

**Joel and the Valley of Decision**

*“The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls.” Joel 2:31-32*

The only thing that we really know about the prophet Joel is that he spoke the word of the Lord. He is given no fixed date and there is no narrative description of his life. No mention is made of Judah’s kings and no litany of national sins is cited. There is no report of miracles and no indication of the people’s response to Joel’s prophecy. The messages delivered by Elijah and Elisha were summarized in bullet-points and issue out of a dynamic narrative. Joel is all message.

It is ironic that this little book should be so hard to place in its historical period and yet so profound in its salvation history perspective. The timeliness of Joel’s prophetic message deals equally well with both the present crisis and the coming Day of the Lord. His unique relevancy confirms the testimony of the word of the Lord and compels today’s follower of Christ to take Joel’s message seriously. Joel saw how tragedy can impact our relationship to the Lord and intensify our awareness of the coming Day of the Lord.

Joel’s references to Judah and Jerusalem, Mount Zion and the temple, imply that he ministered in the southern kingdom. The placement of his prophecy early in the biblical canon, along with Hosea and Amos, seems to support the tradition that situated his work before the exile rather than after. His comments on Israel’s oppressive enemies, Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt and Edom, rather than Assyria, Babylon and Persia, suggest an early, pre-exilic date. His use of “Israel” and “Judah” to address the people of God collectively may underscore the Jerusalem ideal that longed for the people of God to be united, even if by force (1 Ki 22:4; 2 Ki 3:7; 2 Ki 14:8). There appears to be nothing in the book of Joel that precludes an early date. Joel’s attention to the temple with its priests and ritual offerings, fits with the importance of Jehoida the priest as the power behind Joash, who began to rule when he was seven years old (835-796). During Joash’s forty year reign there

was ample opportunity for the hard times described in Joel's prophecy to have taken place.

### **Discerning Tragedy**

Joel's attention grabbing intensity dispenses with introduction. Disaster renders small talk inappropriate and humor superfluous. The prophet insisted on holding everyone's attention. "Hear this, you elders, listen, all who live in the land" (1:2). The events precipitating his message are unique and destined to be remembered for generations to come. "Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation" (1:2-3). Everyone knew what had happened. No one needed to be told that a devastating locust infestation was ravaging the land, but whether they realized it or not, they needed insight.

Prophet-poets like Joel know that disaster details feed people's curiosity, but true discernment nourishes the soul. The prophet was not a newscaster recounting the event, but he was a vision-caster, framing the event in the light of God's Word. When calamity and catastrophe strike, people who have no time for God, suddenly challenge God. They question, "Where is God in all of this?" "How could God allow something like this to happen?" "What have we done to deserve this from the hand of God?" A common tendency among those who defend religion is to offer an apologetic to try to explain the ways of God to those who feel overwhelmed by life's disasters. But the prophet Joel offered no such explanation. He felt no compulsion to defend the ways of God to people in despair.

Joel's empathy consisted of a graphic description of the horrific extent of the evil. He drew on all of his talent as a poet to express the total devastation wrought by an army of locusts that swept over Judah destroying everything in sight.

"A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number;  
it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness.  
It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees.  
It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches  
white" (1:6-7).

The devastation was extensive, even drunkards were forced to wake up and weep. People mourned like a young woman grieving the loss of her fiancée. The temple

was shut down because no one had any offerings or sacrifices to bring. Everything was dried up, withered, destroyed, or ruined. “Surely the joy of mankind is withered away,” was Joel’s lamentable refrain (1:12).

It is important to note that Joel offered no reason for this devastation. He did not try to describe the sins of the people, he only sought to describe the extent of the destruction and how the people should respond to the Lord. There was no division in Joel’s mind between the outwardly righteous and the blatant sinner. There were no degrees of culpability, all were in need of repentance. “Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar....Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord” (1:13-14). Joel was not interested in determining cause and effect, but he was vitally interested in discerning the spiritual impact of this calamity.

Joel insisted on seeing this specific crisis in the larger context of the day of the Lord. He interpreted this tragedy on a trajectory that went straight to the ultimate day of judgment and destruction. “What a dreadful day!” he explained. “For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like a destruction from the Almighty” (1:15). The plague of locusts was a token of the judgment to come and Joel used this relatively small scale devastation to prepare people for the day of the Lord.

There is a marked affinity between Joel’s prophecy and the perspective of Jesus. During Jesus’ ministry two tragedies raised debate about personal culpability. Pilate massacred a group of Galileans at the temple and mixed their blood with Jewish sacrifices. It was a brutal act, calculated to disgrace the Jews and desecrate the temple. Some argued that these Galileans deserved their fate because they were worse sinners. But Jesus answered them emphatically, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Lk 13:1-3). Another tragedy in the news was the collapse of a tower that killed eighteen people. Jesus asked, “Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Lk 13:4-5). In both cases Jesus used the tragedy not to fix blame, but to point forward to the ultimate judgment and to call for repentance.

Having described the tragedy with poetic skill and spiritual intensity, Joel proceeded to repeat and intensify his description of the attack of the locusts. In

this second round he not only calls people to listen but he sounds the alarm from Zion. “Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness” (2:1-2). The locusts are described as “a large and mighty army” transforming the garden of Eden into a desert wasteland. Nothing can stop them as they blaze across the land in lock-step formation, destroying everything in their path (2:2-10). Once again this catastrophe strikes Joel as a reminder of things to come. “The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?” (2:11).

### **Describing Repentance**

The central theme of Joel’s prophetic message is that the present crisis and the coming day of the Lord ought to lead to immediate repentance and spiritual renewal. “‘Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’” (2:12). Contrary to those who claimed there was nothing they could do in the wake of this disaster, Joel interpreted the locust plague as a call to genuine repentance. “Rend your heart and not your garments.” The events were so overwhelming that Joel expected people to be shocked out of their complacency and cynicism. No one could afford to be seriously unserious in the light of the tragic devastation that had rocked the land. The normal diversions and distractions no longer worked. Those who lived with carefree indulgence and thrived on a steady diet of escapist entertainment were forced to take notice. The evil was now too obvious to be ignored and the suffering too real to brush off. It was too great to be pacified with religious ceremony and performance. Showy piety and empty ritual were useless in the face of tragedy.

The crisis called for true repentance. Now was the time to discipline appetites and attitudes through “fasting and weeping and mourning.” Joel’s plea to rend our hearts rather than our garments recalls the truth of King David,

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps 51:17).

Joel dared to hope for a destruction beyond the devastation of the land. He looked for a destruction of pride, greed, materialism, self-reliance and self-indulgence. He longed for people to return to the Lord, not for a week or two, but for the rest for their lives. This awful plague was a wake up call to turn to the Lord God before it was too late. Joel insisted that the call to repentance and spiritual renewal ought to be deeply personal, but he did not stop with the individual. The call was extended

to everyone in the believing community.

“Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” (2:15-17).

The evidence of personal repentance was to be felt in the entire community as they came together as one. The trumpet in Zion, first used to warn of disaster (2:1), now was used to declare a holy fast (2:15) and everyone, from the nursing baby to the oldest elder, was gathered to worship. Nothing was permitted to interfere with this sacred assembly, not even a wedding. They are led in worship and repentance by priests who weep not out of sentiment but out of real sorrow.

No matter how genuine the repentance might have been it would have been empty and ineffectual if it had not been for the mercy of the Lord God. Joel based his call to repentance on the character of God. Salvation was not dependent on human willpower or ethnic identity, but upon the grace and compassion of God. The only reason their return to God made sense was because God “is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (2:13). Moses proclaimed this same truth (Ex 34:6-7), as did David (Ps 86:15). And in the northern kingdom, Jonah, possibly a contemporary of Joel, voiced this truth word for word (Jon 4:2).

Just as Joel saw the disaster on two levels, the present crisis and the future day of the Lord, he also saw the Lord’s response on two levels. Joel was confident that the Lord would respond quickly to restore the land (2:19) and remove the threat (2:20). Sorrow would be turned to joy and the watchword would go out, “Be not afraid, O land...Be not afraid, O wild animals...Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God” (2:21-23). What the disaster had taken away would be restored by the Lord. Once again there would be plenty of grain and new wine. “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten...” declared the Lord (2:25). The end result of this outpouring of blessing would be to confirm to his people the

exclusive truth claim of Yahweh. “Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed” (2:27).

But Joel’s prophecy does not stop there. He was led by the Spirit to take this even further and project God’s blessing into the future of salvation history. His prophecy moves from the present crisis to that extended period of time in the future, known as the day of the Lord. Joel’s transition from his contemporary horizon to a future horizon is brief on purpose. His little phrase, “and afterward,” introduced a new era in salvation history without fanfare. He minimized the gap between the present and the future to stress that the people of God were meant to live in the present with the eminent expectation of the future. In other words, we are to live today in the light of eternity.

And what is to come “afterward”? Joel declared the word of the Lord, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls” (2:28-32).

Joel used the same poetic skill and spiritual intensity to describe the coming day of the Lord that he had used to discern the power and purpose of evil. He voiced what Moses had hoped for years before, when he said, “I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (Num 11:29).

What immediately strikes most Christians about Joel’s prophecy is the convergence of Pentecost and the final judgment. Joel’s vision of the Day of the Lord brings together two endpoints and brackets the Day of the Lord. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit climaxes *the end of the beginning* of the Day of the Lord. That new day arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, and reached its climax following Christ’s resurrection, when the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, came

upon the disciples. The outpouring of the Spirit brought unprecedented public notice to this whole new age. The apostle Peter used the prophecy of Joel to defend the disciples against charges of intoxication. He addressed the crowd, “Fellow Jews and all of you who are in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:14-16).

Joel’s prophecy describes the outpouring of the Spirit in two ways: first, the followers of the Lord will be blessed with insight and understanding; and second, the dreadful day of the Lord will be announced with a dramatic display of apocalyptic signs. At Pentecost, the apostle Peter saw these two events converging not only theologically but historically. He quoted the whole Joel passage, including both the outpouring of the Spirit for gospel insight and the outpouring of the Spirit for apocalyptic judgment. As time went on he reflected on God’s purpose for delaying the final judgment. He encouraged and admonished believers, saying,

“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (2 Pet 3:8-10).

### **Decision Valley**

Joel developed the theme of God’s ultimate judgment and applied the certainty of God’s justice to his own day. This was a very legitimate exercise for the prophet to engage in because all people and nations will be judged in eternity for their actions. Therefore, Joel looked to the day of the Lord when God would gather all nations and “bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat” (3:2). The name Jehoshaphat means the Lord judges. The nations were to be judged on how they treated Israel, the people of God, and on how they responded to the exclusive truth claim of Yahweh. For the first time, Joel named specific sins, “They cast lots for my people and traded boys for prostitutes; they sold girls for wine that they might drink” (3:3). And for the first time he named names and identified Israel’s

oppressors, Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt, and Edom. Their unprovoked evil actions against the people of God called for their condemnation.

Once again, Joel expanded his horizon and enlarged the sphere of God's ultimate judgment to take in all the nations. "Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war!" (3:9). The language he used to describe this judgment shows up in the teachings of Jesus and in the apostle John's vision of the end. "Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness! (see Mk 4:29; Rev 14:15,18).

Jesus and the apostles used the language of Joel to offer perspective on the final judgment. Joel was the first to speak of the fast approaching dreadful day of the Lord. He was impressed with its immediacy, its universal scope and its utter finality. He proclaimed that the day of the Lord was "near" (1:15; 3:14), it was "close at hand" (2:1) and the time to prepare for its coming was now. Jesus renewed this sense of urgency and echoed the message of Joel as he emphasized the nearness of the coming day of the Lord (Mk 13:29; Mt 24:32). When James admonished, "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (Jam 5:8), he spoke in the tradition of Joel.

Joel envisioned multitudes upon multitudes in the valley of decision where the Lord "will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem" and "judged all the nations on every side" (3:12,14,16). He declared what the Lord had impressed upon him, that the day of the Lord was closer than they thought. "For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision" (3:14). He prophesied forward from the current crisis to the ultimate day of the Lord in order to emphasize the opportunity we have today to call on the name of the Lord in the valley of decision. Joel ended his prophecy with the Lord's promise to pardon the bloodguilt of Judah. It had not been revealed to him, as it has to us, that the means of pardon, would be Jesus, the Incarnate one, God's own Son.

When the apostle Paul said, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom 10:13), he based his understanding of the Lordship of Christ over all people, Jew and Gentile alike, on Joel's most famous line. Joel fulfilled his prophetic calling by discerning the tragedy, describing repentance, and leading us to the truth in the valley of decision. Joel was a prophet of hope who deserves to be heard today.

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls” (2:32).