

## The Message of Joel for Today

Dr Michael P.V. Barrett

Although Joel did not directly date his prophecy, the circumstantial evidence points to the 9th century B.C., either during the illegal, renegade rule of Queen Athaliah or the early days of the boy king Joash, who had providentially escaped Athaliah's deadly plot against the royal seed (2 Kings 11-12).

The days were dark, both politically and spiritually. There seemed to be little prospect for hope, but not even wicked Athaliah could frustrate God's purpose and plan. The Lord raised up the prophet Joel to provide the theological interpretation of all the tragic events of the day and to announce details of God's fixed plans for the future.

Joel 1 describes an invasion of an innumerable army of ravenous locusts that devastated the country with severe economic and religious consequences. It was the cause of consternation, deprivation, and perplexity. Although the particular circumstances are not the same now as then, the situation of our day is not much different from Joel's. Our day is marked by darkness, chaos, and uncertainty, politically, religiously, economically, socially, and environmentally. Joel's message to his generation is equally relevant to ours. Just substitute "coronavirus" for "locusts."

Joel made it clear that what to the natural eye seemed to be a natural disaster—the locust plague—was in reality a manifestation of the Day of the Lord. Disasters happen regularly according to the laws of nature and direction of Providence, and they were particularly common and predictable in Palestine. But this locust plague was different: as a Day of the Lord, it was a "shattering from Shaddai" (1:15). Shaddai, normally the title of God associated with provision, was now revealed as the God who deliberately took away all provisions.

God had directly, supernaturally, and unmistakably intervened into human affairs to accomplish His purpose of judgment against the nation's sin. Eternity had broken into time. The locusts,

palmerworms, cankerworms, and caterpillars were dedicated and obedient soldiers under the command of the Lord Himself. Joel declared not only that God had punished, but that He would punish again with even greater severity and devastation unless the people repented. Using both the past (chap. 1) and future Day of the Lord (chap. 2) as the incentive, the prophet issued two great calls for repentance (1:13-14 and 2:12-17). Turning to the Lord was the only hope. But it was a real hope because God does not turn away those who turn to Him.

The invitations in Joel 1 focused on the external manifestations of repentance: putting on sackcloth and fasting. Sackcloth was a coarse material made from either goat or camel hair, which would be extremely uncomfortable. Fasting was an occasion to put aside physical concerns and pursuits to devote attention to spiritual matters. The focus of fasting was not to deprive or punish the body but to afflict the soul (Lev. 16:29). Sadly, man can turn the best of religious practices into nothing more than outward acts without heart devotion to the Lord.

The call to repentance in Joel 2 does not exclude the appropriate outward displays, but it does underscore the importance of inward reality: “turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God” (2:12-13).

*Turning* is the key word in the Old Testament for evangelical repentance, picturing a complete reversal of direction. It is a turning away from sin to God, resulting in new attitudes and a change of perspective. True repentance is a matter of the heart, the principal word for the inner being: the mind, emotion, and will. Intellectually, heart repentance requires a change in thought about God, acknowledging sin’s offence against His holiness.

Emotionally, it is expressed in contrition over sin, and volitionally (according to the will), it involves the resolve to flee to God in apprehension of His mercy. God does not despise this kind of broken and contrite heart. The external evidences of repentance will accompany it (weeping, mourning, fasting), but it is imperative to “rend” the heart and not just the garments.

Not only does Joel expose sin, declare judgment, and call us to

repentance, but he also gives assurance of God's mercy that guarantees acceptance. Joel 2:13 is a remarkable catalogue of divine perfections that give hope to the hopeless.

- He is gracious—that objective and sovereign display of divine favour to the undeserving.
- He is merciful—that subjective display of compassion to those in a pitiable state, along with the necessary action to alleviate their condition.
- He is slow to anger—literally, “long of nostrils,” a picture of His patience and longsuffering without which none would be saved.
- He is of great kindness—His faithful loyalty to His covenant oath that guarantees His promise to receive all those who come to Him.
- He relents concerning judgment—His pledge to deal in mercy and not in wrath to those who repent. If God were not who He is, there would be no hope.

Joel preached a God of hope to a people who seemed too far gone for hope.

After Joel described the locust judgment, predicted a more severe one to come, and issued a call to repentance, he detailed the blessings that God purposed for His people. The blessing was threefold:

- An immediate, temporal restoration of what the locusts had eaten (2:21-27),
- A later spiritual blessing fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (2:28-32),
- An even later blessing involving judgment on every enemy and special favour on God's people (chap. 3).

The unifying principle of each is that the experience of restoration and blessing is available to God's people whenever they repent and seek Him. God has a purpose to advance His kingdom that cannot be frustrated.

The immediate blessing of restoration was marked by prosperity, praise, and experience of God's presence (2:26-27). The prospect of such a revival should incite the church today to seek the Lord. God was able to reverse the devastation caused by the locusts; He is able to reverse the darkness of our day as well. Joel

teaches us that it is not a vain thing to seek the Lord in genuine repentance.

The two “later” blessings are reminders that God has a purpose for His kingdom that is unconditionally certain. Pentecost commenced a key epoch in the progression of redemption with the massive effusion of spiritual power available to all in the church to serve in kingdom work. Whereas in the Old Testament spiritual empowerment was limited to the leadership, in the New Testament era, every believer has access to the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Joel’s prophecy about Pentecost makes his message especially relevant to the church's ministry today.

Joel’s final prophecy (chap. 3) remains future for the church and thus most relevant. It is a solemn reminder to sinners that they must repent before it is too late. Those multitudes in the valley of decision (2:14) are in the place of no return; the judgment has been decreed. But the day of judgment on the wicked is also a day of deliverance for God’s people (3:18-21). It is a timeless and universal truth that there is safety, security, and salvation with the Lord and doom without Him. That is what Joel preached, and it is the message for the church today.

Taken from The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth, JULY/AUGUST 2020, Vol. 28, No. 4, Page 145-146. Used by permission.