



THE MINOR PROPHET CHALLENGE

The Prophecy of Joel

INTRODUCTION TO JOEL

All introductory material has been excerpted from The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible published by Zondervan Publishing. We highly recommend it for your personal study library.

Author

The prophet Joel is identified only as “Joel son of Pethuel” (1:1). The book gives us no other information about the prophet, and he is mentioned nowhere else in scripture.

Time and Place of Writing

Date: Unknown

Since the book of Joel contains no clear indications as to when it was written, it is difficult to date the book. Joel’s keen interest in Jerusalem—particularly in the temple and its functionaries (e.g. 1:9, 13-14; 2:14-17, 32; 3:1,6, 16-17)—suggests that he lived in Jerusalem at a time when temple services were active.

It has been noted that, compared to the long list of accusation in other prophetic books, the book of Joel does not catalog the sins that cause the disasters it mentions. This has caused some interpreters to suggest that Joel was purposefully written as a liturgical guide to be used at any time of crisis or threat to God’s people. In this light Calvin’s firm posture that one cannot know the date of the book may suit the situation well.

Purpose

To call God’s people to repentance so they could escape judgment and enjoy blessings on the approaching day of the Lord.

Finding Christ in Joel

The book of Joel has had an important place in the life of the church. The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus and his followers were familiar with the writings of Joel, and its influence is most evident in the New Testament passages that speak of the latter days. These passages pick up on the graphic images used by Joel to describe the day of the Lord and the plague of locusts (e.g. Mk. 13:24; Lk. 21:25; Rev. 6:9; 9:2). Also important are the promises in 2:28-32, which Peter quoted and claimed to have been inaugurated during the event at Pentecost (Ac. 2:16-21). Paul also referred to this prophecy in Romans 10:13, where he used Joel 2:32 to substantiate his argument that “there is no difference between Jew and Gentile” (Ro. 10:12). Salvation is for all; as the prophet Joel stated: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:32).

The church has continued to find Joel’s teaching on the day of the Lord to be an important source of hope and comfort on the one hand and a word of warning on the other. In times of distress and trouble Christians have found the promises regarding the ultimate blessing, protection and vindication of the Lord’s covenant community to be consoling and inspiring. At the same time Joel’s vivid depiction of the dreadful aspects of the day of the Lord has served as a reminder of God’s holiness and judgment and as a continuing call to wholehearted repentance and holiness of life. Ultimately, the great day of the Lord is the day of Christ’s return, the day when he will judge the whole world, casting his enemies into hell and blessing believers with an eternal inheritance in the new heavens and new earth.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT JOEL

Key Structural Feature: Right Now and In A While

Roughly speaking the book of Joel falls into two major sections.

Contemporary Context

1:1-2:17

A locust plague and drought foreshadowed the need for the greater, impending day of judgment.

Future Context

2:18-3:21

God responded to the repentance of his people with promises of final judgment against his enemies and with blessing for his repentant people.

Each of these prophetic perspectives is important because they will help us understand how to interpret the key themes of the Day of the Lord and how judgment and repentance apply to God's people.

Key Theme: The Day of the Lord

There's Israel and Then There's *Israel*

One of the more difficult parts of understanding Joel is reconciling how at times God's judgment seems to be against the nation of Israel with God's promises to protect them and instead offer judgment against those outside of Israel.

The prophets are reflecting the reality that would be made explicit in the New Testament, namely, that simply because one had an ethnic identity that was Jewish did not guarantee blessing and exclude judgment. Paul makes the point in several places that being born into the nation of Israel was not the requirement for salvation (nor was keeping the law), but rather having faith in God to provide salvation was the key (cf. Galatians 3:5-7; Romans 2:25-29 and especially Romans 9:6-8). In Romans 10:10-13 Paul cites Joel 2:32 as proof that anyone who repents and calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.



This is important for us to remember in that it is possible for the “Israel” to face both blessing and judgment at the same time—Those who are ethnically part of Israel, but who have rejected having a saving relationship by faith with God will face judgment, while those who are spiritually part of “True Israel” (Jews and Gentiles), who have accepted a saving relationship by faith with God (ultimately through Christ), will face blessing.

Judgment or Protection & Blessing?

The “Day of the Lord” occurs 5 times in the book of Joel and 11 other times in the Old Testament. In the first three of these (1:15, 2:1, 11) the Day of the Lord is referred to in the contemporary context of the book and describes judgment that will come upon Israel if she does not repent.

The last two references 2:31 and 3:14 take place in the future context part of Joel, and while they also speak of judgment, they also speak of provision and protection for those who follow God.

To complicate matters, Peter cites Joel 2:28-32 in his first sermon in Acts 2 as being fulfilled on that day by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the apostles.

So in light of all this, what exactly is “The Day of the Lord,” and when was it supposed to take place? There are 3 overlapping layers of meaning to the Day of the Lord. All speak of God’s judgment upon sin, and two of them also refer to God’s provision for those who are his people (i.e. “spiritual Israel”)

T h e D a y o f t h e L o r d

Joel 2:31, 3:14 (cf. Revelation 20:11-15)

Referring to God’s future judgment on all people who have rejected Jesus as their savior, in which they shall receive due punishment for their sins, but those in a saving relationship through Christ will be spared and protected; it will be accomplished by the second coming of Christ.

Joel 2:31 (Cf. Acts 2:16ff)

Referring to God’s future judgment on the NT nation of Israel (both ethnic and spiritual), in which any who failed to receive Jesus as Messiah would be cut off and have no claim to being “God’s people”; it was carried out by the Holy Spirit indwelling the apostles in Acts 2 allowing them to speak in the languages and dialects of all people present in Jerusalem for the feast.

Joel 1:15, 2:1, 11

Referring to God’s immanent judgment on the OT nation of Israel (both ethnic and spiritual), unless they immediately repented of their sins; it was carried out by an “army” of locusts and drought in the land.

Do Bugs, Bug You?

There is much scholarly debate about rather or not the locusts referred to in Joel 1 and on the nation. It's best to probably view them as literal insects in chapter 1 and then understand chapter 2 to blend the literal and figurative use of locusts

Key Theme: Repentance

The other key theme in Joel is repentance. God is calling his people to return to him and faithfulness in their relationship to him. Because we don't have more specific information about the circumstances surrounding Joel's ministry, the passages which deal with repentance give us a good general pattern for how to respond to God's correction in our lives. Here are a few principles we see in Joel regarding repentance from 2:12-18 (cf. 1:13-14)

First, repentance is something that is expected of all who follow God when they find themselves out of accord with his standards. In his call for repentance, Joel bids elders and children, priests and the congregation, men and women to repent. He specifically mentions in v. 16 nursing mothers and newlyweds to come forward in repentance, people who were characteristically exempted from the normal demands of religious life in Israel. No one is excluded from needing to be right with God in their daily walk.

Second, repentance is primarily about a "whole person" change, not merely external actions. In 2:12-13, God says that our return to him is to be "will all our heart" and that we are to "rend our hearts" and not just our garments. There is a grave difference between simply changing our outer behavior vs. having a change in heart toward God and our fellow believers.

This is not to say that repentance is not accompanied by outer manifestations. God also instructs his people to engage in fasting, weeping, mourning and sincere prayer asking for mercy. These are to arise from heartfelt sorrow over our sin and not just be religious exercises.

Third, our repentance is to be grounded in God's character. 2:13 explicitly tells us that our repentance has as its basis God's grace, mercy, patience, covenant love, and willingness to spare his people discipline when they return to him. Fear, guilt and a desire to avoid punishment are signals that our repentance is not really "whole person" repentance.

Third, we should expect to receive God's forgiveness and blessing when we return to him. In 2:19ff we see that God will renew both his land and his people. 2:28ff is the passage cited by Peter on Pentecost. In some sense, it indicates that even our most feeble efforts to draw near to God are met with his grace and mercy in ways that are far beyond our ability to understand. Giving our entire heart to God is always a "good deal."

WHY IT MATTERS

In one sense, The Day of the Lord speaks to the reality that although we live in a sin damaged world, God will one day make all things right by drawing his people to himself in love and mercy and executing a just punishment on all sin. How can this truth cause you to think and live differently with regard to:

- *Things which aren't ultimately important, but which tend to take up a lot of your time?*
- *Your relationships with people who don't yet know Christ?*
- *The way you approach your relationship with God?*

(answer the last question first by yourself; then discuss the first 2 questions with your group)

Without being judgmental or critical, where do you sense that NPC needs to repent in order to more closely follow Christ?

Where do the people who you are in community with at NPC need to repent in order to more closely follow Christ?

Where do you as an individual need to repent to more closely follow Christ?