19-20 O Lord, to You I cry out; for fire has devoured the open pastures, and a flame has burned all the trees of the field. The beasts of the field also cry out to You, for the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the open pastures.

We need to learn from Joel's approach to suffering. We have been so very blessed in this nation that we often tend to treat disaster lightly, especially when it does not happen to us personally. We reword statements of unpleasantness. Although we all tend to use euphemisms at times, this is not the approach of the biblical writers. They call evil, evil, and suffering, suffering. They even cry out in their pain, and so did Jesus.

In Isaiah 53:3 He is called, “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Luke 19:41 tells us that Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Luke 22:44 says, in His agony in the garden “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” Mark 15:34 records that while on the cross He cried out in a loud voice, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

When Jesus cried out, in the Greek the term means: to shout for help; to shout in a tumultuous way; to scream it out. In none of these cases is there any attempt to glorify pain, but neither is there any attempt to deny it. So the royal priesthood must at times of national and individual impending judgment “cry aloud and spare not!”

The most important thing about Joel’s handling of disaster is that he sees God as often responsible for it. Of course, this does not mean that God is the author of sin, as if He were directly responsible for the rebellion of Satan or the original transgression of Adam and Eve. But it does mean that, given the sin-sick and evil world in which we live, God Himself does not hesitate to take credit for the occurrence of natural disasters and the resulting suffering that comes from it.

This is the reason why Joel is dealing with the disaster caused by the invasion of the locusts. Granted, the first chapter merely laments the disaster. But as we get farther into the book we discover that the locust invasion is a foretaste of the coming day of God’s judgment and is sent in advance of that day as a warning of it.

Now in Joel 2, where the locust invasion is treated as a symbol of the coming Day of the Lord, Joel makes very clear that God causes both. We will start in verse 11.

Joel 2:11-13 The Lord gives voice before His army, for His camp is very great; for strong is the one who executes His word. For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it? [So I ask the question here: will Judah repent? This is the goal of what Joel is writing here.] “Now, therefore,” says the Lord, “turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. There will always be people who argue that such judgments are selective and therefore unjust. They might say, “why should Judah be judged and not other nations?” You may recall that more than 100 years later Habakkuk spent much of his prophecy dealing with this same question regarding Judah.

The biblical writers understood, because they had a far higher vision of the majesty and holiness of God and a far more accurate assessment of the sin and depravity of men and women than do those who doubt God’s methods.

On one occasion a question along these lines was asked of Jesus. Some time before, Herod’s soldiers had attacked a group of Galileans at the moment when they were offering their sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, and the problem suggested by this was raised with Jesus. How could this happen in a world run by a good God? These worshippers were killed at the very moment they were apparently being most devout.

Also, there was the case of the collapse of the tower in Siloam which killed eighteen people. How could that happen? Are we to suppose that these were more sinful or more deserving of God's judgment than the many others near them who were spared?

We know how Jesus answered. He did not argue, as Job's comforters did, that those who were killed were more evil than those near them. Whatever the outward appearances might be, He did not say, as we might, "Well, accidents will happen. I suppose that God merely didn't pay attention for a moment, and the tower fell." We know Jesus did not respond that way.

Luke 13:2-5 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; 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 sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

What is Jesus saying? He repeated it twice, which means listen closely because it is important. When we listen carefully we hear Him saying that those who object to tragedies like the locust plague do so because they ask the wrong question. They ask, "Why should disaster fall upon these? Why should God strike such innocent people?" But what they should be asking is: "Why have these disasters not come upon us? Why have they not destroyed us?"

Our problem is that we have forgotten how sinful we are as a nation and as a people. We have forgotten that it generally takes a disaster of unparalleled proportions to wake us from sin's lethargy. This brings us to the bottom line, which is the point of Joel's prophecy. Both the delays in God's judgment, that is the periods of grace, and the previews of judgment in such catastrophic events such as locust plagues and earthquakes are for our good so that we might repent.

In America we have not seen many disasters of this magnitude. But few would deny that times are not good and that even worse times may lie ahead. We have had our cities ravaged by blight and riot, by corruption and other forms of decay. We have even had the towers fall down and for a split second the nation turned to God.

We have not been destroyed by locusts, but we have seen our economy weakened by the declining value of the dollar, an intolerable balance of payments, deficit, and shortages of oil at times and other necessities. We have had droughts and fires. Are we to make light of such things?

On November 29, 2016 the website theblaze.com carried a report which they captioned: Dollywood employee discovers 'divine warning' on fire-ravaged Bible page in Tennessee. The article reads: "Trevon Kates walks through the smoldering remains of the fellowship hall of banner missionary baptist church Tuesday, as he inspects damage after a wildfire in Gatlinburg Tennessee.

A Dollywood employee says he was helping the theme park's grounds team clean up from the ravaging Tennessee wildfires when he discovered something that gave him goosebumps. Laying soaking wet beneath a bench, Isaac McCord found a page ripped from the Bible. Not all of the verses on the lone sheet were legible, but the verses that were clear enough to make out seemed ominously relevant. According to a Facebook post by McCord, the verses read:

Joel 1:15: “The day of the Lord is near, the day when destruction comes from the Almighty. How terrible that day will be!”

Joel 1:19: “To you, Lord, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness and flames have burned up all the trees of the field.”

Joel 1:20: “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 2:1: “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand.”

So McCord called on his co-worker, Misty Carver, to come have a look. We were, like, ‘this is unreal, this is unbelievable.’ When we had both fully read it, we looked at each other, and I will never forget this moment, we both burst into tears. I was ghost white, and we just prayed. There was nothing else to do,” McCord said. ‘Still to this moment, almost four hours after the fact, I do not have words for it,’ he added.”

Most people shrug these kind of things off, but those who take it to heart are wise. Are we to dismiss disasters and then merely go our normal way until even greater judgments overtake us? Are we to say, “Such things just happen”? Are we to blame Russia or Communism or Iran or Islam?

No doubt God does use causes, and the opposition of these or other countries may be among them. But the wise will see these things as having come from God and lead us in personal and sometimes national repentance.

I mentioned earlier, that when the locust invasion of 1915 struck Palestine and Syria, the desolation was as great as anyone could possibly have imagined. During that four or five month period, the land was stripped of every green thing: vines, fig trees, grain. Still, bad as the destruction was the locusts did move on and in time the land recovered.

Since the invasion of Judah in Joel’s day was undoubtedly similar, we might expect Joel to have had at least a few encouraging words such as, “hang in there,” or “don’t give up,” but Joel did precisely the opposite. Instead of suggesting that things would get better, he warned that the worst was yet to come. The destruction of the locusts was total, but it was nothing compared to the end-time judgment of God.

This is the explanation of the apparent shift in imagery in chapter 2. The description in chapter 1 is literal. The various stages of the locusts are specified in verse 4. The destruction of vines, grain, and trees is described quite clearly in Joel 1:7-12. Judah is to mourn for the land.

In chapter 2 this literal description is suddenly heightened by the use of stirring imagery, and the locusts begin to take on overtones of even greater invaders. They are described as “a large and mighty army” in verse 2 of the NIV translation.

Chapter 2 of Joel is very familiar to you because we sing the hymn, “Blow the Horn, Let Zion Hear!” we will read verses 1-11 here.

Joel 2:1-5 Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand: A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, like the morning clouds spread over the mountains. A people come, great and strong [the NIV adds “a large and mighty army], the like of whom has never been; nor will there ever be any such after them, even for many successive generations. A fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns; the land is like the Garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; surely nothing shall escape them. Their appearance is like the appearance of horses; and like swift steeds, so they run. With a noise like chariots over mountaintops they leap, like the noise of a flaming fire that devours the stubble, like a strong people set in battle array. Before them the people writhe in pain; all faces are drained of color. They run like mighty men, they climb the wall like men of war; every one marches in formation, and they do not break ranks. They do not push one another; every one marches in his own column. Though they lunge between the weapons, they are not cut down. They run to and fro in the city, they run on the wall; they climb into the houses, they enter at the windows like a thief. The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness. The Lord gives voice before His army, for His camp is very great; for strong is the One who executes His word. For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it?

There is an important clue to Joel’s purpose in the way he begins this chapter—not with a view to the past, as he did in chapter 1 verse 2, “Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your fathers?”—but rather in anticipation of the future in chapter 2 verse 1, “Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand:.” The terms “is coming” and “is at hand” signifies that it is guaranteed to happen to anyone who is sinful.

The invasion described in chapter 1 has happened. The invasion described in chapter 2 has not happened, though it is threatening. Joel wants to sound the alarm so that those who are threatened by the second, greater invasion might get ready for it. This is directed at the Israelites today, and the church is to view it solemnly and take it into consideration.

So, we find the Day of the Lord mentioned in verse 1 and again in verse 11 of Joel 2. This is the first mention of the Day of the Lord in the Minor Prophets, since it is absent from Hosea, at least by name. But it is a major idea both in these prophets and in other biblical literature.

“The Day of the Lord” is a technical phrase used initially by the Old Testament prophets to designate a future period of catastrophic judgment. Sometimes the references are to destructive events happening at that time, as to the locust plague in Joel. But there is always an overriding reference to an even more intense, end-time judgment by God. It is a day in which the Lord will break silence and intervene in history to judge both Israel and the Gentile nations. The characteristics of the Day of the Lord are seen in the following series of verses.

Isaiah 13:6-10 Wail, for the day of the Lord is at hand! It will come as destruction from the Almighty. Therefore all hands will be limp, every man’s heart will melt, and they will be afraid. Pangs and sorrows will take hold of them; they will be in pain as a woman in childbirth; they will be amazed at one another; their faces will be like flames. Behold,

the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine.

Amos 5:18-20 Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness, and not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him! Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him! Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it?

Zephaniah 1:14-17 The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day of the Lord is bitter; there the mighty men shall cry out. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. "I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse."

It is the time of God's wrath against the world for its sins. It is obvious from these scriptures that the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars is the event that precedes Jesus Christ's return. We will now read in Matthew 24.

Matthew 24:29-31 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Here Jesus quotes the verses in Isaiah dealing with the Day of the Lord and applies them to the time when He Himself will judge the world. Peter also refers to this day, saying in II Peter 3,

II Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.

Also in Zechariah 14 it says:

Zechariah 14:1-3 Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, the houses rifled, and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity, but the remnant of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle.

From an examination of these and other texts several things are clear. First, the Day of the Lord is a day of God's judgment. Second, the day is still future. Third, it is accompanied by a time of great trouble on earth. And fourth, it is to be followed by the reign of Jesus Christ as King of kings and

Lord of lords. That day is coming, as Joel warns. The disasters of this life—locust invasions, plagues, famines, wars, and natural catastrophes—are small judgments compared to it, but they are warnings of the wrath to be revealed.

The goal of Joel's writing is to lead people to repentance. So we are not surprised that the next section of chapter 2 contains a direct and moving appeal for repentance. First it contains an analysis of true repentance in verses 12-13. Secondly it contains incentives or encouragements for it in verses 13-14.

Joel 2:12-14 “Now, therefore,” says the Lord, “turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him—a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?

Joel 2:15-17 Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar; let them say, “Spare Your people, O Lord, and do not give Your heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

As Joel speaks of repentance, his emphasis is on the heart. That is, he wants a true repentance and not merely a formal one. Granted, Joel does speak of outward expressions such as: fasting and weeping and mourning in verse 12. An outward expression of an inward state are both right and valuable. However what Joel is against is outward expression that does not correspond with reality, because God looks on the heart. So repentance on the surface or just an act alone is not true repentance.

Therefore the people of God are to rend their hearts, not their garments as we see here in verse 13. It is easier to do the opposite, to rend our garments rather than our hearts. But God wants us to be “heartbroken” over sin. Only that will actually turn us from sin and enable us to please God again.

We have to acknowledge sin, confess it, and appeal to God. This is the kind of repentance Joel wanted to see among his people and which we should seek today.

Even at this late hour it was possible to repent and turn to God, thus averting further disaster. God calls for a time of deep exercise of heart and spirit, a time of fasting, a time of brokenness of heart before Him. Because it is ever-so-easy to substitute the external for the real, to be lost in the activity of outward show, God exhorts them to “rend their hearts and not their garments.”

So often people make up their own religions that fit their own comfort zones and think that they are repenting of their sins, but it cannot be done if it is not according to God's direction and will. All true repentant attitudes and actions before God are based upon the fact of God's wonderful character, because He is gracious beyond words and ready to forgive.

God is always more willing to bless than to blast; to pardon than to punish; to win by love than to wound by lashing. So there is always the possibility of God's displeasure being turned into His favor.

One element we should expect to see in true repentance is true confession to God of the specific sins we have committed, because until we confess sins specifically, we are not really repenting. We will read in Psalm 32.

Psalm 32:3-5 When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah I acknowledged my sin to You and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

In other words, “I will no longer attempt to hide my sins, or to suppress the convictions of guilt. I will seek the only proper relief by making confession of my sin, and by obtaining forgiveness.” The psalmist experienced forgiveness when he acknowledged his sin, but it came only after divine discipline. When he was silent and did not confess his sins, he was weakened physically and grieved inwardly. That is what the weight of sin does to us when we do not truly repent of it.

The hand of the Lord was heavy on the psalmist, that is, God dealt severely with him. The result was that his strength was dried up as in the summer heat. This describes his remorse of conscience which leads to repentance.

Romans 2:4 Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

Now the psalmist’s confession of his sin to God is the way of restoration, because God forgave him. This resolution by the psalmist was substantially the same as that of the prodigal son in Luke 15, where he says:

Luke 15:18-19 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”

Now the second element in true repentance is contrition, which is genuine sorrow for sin. Hardship or a heightened awareness of sin can result in a stripping away of our natural pride, leaving us a tender and contrite heart.

One passage that deeply shapes the image of contrition is Psalm 51. When David was humbled by the denouncement of his sin with Bathsheba, he declared in verses 15-17.

Psalm 51:15-17 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise. For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; you do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise.

Contrition is deeper than regret. We may all regret something we have done but still not sorrow over it. Judas regretted his sin of betraying Jesus to such a degree that he returned the blood money given to him by the priests and then committed suicide. But he did not repent of his sin and so suffered for it. We cannot repent by committing another sin. Contrition is a deep feeling of remorse for sins or wrongdoing. It is earnest repentance.

In the Bible the words contrite or broken, in reference to the heart or mind, occur relatively few times, but the concept of humility and acceptance of divine providence born out of trials is very common.

This theme of humility and acceptance is repeated throughout scripture in that the contrite person enjoys special care from God. We may carry wounds from the tragic events of our lives, but God delights in the humility that results from this brokenness.

Isaiah 57:15 For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

In verse 15, the first word contrite in the phrase “a contrite and humble spirit,” is translated from a Hebrew word whose root is *daka*, but it is specifically *dakka*. *Dakka* basically means crushed literally into powder. In a word, it means pulverized! The second word contrite in verse 15 in the phrase “the contrite ones,” is the root word *daka*. It, of course, means to crush, but depending on the context it means to crumble, to bruise literally or figuratively. It is used to describe those who are devastated by an action.

In the Bible, *daka* is translated into the English words or phrases as: beat to pieces, break in pieces, broken, bruise, contrite, crush, destroy, humble, oppress, and smite just to name a few.

The contrite person, that is, the person broken in the right place, is bruised or crushed in a way that results in true humility. This person does not carry anger, fear of punishment, or lowered self-esteem that characterize the bitter person.

Now the third and final element in true repentance is conversion. Joel uses the word “turn” in verse 12, and “return” in verse 13, but the meaning is the same as convert. Convert is from the Latin words *con*, meaning “around,” and *verto*, or *vertere*, meaning “to turn.” It means “to turn around.” Return means “to turn again.” In both cases there was a right relationship to God, but the person has turned away from God and now needs to turn back.

This is the essential meaning of repentance too. Repentance comes from a Latin word *paeniteo*, which refers to a change of mind, a change so basic that the direction of one’s life is altered. Now we must be sorry enough to quit whatever wrong thing we are doing. Repentance is essentially an about-face. It is a spiritual-military command. There must be an ‘about face’ that will change the direction of your walk forever.

Joel does not only show the nature of true repentance, he also gives encouragement and incentives, arguing that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. God often changes His intention to judge sin and instead relents and shows mercy is a problem for some people. They ask: “How can the unchanging God change His mind? How can God relent?” That may be a problem for our thinking, but it is important to note that it is not a problem for God.

God does not explain His relenting. He simply states that He does relent, and He holds this possibility out as an incentive to get us to turn from sin. God is gracious. God does relent from sending calamity and He has delayed His judgments and turned back His wrath.

Sin always leads the sinner downhill. Sometimes it is rapid, like a mountain stream twisting and splashing downward over rocks and crags. Sometimes it is slow, like the nearly imperceptible course of a glacier, but it is still downhill.

America is going downhill and will continue to go downhill to ever greater judgments unless there is a national confession of sin and a turning around, a repentance. But sadly we should not hold our breath in anticipation of this. The nation has gone so far over the slippery slope and down the cliff that gravity has grabbed hold. God can do anything. However we see the course of what God allows the course to be by looking back at ancient Israel and Judah.

Where are the leaders? There is one last point: the need for leaders. Joel points to this in the closing verses of this chapter. Having spoken of the judgment to come and of the nature and incentive for repentance, he turns to the priests, the leaders of Israel, and calls on them to set the pattern. These verses are marked by imperatives. We will read verses 15-17 again here.

Joel 2:15-17 Blow the trumpet in Zion [often a code word for the church], consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar; let them say, "Spare Your people, O Lord, and do not give Your heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

Who is to blow, declare, call, gather, consecrate, and bring together? God does this through the priests, through the ministers. This is a special word for those in spiritual authority, but it is also a word for all God's people, God's church, because in this day we are all a type of priests in God's service.

We are all to lead the way in repentance. It is God who calls people into His church, but we can help in making things available, such as sermons and literature as God wills. If we do not do this, who will do it? We are the watchers on the wall, the watchmen, and if we do not see the approaching danger and sound the alarm, who will sound it? No one! People will perish, and we will share in the blame. Ezekiel 33:2-6 says:

Ezekiel 33:2-6 "Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say to them: 'When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from their territory and make him their watchman, when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people, then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, but did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But he who takes warning will save his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.'

God's revelation through Joel contributes greatly to our understanding of the end times, the second coming, the resurrection of the dead, and judgment. Joel's central concern is God's role to His people, Israel.

While God may allow other nations to chastise Israel for their sins, God has reserved a remnant to Himself. On them He will pour out His Spirit, and to them He will manifest Himself with marvelous signs, and He will regather them and bring them to the Promised Land.

He will gather for judgment those nations that have dealt severely with His people and bring them to a great and final battle near Jerusalem. On that awesome day, He Himself will lead His people in triumph, thereby ushering in an era of unparalleled peace and prosperity.

Essential to all Joel's prophecy is his teaching about the Day of the Lord. By the skillful use of this term, which gives cohesion to his entire message, Joel demonstrated that God is sovereignly active in all that comes to pass, directing all things to their appointed end.