

SESSION #37

JOEL

1. Setting

Joel is yet another unique prophet and one of the early writing prophets. You will see on the timeline chart that he probably ministered about the same time as Obadiah and during the lifetime of Elisha. It's quite possible that he knew Elijah and Elisha. His place on the chart is much more certain than was the case of Obadiah because he wrote during the time of King Joash when there had been a serious plague of locusts. These locusts devastated the country of Judah.

Also during the time of Joel, there was a constant threat of invasion by enemy neighbors on Israel and Judah. This threat plus the locust attack helps to set both a backdrop and a springboard for Joel's message to the southern kingdom of Judah.

2. Message

And what is it that God wants to say to His people through Joel? He wants to tell them about "*The Day of the Lord*". So, Joel's theme is "*The Day of the Lord is coming!*" It is one of the common themes of the OT prophets but Joel is the first writing prophet to focus his message around it.

As he delivers his message, Joel has three main purposes. (1) He will foretell the coming judgment on Judah because of their sin, just like the other prophets have been doing.

(2) Since God will judge them for their sin, Joel appeals to them to repent: *turn back to God and He will receive you; and perhaps that judgment will not need to fall.*

(3) And thirdly, Joel wants to impress not only on Judah but on all the people of the world, the truth that world history will some day culminate in something called "*The Day of the LORD*".

There will be a "day of the Lord" in an immediate sense for the people of Judah, coming very soon in Joel's day. But there is also a long-term picture that he will point to:

eventually all of human history will culminate in what is called *“The Day of the LORD”*. The severity of his message caused one Bible commentator to call his book *“one of the most disturbing and heart-searching books of the Old Testament”* (R.A. Stewart).

Similar to what we saw with Micah’s message, there will be a dark time of judgment on the nations but later a bright restoration of God’s people: God’s kingdom, under the rulership of the King of kings, the Messiah in the Millennial Kingdom. And the OT promises made to Israel will finally be fulfilled.

In Joel’s book there is a movement from mourning and crying and concern about what is happening now with the prophecy of judgment and the plague of locusts, to a bright future of rejoicing because God will restore His people in the end.

3. Structure

The book’s structure moves from the “now” of judgment to the “then” of restoration, using three segments.

First of all, Joel rings the alarm bell for the people of Judah. Wake up! There’s trouble coming! He leans on what had recently happened with the locust invasion and reminds the people, *“Don’t you remember that terrible plague of locusts we just experienced? It devastated our national economy as they ate up all the crops.”* Everyone felt it deeply. And Joel says, *“You think that was bad? That was just a wake-up call from God. There’s another invasion coming which will be like locusts again, but this time it will be an invading army that will come upon the land like locusts.”* So, he wakes up his people with the alarm bell.

He appeals to them, secondly, with an 11th hour appeal that there can be hope if they will turn back to God. If they repent, God may spare them from this invasion.

C.S. Lewis wrote, *“God whispers in health and prosperity. If we fail to hear His whisper He shouts through suffering.”* If we’re not tuned to hear God’s whisper in the good times, maybe He’ll have to get our attention by shouting. And the best way God shouts is through pain and suffering because that’s when we pay attention.

That's Joel's appeal to his own people of Judah. They had not been listening to God's whispers; they just shut Him out. Now God tries to get their attention by the shouting of suffering. And Joel now urges them to listen to God. If they will, then God says, *"I will restore to you the years that the locusts have eaten"* (2:25). That's His promise.

Joel's third segment is an Annex, a final section dealing not with the present time of Joel's day but the final days of world history (2:28 – 3:21).

You can see that Joel's message addresses all four of those prophetic mountain tops in our earlier diagram. For the people of Judah in Joel's day he urges them to repent, reminding them of the severity of judgment like they experienced with the recent devastation of the locusts. If that locust-like invading enemy army comes, they will take the people into captivity – the second mountain peak.

He sees the Day of Pentecost in the third mountain time zone, when Peter preached and God sent His Holy Spirit in a new way upon people. And he sees the eventual Day of the Lord, mountain peak #4, when God will restore His people forever.

In our introduction to the books of prophecy, back in session #30, we mentioned the foreshortening effect which some of the prophets experienced as they looked into the future. Joel is a good case in point. In chapter 2:28 he wrote, *"And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit [God says] on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions."*

Peter, in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, recorded in the NT book of Acts, quotes this verse from Joel, identifying that prophecy with what was happening in Jerusalem right then. So, we know that this verse refers to the Day of Pentecost. Joel sees this as mountain peak #3; so far, so good. But look now at what Joel writes next in verse 30:

"And I [that is God] will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood and fire and pillars 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." Has that happened yet? Did it happen on the Day of Pentecost? No, this is still future from *our* own day.

But Joel, as he looks along the mountain range of time, sees peak #3 and #4 as being in the same time zone. So his description of the Day of Pentecost goes straight into the prophetic picture of the end of time. We live in the valley between these two mountains so we know there is a long period of time separating these prophetic focal points.

4. “Day of the LORD”

Joel deals with the Day of the LORD as his overall theme. And like many of the prophets who also used this phrase he uses it in three specific ways.

First of all, he speaks of the Day of the Lord coming in a local sense. The invasion of locusts is going to be matched, and made even worse, by enemy army troops whose destruction will be worse than that of the locusts.

Then Joel sees the Day of the Lord in a final sense, the end of world history, as described in 2:30 & 31. The very cosmos will be shaken in those fearsome days.

Then in chapter 3:14, he uses the Day of the Lord in a double sense. First of all, there will be a judgment on the nations around Judah in the Middle East of their day.

But beyond that, there will be a subsequent judgment on all the nations globally. Both are called “the Day of the LORD”.

Joel, then, is especially the prophet of “the Day of the LORD”. Other prophets will use this phrase but he is the first one to describe it so thoroughly.

In the final verses of his book, Joel looks past the judgment aspect of the Day of the LORD and describes the restoration of God’s people. And not just God’s people; He will make “everything new”. The biblical story began with creation. The final three chapters of the Bible, Revelation 22, 23 & 24 show us that He will re-create anew; He will make “all things new”.

You and I are now living in “man’s day”; the Day of the Lord hasn’t come yet in its final sense. It’s coming. But in the meantime, as Peter said in 2 Peter 3:9, God is patiently waiting for people to come to know Him. So, this is still what could be called “man’s day” – time yet for people to respond to God before history spirals down to final

destruction. And when that day comes, it will no longer be “man’s day”; it will be God’s Day and the opportunity for repentance will be gone.

Joel writes about “man’s day” in 3:14 when he sees “*multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.*” Joel brings people of his day – and not just his time but all generations since – to this recognition: as the Day of the Lord in its final sense gets closer and closer, we are increasingly in the valley of decision. As individuals, what are we going to choose?

Man’s way, or God’s way? People in the day of man live in the valley of decision, a time period when we can choose whether to walk with God or choose not to follow Him. We have that opportunity now because the Day of the LORD hasn’t yet come. Joel tells us that this day is coming, it’s certain. We just don’t know when.

But when it does come, the valley of decision will be closed, the scrolls of heaven will be opened and mankind will be judged out of what is in those books. And God will judge humanity in the Day of the LORD.

But at the present time we – and our families and friends – have the opportunity to make decisions that will determine our destinies. It’s a sobering thought from an ancient prophet named Joel.

In our next session we will look at probably the most famous of all the Minor Prophets, Jonah.
