

IN THE VALLEY OF DECISION: LESSONS FROM THE PROPHET JOEL

Notes For Week One: Introduction & The Locust Swarm (Joel 1:1-12)

The book of Joel is one of the lesser-known books of the Old Testament, and yet it gives us some valuable insights into our relationship with God. Joel also contains a significant prophecy that is fulfilled in the New Testament. In our first lesson on the book, we shall first look at some key verses and background, and shall then study the first few verses of the book.

Introduction, Key Verses, & Overview

Most of the prophetic books have a definite historical context. So, when studying them, we generally make frequent use of historical details. Joel, though, is an exception, in that it cannot be assigned to a definite date. A study of Joel must therefore be primarily thematic, focusing more on principles and ideas than on historical information.

There are a couple of key verses in Joel that will help us to get an idea of what the book is about. One, in particular, may be familiar to you from studying the New Testament, since it was one of the foundations of Peter's Pentecost sermon. This is Joel's prophecy of the Spirit in Joel 2:28-32, which contains several important points that we shall study later in much more detail. He prophesies that God will one day pour out his Spirit on all of his people, that this will be accompanied by wonders and signs, and that it will seem like an upheaval of the universe. This passage is also the source of the well-known verse, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". When we put this verse in its context, we shall see how this illuminates the meaning of all of these ideas.

Most of this passage is quoted in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Peter applies it to the beginnings of the church of Jesus Christ in two ways. He tells the crowd that Joel's prophecy applies to the miraculous sign of the tongues of fire, which occurred just before he got up to speak, and later in the lesson he tells the crowd how they, too, can receive "the gift of the Holy Spirit". So an understanding of Joel can also give us additional appreciation for what happened in Acts 2.

Joel 3:14 could be called the theme verse of Joel, since it concisely summarizes the basic lesson of the book, telling us that "the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision". Joel's original audience was suffering at the time from the effects of a gigantic swarm of locusts. His message to them was that they should learn from this misfortune. They should realize that we all need God's mercy all of the time, and they should heed Joel's call to them to make a firm decision to recommit themselves to God.

For later generations, the same message holds true. Joel tells us all that we shall soon find ourselves "in the valley of decision". This world will last only a short time, and thus we should not become engrossed in the persons, things, and events of this world, but rather should learn from its problems and limitations. We should turn to God and then rely on him alone.

Our study over the next few weeks will follow this basic overview of Joel:

The Locust Swarm (Joel 1:1-1:12)

Preparing For The Day of the Lord (Joel 1:13-2:11)

God's Call to His People (Joel 2:12-2:27)

God's Promise to His People (Joel 2:28-3:2)

Decision & Judgment (Joel 3:3-21)

Although there is not much definite historical background to Joel, we can briefly mention some general background to the book. It is the second of the twelve shorter prophetic books (usually called the "Minor Prophets"*) at the end of the Old Testament. Of these, 10 have definite or fairly definite historical backgrounds, while Joel and Obadiah provide too little internal information for us to assign a definite date. We do get a clue, though, from the fact that the others are arranged roughly in chronological order (that is, Hosea, Amos, and Jonah are the earliest of the ones with definite dates, and Malachi is the latest). Since it is most generally assumed that the ancient Jews arranged these books deliberately, this would suggest that Joel is likely to have been written during the same general era as Hosea and Amos, which would be the first half of the 8th century BC**, or perhaps slightly earlier (see below). This was a time when the spiritual problems of God's people became particularly serious, and when God began to deal with them with rigorous discipline.

* The common term "Minor Prophets" does not mean that these books are of secondary importance, but rather that they are shorter than books such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. The ancient Jews called them "The Twelve", and they were considered one book with that name. The early Christians sometimes called them "The Twelve Prophets", or, because the Latin word "minor" means shorter or smaller, the Minor Prophets.

** That is, during the later years of the Divided Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom fell in 722 BC. While cautious or conservative commentators often still accept this early 8th century BC date for Joel, more modern theories have used his style and his external references to suggest dates ranging anywhere from the 9th century BC, to as late as 500 BC. Most of these theories are speculative, and a date in the first half of the 8th century BC probably still fits the best, at least from a perspective that relies primarily on the Bible's own internal evidence. (There is also a possible reference to Joel's locust swarm in Amos 4:9.) Nevertheless, there is no absolute proof of any of this, and the date of the book must be considered as uncertain.

Fortunately, all of this has only a minimal effect on the way Joel is interpreted. The key lessons, such as the prophecy of the Spirit and the concept of the "valley of decision", remain the same regardless of when the prophecies were written. If, in fact, we do not worry about the date issue, we find that Joel becomes one of the easier prophetic books to interpret and apply.

For Discussion or Study: What might Joel's prophecy about the Spirit have meant to his original hearers? What might we be able to learn from studying it in its original context? How might Joel's concept of "the valley of decision" apply to Christians? Looking at the key verses and the outline of Joel, what kinds of lessons do you think we might find as we study the book?

The Locust Swarm (Joel 1:1-12)

The book of Joel is set amidst an enormous swarm of locusts that were devastating the land. Joel

gives a vivid description of this disaster and of its effects. The locust swarm provides the context for the rest of the book, and by understanding what it was like to live through it, we can see the ways that Joel's prophecies are significant to believers in any era.

In describing this locust swarm, Joel tells the people that nothing like it has ever happened in their memory (1:1-4). It is an unprecedented calamity, the kind of event that naturally causes us to ask why it happened and what it might mean. But Joel has a couple of other points to make before discussing these aspects of the event. He first calls them to remember what has happened, and to pass it on to their children and grand-children, so that it will remain in the memory of God's people. In other words, there is no doubt that God will use this locust swarm to say something, and he wants his people to listen to him, not merely to try to live through the current problems and then forget about them.

In verse 4, Joel describes the swarm as one wave of locusts after another. The terms for the different types of locusts vary somewhat from one Bible translation to another, but the specific terms are not the point: he is establishing an image of trouble upon trouble, a series of ills that never seems to stop. While we may not have lived through a locust plague, most of us know quite well how it feels to be plagued by one difficulty after another.

Joel then turns to the effects of the locust swarm (1:5-12). He first addresses drunkards, telling them to wail because the locust swarm has ruined the crop that would have produced new wine. In doing so, he is not referring exclusively to literal drunks, but to all those who have been living for pleasure. The locust swarm not only destroyed many of the essentials of life, it also took away everything "fun", leaving each person to rely solely on his or her relationship with God - if indeed he or she had one strong enough to last.

Next, Joel gives us some images of the swarm, comparing it at one point to an invading army. This provides an obvious parallel to the times in Old Testament history when God would allow foreign armies to invade Israel* because of his people's sin and idolatry. Indeed, early Christian commentators invariably pointed out this parallel**, and pointed out the emphatic reminder of human helplessness before God's judgment. Locust swarms and armies are fearsome opponents, but they are nothing compared to the full power of God - thus we are reminded of how nonsensical it is ever to oppose God.

* If Joel was indeed written in the 9th or early 8th century BC, then these invasions were yet to come, making the locust plague a sobering warning of what would come later if they did not repent.

** Yet another interesting parallel was raised by the late 4th century commentator John Chrysostom, who spoke out repeatedly against what he considered to be the spiritual indifference of the church in his era. Chrysostom pointed out that worldly or sinful desires can ravage the church, just as the locusts ravaged Israel in Joel's day.

Joel then returns to his discussion of the consequences of the locusts. Harvests of all kinds have been ruined, so that the farmers despair, and the rest of the people go without the things they need. Beyond the devastating physical and monetary losses is the sense of despair and helplessness, for as Joel says, "the joy of mankind has withered away".

We can best apply the lessons that Joel is going to teach us if we first think about how it must

have felt to live through this disaster. When faced with problems and trials (whether on a large scale or a small one), we can ask questions of God ("why did this happen"), we can struggle with emotions such as fear or anger, and we can often find it a temptation to respond to our struggles in an ungodly way. It is interesting to keep in mind some of the more uplifting verses later on in Joel, especially his wonderful promise that the Spirit would be poured out, and his encouraging description of spiritual living. Clearly, there are some lessons ahead that are meant to get the people to move from Joel 1:4 to Joel 2:28.

For Discussion or Study: What kinds of events or worries might cause us to feel like those who experienced this locust swarm? Consider more fully some of the ways that we respond to such trials, and the feelings that they produce. See if you can find any further parallels to Joel's descriptions in verses 5-12. What kinds of lessons might you now expect Joel to teach, in light of the initial situation?

For Further Study

As Joel is such a short book, commentaries on Joel are generally portions of volumes that also cover one or more of the other shorter prophetic books. Some suggested sources are listed below. Each of them has its strengths and weaknesses, so if you would like to study Joel on your own, and you want some suggestions on which references to use, just let me know.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I* (New International Biblical Commentary)

Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (New International Commentary)

Alberto Ferreiro (editor), *The Twelve Prophets* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture)

Frank Gaebelin (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 7: Daniel-Minor Prophets*

David Hubbard, *Joel & Amos* (Tyndale Commentary)

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2004*

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IN THE VALLEY OF DECISION: LESSONS FROM THE PROPHET JOEL

Week Two: Preparing For the Day of the Lord (Joel 1:13-2:11)

After his description of the catastrophic swarm of locusts, Joel now turns to the lessons that his hearers should learn from this disaster. He also introduces one of his key topics, the "day of the Lord", and he exhorts God's people to prepare themselves.

Calling Upon the Lord (Joel 1:13-20)

Joel indicates that the first and most vital response to the locust swarm should be to call upon God. His appeal is vivid and urgent, suggesting that the people must not only heed his advice, but heed it quickly. There are a number of important points in this passage. In particular, it sheds some important light on the ideas of "calling on the Lord" and "the day of the Lord".

Joel first calls for a fervent response to recent events (1:13-14). Certainly, the people should not indulge in complaining, anger, or resentment because of their misfortunes, but Joel also teaches them that God is hoping for more from them than mere endurance or patience. God wants them to turn to him, and even to put on sackcloth and to fast, as a demonstration that they realize their complete dependence on God. Their situation has become so desperate (Joel mentions that there is hardly even anything left for the priests to sacrifice) largely for this reason: that they should now focus completely on God, having had all distractions removed.

They are then to use this time to cry out to the Lord together. Even individually, crying out to the Lord is a significant act of belief and submission. In doing so together, God hopes that they will more clearly see and appreciate their identity as his people, so that they can help and encourage each other to draw closer to God. Later in the passage, Joel will use a similar phrase, when he says that he will call on God.

Joel next presents a fearful picture for the people to contemplate (1:15-18). He tells them that "the day of the Lord" is near, the first of several times that he will use that phrase*. Other Old Testament prophets also used this phrase**, and to them it meant something more all-encompassing than the exclusive application to the final coming of Christ, as the phrase is usually interpreted today. The prophets used "the day of the Lord" to refer to any time that God `came' to earth, whether to render judgment, justice, or reward. This definition of "day of the Lord" includes, naturally, the final coming of Christ, as the complete and permanent fulfillment of all of God's promises and warnings. The prophets tell us, though, that there have been many other `days' when God has actively intervened on behalf of his truths and his people.

* For reference, here is a complete list: Joel 1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31, 3:14.

** Here are some selected passages from other prophets: Isaiah 13:6, 13:9; Ezekiel 13:5, 30:3; Amos 5:18, 5:20; Obadiah 1:15; Zephaniah 1:7, 1:14. See if you can find others, and also look at these passages with slightly different wordings of the phrase: Isaiah 2:12, 22:5, 34:8; Jeremiah 46:10, Micah 7:4.

In the particular `day' that Joel pictures here, there is no joy or gladness, because this time God's visit is one of judgment and discipline. Joel follows this with more images of want and need. Again, in his great love for his people, God is forced to make them go through painful trials and

deprivations so that they return their focus and devotion to him, not to things of the world. When our hearts wander from God, and become too strongly attached to the world, we can become so unaware of our condition that, to bring us back, God must deprive us of the things that have distracted us from him - even if these things originated as blessings from him.

All of this leads up to Joel's crucial point: our need For God (1:19-20). We need God all of the time, in every circumstance, in every area of our lives. He cares for us in ways so numerous that we could never notice them all. What he does ask, though, is that we acknowledge him and call to him, and so the prophet says, "To you, O Lord, I call". Seeing this idea in context helps us better to see what the Bible means by "calling on the Lord". It has nothing to do with a ritual or a mere verbal act, but rather is an expression of dependence, devotion, and submission. The Hebrew verb can mean, in English, to cry out, to shout, or to appeal - all indicating an active turning. To call on the name of the Lord, then, means to appeal to God by name, or to cry out to him by name. The prophets use this phrase to convey an attitude that acknowledges God as not just one source for help, but as our only true and certain source of lasting hope, peace, and security.

Here, Joel says that the present crisis has brought out this need for God so clearly that even the wild animals "pant for (God)". God takes no delight in seeing his creations reduced to such a desperate state, but he knows how important it is for us to acknowledge him and to call to him, in the truest sense of the word. Thus he will allow us, when needed, to be brought into a condition that gives us little rational choice but to turn to him.

We should thus apply this passage to our recognition of our own need for God. We can either ignore his many ways of caring for us and his numerous attempts to communicate with us, or we can learn to be more aware of his hand at work all around us. We can look at the things he created and take them for granted, or we can develop an appreciation for his indescribable majesty and wisdom. We can live our lives caught up in our day-to-day affairs, or we can call on God constantly, whether or not our need for him is obvious in worldly terms.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How does God want his people to respond to the locust swarm? When might we have to heed this kind of plea? Describe in your own words what the prophet means by "the day of the Lord". What does the prophet mean by calling to God or calling on the name of God? How do all of these ideas help us to see our need for God? When we see our need for God, in what ways should it affect us?

Here's What's Coming (Joel 2:1-11)

With the people's attention now focused on God, Joel wants them to understand an important lesson from the locust plague. The images in these verses can be applied both to the locust swarm, which they have just seen, and also to the invasions of foreign armies, which God would later use when needed to discipline his people. And yet neither of these, fearful as they may be, can compare with the full power and might of God.

Joel tells the people that they must sound the alarm (2:1-2), because the day of the Lord is coming. It will bring a fearful display of God's power, in the skies and on the earth, so that the people should tremble in anticipation. He warns them that it will be like nothing they have ever seen before. This, and the description of the 'day' that follows, can be applied on several levels.

Most obviously, it describes (from another perspective) the locust swarm that the land has just endured. Then, as Joel's images demonstrate even more clearly, the descriptions can apply to the invading armies that God would use from time to time to discipline his people, throughout their history. Finally, the imagery is meant to teach us that such displays of earthly force are only a small taste of the full power that God has in himself. Most of us can hardly bear to contemplate the fearful power displayed in catastrophes such as war or natural disasters, but no person can even begin to stand up against the power of God. This force can either be exerted on our behalf, if we call on God, or it can be exerted against us, if we oppose him.

The prophet now describes several images of destruction and fear (2:3-9). He describes a force that consumes and devours everything in its path, like an uncontrolled fire. He describes its power and strength, like a herd of horses, a mighty army, able to break through any obstacle. He describes a force with swiftness and cunning, faster than horses or chariots, and able to enter any building or location. These are unpleasant thoughts, and yet there is a crucial point. We simply cannot have a healthy relationship with God unless we fully understand and accept the awesome power and might that he can summon forth at any moment.

Joel says, therefore, that the day of the Lord is a day that most should dread (2:10-11). He draws a picture of upheaval in the heavens, a common prophetic device that he uses again in 2:30-31. This imagery can, of course, be applied literally to the end of the world, but it also applies in a figurative sense to any time when God chooses to use his power to overturn human agendas and to call his people to refocus their lives on him. God is pictured as thundering at the head of his forces, so that no one can stand against him. As Joel says, "the day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?"

In applying this passage, we should use it to deepen our appreciation of the full power of God. Even most Christians speak quite casually about God's power, and are only able to see some of the smaller ways in which it is expressed. Just because God's extraordinary patience with us leads him to withhold almost all of his potential power, this is no reason for us not to respect and honor him. The fear of the Lord is not a popular concept nor a trendy topic, but it is a biblical teaching. The Scriptures frequently tell us of the importance of developing the right kind of fear of the Lord: not a terror or a cringing fear, but a deep reverence and respect, an awareness that God has power on a level far greater than any force in the physical universe. To those who oppose God, his power guarantees their doom. To those who love him and honor him, his strength is a source of security, assurance, and hope.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Joel give such graphic, fearful images to illustrate God's power at work? In what less dramatic ways can we look for God's strength at work, that we can appreciate it more fully? What effect would it have on our lives and ministries if we would grow in our understanding of God's power? How does all this connect with Joel's earlier point about seeing our need for God?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2004*

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IN THE VALLEY OF DECISION: LESSONS FROM THE PROPHET JOEL

Notes For Week Three: God's Call to His People (Joel 2:12-27)

Joel has now taught the people two vital lessons to be learned from the locust swarm: their need for God, and God's extraordinary power. He now moves on to tell them about the response that God wants from them. God's call through the prophet is also accompanied by a set of promises.

Return to Me (Joel 2:12-17)

We now hear in detail about the response that God wants from his people. With expressive language, God appeals to them to restore their relationship with him. He wants them to use the lessons of the locust swarm to shift their attention to things of spiritual importance. These verses emphasize the heart and the relationship that we have with our God.

The prophet tells the people that "even now" (2:12) they can simply return to God, if they do so from the heart. Joel emphasizes that God wants their hearts, and not simply an outward proclamation of faith. He even calls them to return with fasting and weeping, which is meant not so much to emphasize these actions in themselves (which can be done either sincerely or insincerely), as to indicate the depth of conviction that God seeks from his people.

Many of the topics that we are studying bring up an interesting question: what, specifically, caused the locust plague? Joel has never identified a specific sin, or a specific act of neglect, or any other precise cause of the locusts. What we now see here is that God is not interested in pinpointing specific wrongdoings or omissions, but rather wants them to return to him in their hearts. While our natural response to misfortune is to wonder why it happened, God is usually much more concerned with what will come out of it, rather than with what preceded it.

A New Testament illustration is found in John 9, when Jesus and his disciples meet a man who had been blind since his birth. While the disciples wonder whether the man or his parents were most to blame, Jesus tells them not to analyze, but rather to see this, like any instance of suffering or pain, as an opportunity for God to work and for us to participate in God's work.

There are, of course, instances when something bad does happen to someone specifically because that person disobeyed God in some way. But here is the important point: when that happens, then the reason is usually clear to anyone with open eyes and an open heart. When, instead, there is no discernible specific reason for our struggles, we ought to take Joel's counsel, and simply turn to God in our hearts, rather than analyzing and searching for a "reason". This will be more pleasing to God, and more beneficial for us. It is quite natural for humans to search desperately for explanations whenever hurtful or frightening things occur, but much of the time this is not the most fruitful way to respond.

This is a broad and important topic, and we do not, of course, have time to cover it in depth in our present study. This is a good topic for individual study, using some of the ideas we have introduced. John 9 teaches us that even the worst misfortunes can be the fault of no one at all, and should be viewed as opportunities for us to glorify God by helping in any way that we can. A different kind of example is found in Jonah 1, when all of the sailors experience terror (and

financial loss because of the lost cargo) because of one man's disobedience to God. Here in Joel, on the other hand, most of the people are at "fault" for the locusts coming, though not because they committed one serious sin, but rather because of a general loss of spiritual focus and sincerity. Finally, there are many other examples of specific sins leading to specific consequences. With some thought, you can find many other examples of all these kinds, and such a list can serve as a starting point for further study.

To make sure that the people understand what God wants, Joel elaborates on the need to respond from the heart (2:13-14). At many times during Israel's history, they went through periods of devoted outward observance of the various rituals, sacrifices, and other worship activities, but without any real devotion, and without placing any real value on it. They would often fall into the habit of viewing their worship as something that had to be checked off the list as painlessly as possible, rather than as a worthwhile expression of reverence and honor to their God.

One of the common rituals was the rending (tearing) of garments, sometimes followed by putting on sackcloth, as an acknowledgment of having committed a sin (or of having witnessed a grievous sin). Like other rituals, this could be done sincerely or insincerely, and often the latter was the case. But Joel tells them that if they "rend" their hearts, then there can be no doubt of their sincerity. He calls them to pour out their hearts to God, and to realize that their sin has harmed their relationship with him more than anything else.

In doing this, the people can be assured that God is slow to anger and abounding in love*. He wants them to come back to him, and he wants to see them happy and secure. But this must happen for the right reasons. They must take advantage of the opportunity provided by the locusts, but if they do, they can be assured of a compassionate response from God. Joel uses an interesting expression when he says, "Who knows*? He may turn and have pity . . .". To the prophet, who understands God's nature, it is clear that God would never turn away anyone who sincerely calls on him. But those who have just become convicted of sin are usually afraid of God, because they know that they deserve his wrath. Joel's simple, humble message is, essentially, why not turn to him and see what happens? What you've heard about his grace and his love might really be true!

* It is interesting to compare Joel 2:13-14 with the ways that some of the identical phrases are used in different contexts in the book of Jonah. See, in particular, Jonah 3:9-10 and 4:1-2.

With all of these ideas in mind, Joel calls for the people to gather in a sacred assembly (2:15-17). This will only be of value, of course, if the people have individually determined to change in their hearts. But Joel is also teaching us that God does ask for more than individual conviction or commitment: it is also important for them to turn back to God together. In fact, it is so important that the prophet tells them to drop whatever they are doing, even if they are nursing children or getting married.

In calling on God together, the people are encouraged to appeal to him, through their priests, that he "not make your inheritance an object of scorn". Part of the prophet's concern is the way that other nations will look at Israel's God. Joel knows that the locust disaster - as well as the other such crises that happened to God's people in the Old Testament - brought necessary spiritual discipline that could produce good fruit. But unbelievers would not see it this way. Rather, they might scorn both Israel and its God, who (from their perspective) was incapable of protecting his

people.

The parallel, of course, is that sometimes others can also see today when God must bring discipline upon his people. In such cases, all we can do is to be humble and to admit that God is giving us the discipline we need. It is painful to admit our faults to others, but it is much better to allow them to think less of us than for them to think less of God.

Although the specific situation may be different, there are some important (and fairly obvious) applications of these verses for us. God has always desired our hearts above all else, and has always preferred to bless us rather than to discipline us. He loves us too much to allow our hearts to become dull, and there will be many times when he must discipline us, both as individuals and as a church. Whenever this happens, may we always have the proper, sincere response that Joel describes here.

Questions For Discussion & Study: How does thinking about what "caused" the locust swarm help us understand unpleasant things that happen to us? As you have time, consider also the study suggested above, beginning with a search for various examples in the Bible of how to respond to suffering (both our own and others'). In such situations, should we follow Joel's directives literally, or apply them in some other way? What would be the parallels for us of the kind of assembly that Joel describes in 2:15-17?

Promises of Protection & Healing (Joel 2:18-27)

We now see the first series of promises in the book of Joel. They are conditional, in that they accompany the response for which Joel has just called. Having these promises will make it much easier for Joel's listeners to choose the path that God wishes them to take. He promises to protect them, to meet their needs, and to heal them. This set of promises will then lead into the far greater promises in Joel 2:28-3:2.

Through Joel, God promises to protect his people and to meet their needs (2:18-24). Not only will he make sure to meet their basic needs, but he promises "enough to satisfy you fully". There are many images in these verses that are meant to paint an attractive picture of plenty and security. The prophet details such things as the ways that God will provide essentials like oil, grain, and pasture for livestock. He also depicts God using such natural processes as the seasons and the weather to bless them.

He also promises to drive out the invaders (in the immediate context, the locusts; later in their history, foreign oppressors) once his people have returned to him. Once these invaders have fulfilled God's purpose, they will be swept aside. Therefore God's people do not have to be afraid of them, and the overall picture in these verses is one of abundance and rejoicing.

Even beyond these blessings, God promises them a time of healing (2:25-27). He knows that the people need healing, even beyond the resumption of normal habits and the restoration of basic staples. God promises to make up for all of the devastation that they have been through, and he promises that (again, as long as they return to him), they will no longer be shamed; they will no longer be objects of pity and scorn from others who see their misfortune.

Most important of all, though, is the realization of God that they will regain. They will now

know that he is God, and they will know this much more deeply than they did before the locusts came. From God's perspective, this is the best and most valuable blessing of all. Of the immediate blessings that will come out of the locusts, it is the one he most wants to give them. It will now be up to them to appreciate this blessing as much as they should.

There are some powerful implications to the combination of call and promise in Joel 2:12-27. If the people will merely concentrate on returning to God, and giving God their hearts instead of mere outward things, then they have assurances that everything they truly need will be theirs. They will have the assurance that no one can do them any real harm, and that no one can ever overcome God or separate them from God. While stated in a much different style and context, Joel's message in this passage is very similar to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:25-34 and other passages. We should not worry about the things we need or desire in this world, but rather we should seek first the kingdom of God, and put our trust and hope in God to care for us while we seek him first.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How would the promises God makes in these verses apply to us? (That is, what parallel promises do we have?) What similarities are there between this passage and Matthew 6:25-34? What reasons might there be for teaching similar lessons in such different styles and settings?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2004*

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IN THE VALLEY OF DECISION: LESSONS FROM THE PROPHET JOEL

Notes For Week Four: God's Promises to His People (Joel 2:28-3:2)

We have now reached the most well-known part of the book of Joel. The prophet has already called the people's attention to the lessons that can be learned from the locust disaster, and he has explained the appropriate response that God wants from them. He has also given them some promises about the care that God will provide for them. Now, he will give them some added promises that, from a spiritual perspective, are even more important.

I Will Pour Out My Spirit (Joel 2:28-31)

Joel's prophecy about the pouring out of the Spirit is best known from Peter's use of it on the day of Pentecost (in Acts 2). While you are probably familiar with the ways it was fulfilled in Acts 2, it is still a passage that will repay careful study. The details of Joel's imagery are both memorable and illuminating.

The passage starts with the promise of the Spirit (2:28-29)*. To Joel's original audience, this would have been an attention-getter, since they were accustomed to only a few persons (such as Joel himself) having the Spirit come upon them. But God's promise here is that the Spirit would be given to everyone. To emphasize this, he details that both men and women, old and young will be given the Spirit. In fact, the old will dream as if they were still young, and the young will see visions**, as if they were old and wise. God says that he will pour out the Spirit "even on my servants", using the "servant" image that is prevalent in Isaiah.

* It is interesting to note that in the Hebrew Scriptures Joel 2:28-32 is a separate chapter (chapter three). Our chapter Joel 3 is thus Joel 4 in the Hebrew Scriptures.

** The phrase "see visions" is meant to carry the suggestion of seeing things as they really are. When the prophets are described as seeing "visions", we are meant to understand that they are being given a look at the full and complete truth of things. This can, of course, apply to the past, the present, or the future.

Numerous passages in the New Testament teach us that the Spirit was promised as a seal of God's ownership, as a deposit in our hearts that guarantees our inheritance, as a Counselor who guides us into all truth, and as an assurance of many other spiritual promises. It was the Spirit who conferred miraculous powers on the apostles and others. His spiritual gifts to us, though, are even greater than the ability to do miracles, if we look at them through spiritual eyes.

The promise of the Spirit is followed by a series of images of upheaval (2:30-31) that will characterize the day of the Lord. Joel foretells wonders in both the heavens and the earth, taking the form of powerful forces. On the earth, Joel foresees "blood and fire and billows of smoke". On a literal level, these represent the effects of war and other devastations that often came on "the day of the Lord" that the prophets foretold. In a more figurative sense, they represent the turmoil that the gospel brings to the hearts and minds of those who hear it. The gospel forces us either to allow God drastically to transform our way of thinking and living, or else to harden ourselves in a fruitless battle against God's will.

In the heavens, the sun will be darkened and the moon turned to blood. The first part can be

compared with Amos's prophecy (Amos 8:9) of the sun turning dark at noon, which happened at the crucifixion. But both are also meant to have a more spiritual application. The sun and moon are constants to us, bodies far away and beyond our control, objects that are always there and that we count on to behave in a predictable fashion. We even get our calendars and our understanding of time from the sun and the moon. Joel says that even these will be overpowered on the day of the Lord*: in a literal sense, certainly, at the final judgment, but also in a spiritual or figurative sense. God's power, seen through Jesus, turns all fleshly wisdom upside down, and challenges us to see past the physical universe into a more majestic and permanent realm. Other prophets**, especially Isaiah, use similar images of turmoil in the universe, as a way of expressing the upheaval in our minds and hearts that comes with learning the truths of God.

* Astrology, in many forms, was just as popular in the Roman era as it is today. So, some early Christian writers also referred to these verses to combat the belief that the sun, moon, and stars had power to predict the future. These verses remind us that God created the heavenly bodies, and they are under his power at all times.

** Here are a few passages to compare with Joel 2:30-31: Isaiah 13:9-13, 24:21-23, 60:19-22; Ezekiel 32:3-8; Joel 2:10. There are also passages such as Isaiah 34:8-17 that use different images to convey a similar message about God's judgment and justice, and how they bring upheaval, both physically and spiritually.

In applying this passage, we should use it to help us better to appreciate the gift of the Spirit that we as Christians have been given. Long before the final judgment comes, the Spirit will bless us in many ways, guiding our ministries and keeping us close to God. Just a brief survey of the promises Jesus gave about the Spirit's work will open our eyes to the priceless blessing that he is in our lives. Christians need to learn to look past their fleshly desires, activities, and identities, and learn to rejoice in becoming new, spiritual, holy creations. This comes at a cost: denying our flesh. When we allow God to transform us as he wishes to, our flesh will sometimes feel as if it was going through the kind of upheaval that Joel describes here.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does this passage help us to understand the significance of the Spirit in Christianity? How does the kind of imagery that Joel uses illustrate the spiritual effects of "the day of the Lord"? What is the connection between the pouring out of the Spirit and this upheaval in the heavens and the earth?

Deliverance & Restoration (Joel 2:32-3:2)

While there will be great upheaval whenever God comes, God promises safety to his own people. To all who have responded from the heart, and have accepted God's word and will, these verses offer some powerful promises. If we learn to understand and appreciate these promises, they can help us develop patience to deal with the troubles of this world, and they can help us develop a sense of eager anticipation as we look forward to our eternal inheritance.

The prophet promises that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (2:32)". Besides Peter's use of it in Acts 2, this phrase is also quoted in Romans 10:13. Comparing these New Testament references with the original context in Joel helps us to understand what the phrase really means. Calling on the name of the Lord means, of course, much more than a physical or verbal action. In the context of Joel, set amidst the turmoil that is described in verses 30-31, it is clear that those who are calling to God are doing so as an expression of their need for him and their dependence on him. They are aware of their own weakness in the face of these

overwhelming forces in the earth and the heavens, and they know that turning to God is their only hope of salvation*. They are turning from the heart, just as Joel has already urged.

* Acts 22 has an interesting parallel. When Paul tells of his conversion, he recalls how the vision of Christ left him dazed, blinded, and convicted. Ananias then came to preach the gospel to Paul, ending with the exhortation, "... what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

Those who do this, then, are promised deliverance. Joel uses an interesting expression when he says that they are "among the survivors whom the Lord calls". This is similar to the concept of the remnant that is used prominently in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah. Both expressions encourage us to think of the faithful as having survived a dangerous ordeal, which in fact we have. Every believer has to face the challenge of remaining faithful to God, while living a lifetime in a hostile world that worships sin and self.

The prophet also says that, as part of the sweeping changes that will accompany the "day of the Lord", God will restore the fortunes of his people (3:1-2). In promising restoration for Judah and Jerusalem, Joel is talking about more than simply restoring the nation physically. In the first covenant, God promised that, in the long run, blessings would follow faithfulness and disasters would follow disobedience. But in the new covenant, God wants us to move beyond the physical level, promising instead to give us spiritual blessings in greater measure as we grow in the faith. Amos made a very similar prophecy in Amos 9:11-12, and in Acts 15, James explicitly applies Amos's prophecy to the church.

The second verse of chapter three leads into the climactic portion of Joel. The prophet describes the nations of the world being brought into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, where they shall answer for their offenses against God and his people. God, of course, frequently judged other nations in a literal way in the Old Testament. Even those nations which he used to discipline his people were themselves later disciplined. He now looks ahead to a more complete expression of judgment. The Valley of Jehoshaphat is not meant as a reference to a literal place (Jehoshaphat is the name of one of the kings of Judah, but it does not refer to him either). The name Jehoshaphat means "God (Yahweh) judges". This idea comes up again in verse 14, which describes the valley of decision. That will be our next and final topic in our study of Joel.

These verses should encourage us to grow in our patience and our anticipation. We are absolutely assured that the day will come when God brings all things to light, and repays us all for the spiritual decisions we have made in this world. Christians should learn to yearn for heaven more than any earthly blessing, and to be patient, knowing that the sins, injustices, and tragedies of the world will all end one day.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does Joel 2:32 help us to understand what it means to "call on the name of the Lord"? What New Testament verses also help us to see what this means? In what ways has God "restored the fortunes" of his people since the time of Joel? How does this apply to us? In what ways should we apply God's assurance that he will judge those who harm his people?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2004*

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IN THE VALLEY OF DECISION: LESSONS FROM THE PROPHET JOEL

Notes For Week Five: Decision & Judgment (Joel 3:3-21)

This passage is the climax of Joel. The prophet has now explained the lessons to be learned from the catastrophic locust swarm, and he has detailed both God's call and God's promises. It is therefore time for the people to decide how they are going to respond to all of this.

Time For a Decision (Joel 3:3-16)

God has great patience, and he gives each person every possible chance to turn to God. He allows us to consider his call and his promises, and he teaches us gently through many means. There are times, though, when we must make definite, final decisions about important spiritual matters. Joel tells his listeners that this time will come both for them and for their enemies. He appeals to them to decide now, once and for all, to turn to God with all their hearts.

The prophet has just spoken of all the nations being gathered together into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, that is, the "valley" where God judges*. He now turns first to those nations that have committed offenses against God's people (3:3-8). As we can read in detail throughout the Old Testament, these offenses took two primary forms: corruption and oppression. Here Joel mentions both: they led God's people into drunkenness and immorality (corruption); they enslaved them and looted the temple (oppression). God will thus deal with them in kind, scattering the oppressors and bringing his own scattered people together.

* See Joel 3:2, and the explanation in last week's notes.

Then, with this assembly in the "valley" in mind, God calls his own people to prepare for war (3:9-13). They are told to "beat your plowshares into swords"*, that is, to set aside their normal activities and get ready to do battle. His people are, specifically, told to advance into the same Valley of Jehoshaphat (God judges). Unlike the other nations, who were brought there unwillingly, God's people advance of their own accord into this valley. They are to go there because the harvest is ripe; it is time for judgment. As we see below (verse 14), this is "the day of the Lord". As in other instances in Joel, this applies both in the present (the locust swarm and the response to it that God desires), the near future (God's dealings with his own people and the pagan nations throughout history), and the distant future (applications in Christianity).

* Contrast this verse with Isaiah 2:4. Consider the different contexts, and see if you can determine why these two prophets use similar imagery in two different (in fact, opposite) ways.

The prophet then foretells the day of the Lord in the "valley of decision" (3:14-16). Moreover, the day is near. Joel's original hearers were being called to delay no longer in returning to God with all their hearts. When we read this today, we are being urged to prepare ourselves for the day of the Lord, by deciding once and for all to set aside worldly perspectives and see things with spiritual eyes.

Joel describes this day with the same kind of imagery he used previously. The sun, moon, and stars will be darkened, and the earth and sky will tremble. He describes God as roaring and thundering, bringing terror to all who have failed to acknowledge him and accept him. The

revelation of even a small amount of God's power will be absolutely unbearable to those who are not devoted to him. At the same time, though, God's own people will have a much different feeling. Even as he renders judgment on the worldly and the ungodly, God will provide a refuge and a stronghold for his people. Our response to the display of God's power will depend entirely on how we have responded to him in our hearts and minds.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Summarize the applications of these verses for Joel's original hearers, and for us. In what ways did Joel want his listeners to "prepare for war"? In what ways should we? What is our "valley of decision"? In what forms might we see the imagery of verses 15-16 take place?

Closing Promises & Blessings (Joel 3:17-21)

As is so often the case, God's call and exhortation are followed by a series of blessings and promises. In these verses, God promises them the kind of short-term, physical relief from their sufferings that the people most desired to hear. At the same time, he also promises them some spiritual blessings that are even more valuable.

He first promises that Jerusalem will be made holy (3:17). The physical Jerusalem was attacked and defiled numerous times throughout the Old Testament era. But always, until everything was fulfilled through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God would restore and purify Jerusalem once his people turned back to him. Spiritual Jerusalem, the church, has likewise faced many periods of defilement, persecution, oppression, and desolation. But we can look forward to a day when the church of Christ will be made perfect once and for all.

God also promises his people a land flowing with plenty (3:18). This was a long-running promise to the Israelites, beginning with the generation of the Exodus. Throughout the Old Testament, God's people were promised peace and prosperity as long as their hearts remained with God. The promise that we have inherited is similar, but more spiritually-focused. While God loves to bless his people in earthly ways, we are no longer promised that obedience and faithfulness will guarantee earthly safety, prosperity, or peace. We are, though, promised that our faithfulness will always result in the corresponding abundance of spiritual blessings such as peace, grace, love, hope, and mercy. Note also Joel's image of the flowing fountain*, which is itself a look ahead to the spiritual blessings that would flow through Christ.

* The image of flowing water or living water is also used by other prophets to look ahead to the blessings that would come through Christ, or sometimes simply to describe spiritual blessings in general. See, for example, Isaiah 12:2-3, 41:17-20, 58:11; Jeremiah 17:13; Zechariah 13:1, 14:8-9.

The prophet now has a final word about God's people and their enemies (3:19-20). The guilty will experience eventual desolation. This proved true in a literal sense in regards to those who corrupted or oppressed ancient Israel. Every one of the neighboring pagan nations that corrupted the ancient Jews has long since disappeared, and all of the ancient empires that at one time or another invaded or enslaved the ancient Jews were eventually themselves conquered and brought low.

On the other hand, God promises security for his own people. In assuring them that Judah and Jerusalem would be populated in perpetuity, God is assuring them that he is faithful to his promises, and that his people can be secure in knowing that, no matter how firmly he must

discipline them, they will never be wiped out. In the Old Testament, no matter how badly things went for the nation as a whole, God always preserved a remnant, in looking to the future. As Christians, we and our church must also experience times of discipline and testing. But we also can be assured that, even when things go poorly, God will never allow his people to be destroyed. We must simply stand firm and endure such times, knowing that times of renewal and rebuilding are in God's future plans.

The book of Joel concludes with the promise that the bloodguilt of God's people will be pardoned (3:21). As the prophet says in this verse, God had not yet (at the time that Joel wrote) pardoned the guilt of his people once and for all: he had simply allowed them periodically to atone for it through the Levitical sacrifices. Joel is, of course, looking ahead to the time when the blood of Christ would finally enable us to obtain complete forgiveness for sins, through a once-for-all sacrifice. This, the most crucial of all of God's promises, is Joel's final promise.

The book of Joel is a call to examine our hearts and consider our blessings. We should learn to use the "locusts" in our lives as an opportunity to pull our eyes off of worldly things, and focus instead on our spiritual needs. We must appreciate all of God's blessings and promises, but we must also learn to put them into perspective. God blesses us in many visible, obvious ways, in order to get our attention and to help us see the value of the more important spiritual blessings (grace, peace, eternal hope, and the like) that he has in store for us. His greatest blessings, the ones he most wants to give us, are waiting for those who accept the prophet's call to make the right choice when they find themselves in the valley of decision.

Questions For Discussion or Study: For each of these final blessings and promises, indicate how they applied to Joel's original audience, and how they apply to us. Which are the most important? Which ones do we really appreciate or desire the most? How can we learn to place the highest value on the blessings that are truly the most valuable?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2004*

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