

A Look at a Book: Joel

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Tonight we will look at the second book in our study of the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament, as we turn to the book of Joel.

The Basics of the Book

The first thing we notice about the book of Joel is that it is brief, consisting of only 73 verses which are divided into 3 chapters. This brevity of content is the sole reason this book is included among the 12 Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. The message of Joel is no less important than any other content within the Old Testament, just brief in nature.

The Author and Date of the Prophecy

The very first verse of the book is really the only specific background information we have regarding the historical setting of the text. In this heading, we learn the source of this word is from God and this message has been given to a man named Joel, who was the son of Pethuel (peth-oo-ale'). Other than the information that is to follow within the prophecy itself, we really know nothing else about Joel, the prophet, except that his name actually meant "Yahweh is Lord". Throughout the Old Testament, Joel was a fairly common name, which gives little, if any, help at all in identifying Joel's role in society. Joel's father's name, Pethuel, is the only other identifying information we have recorded from Joel, and still, it provides no help in determining who Joel was or a proximate date for this text since this is the only occasion that this name, Pethuel (peth-oo-ale'), is mentioned in the Old Testament. Incidentally, it is neat to see God's plan at work through ancient history as the name, Pethuel, means voice or vision of God. Obviously, this name is a testimony to the lessons and instruction Pethuel passed on to his son Joel.

As we saw last week in our study of Hosea, the book began with a detailed list of kings who reigned during the time Hosea prophesied. Yet, in Joel, there is no mention of any kings, as well as no word regarding the Babylonians, the Assyrians, or even the Persians. Also, as we learned in our introduction to the Minor Prophets, one cannot rely on a chronological sequence of the books within the Old Testament to determine the times events occurred, so the placement of Joel within the order of the Minor Prophets is of no help either. This information leaves us as readers of the text, with no real good evidence at all to determine an approximate date when Joel actually prophesied.

Setting and Audience

On the other hand, we do know that the prophecies of Joel were intended for the southern kingdom of Judah. You probably remember from prior studies that there were two tribes that comprised the southern kingdom around the city of Jerusalem and 10 tribes that comprised the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel is mentioned 3 times in Joel (vs. 2:27; 3:2; and 3:16), but there are no references made to specific northern Israelite locales. As we will see, Joel's audience is all levels of society within Judah, including both the leader and the laborer, old and young, and male and female. Joel does not really address any specific sins of the people of Judah, nor does he rebuke them for their idolatry which was believed to be on the rise at the time of his prophecy, but instead calls them to repentance for their "callous indifference" to God's authority.

Central Theme

If there is a theme of Joel's prophetic words, it can be summarized with the phrase, "The Day of the Lord". This "Day of the Lord" that Joel refers to, will be a day when God reveals His character of power and holiness. It will bring both a day of judgment for those who oppose or reject God's will and way, and it will bring a day of deliverance to those who are faithful. This phrase, "The Day of the Lord" occurs five different times throughout the 3 chapters of the book (vs. 1:15; 2:1; 2:11; 2:31; and 3:14), and is used by Joel, to explain both its description or nature and the anticipation of its coming. Three of these 5 references, verses 1:15, 2:1 and 3:14, indicate the day is near or is at hand, while verse 2:11 describes the day as already being present. Yet, verse 2:31, views the day more as a distant date in the future. Throughout the prophecy, Joel causes us to think about the Day of the Lord and whom will God save?

As we begin to study the text, let's start in the first 16 verses of chapter 3, where God describes the other nations, beyond Judah, as full of wickedness and ready for, in agricultural terms, a harvest of judgment. God calls for a time when all of the nations will be summoned to assemble in the valley of Jehoshaphat or the valley where Yahweh judges. Here the verdict will not be good because of such crimes as slavery, theft and bloodshed. There will be no defense against God when He brings the charges of sin against the nations. In this trial like setting, God will be the judge and jury and He will also bring the final decision.

It is interesting to note that in this portion of Joel's prophecy of God's promise results were witnessed. In 343 B.C. King Artaxerxes conquered and enslaved Sidon, while just a few years later, 322 B.C. Alexander the Great took Tyre, selling more than thirteen thousand inhabitants into slavery.

Content of the Text

With this judgment day of the Lord in mind, let's begin in chapter 1, verse 2 through verse 14. Here we see Joel addressing a terrible and devastating infestation of locusts that has invaded the land. In this portion of chapter 1, he questions anyone who will listen from the leader to the labored, asking the question, has anything like this ever happened before? Not just in the recent past, but ever before? He wants folks not only to contemplate the incredible impact of the infestation, but also to remember this calamity so that what is learned from it can be passed down to generations to come. He speaks of the devastating effect this infestation has had on people from all walks of life. In verse 6, Joel even conveys the idea of the infestation as an invading army knowing that if his audience did not understand the agricultural impact of the plague, they would certainly understand the impact of a military invasion.

In the rest of chapter 1, Joel not only assesses the catastrophe, but he is also driven to contemplate God's purpose in midst of all of these events. Knowing indeed that "Yahweh is Lord" as his name implies, Joel's strong faith in God is manifested in his challenge to the people to cry out to God in genuine worship and in earnest and sincere prayer. And, he begins to think about this event, and the ruin that has occurred and how it might compare to the "Day of the Lord" or the ultimate day of judgment. It is evident in this portion of Joel's prophecies that the things we prioritize and in turn place our trust in life are not always things that bring everlasting certainty.

What begins in Joel's prophetic message as some serious food for thought based on the current circumstances of the day in chapter 1, turns to an even greater unsettling description of an even more terrible and more destructive and imminent event; the coming of the actual "Day of the Lord". Look at chapter 2:1-11. As one biblical scholar remarked, this portion of chapter 2 is the Lord saying, you think the current situation is bad, "you ain't seen nothing yet!" Here, Joel shares God's message to blow the trumpet sounding the alert that a mighty army beyond all comprehension is on the move. All consuming, arriving like an earthquake and sweeping in like a tornado, Joel even poses the question at the end of these verses asking, who can endure this very great and terrible day?; the Day of the Lord; judgment day.

It is here in the first 11 verses of chapter 2, that Joel paints a very clear picture of God's consequences for the disobedience and sins of His people. Joel reminds Judah that there is indeed an almighty God that is often ignored, and that He is a God that will indeed bring judgment on His people for their very real sins. It is through this image Joel has described that even this very day, we must realize our need to be saved from our sin and its consequences, which is the exact judgment of God. You see, even today, our sin is still very real, and outside of Christ, God will judge us for it. Therefore, whether in Joel's day or ours, we have the greatest of need to be saved from our sins.

Now that Joel has explained God's judgment and the need of God's people to be saved, in verses 12 through 17 of chapter 2, he issues a beautiful invitation to Judah to actively and immediately come back to God and make a real change in their lives. It is through this invitation that Joel shows his people that God is not only a God of justice, but even better, a God of mercy. Joel follows this invitation to repentance with three assurances from God beginning in verse 18 of chapter 2 and going all the way to the end of the book.

The first assurance is cited in chapter 2, verse 20, that God will rescue His people from their enemies and bring judgment upon all the nations. In this passage, God will remove the northern army or plague locust, depending upon a current perspective or an eternal perspective, casting them into the desolate land and the eastern and western seas.

The second assurance is cited in chapter 2, verses 18 through 27, and, again in verses 18 through 21 of chapter 3, that God will restore prosperity to his people. In these passages, we read of restoration to the land, the animals and the people through God's good gifts that had once been taken away. The devastation would most assuredly be permanently reversed.

And finally, the third assurance found in Joel's message is cited in chapter 2, verses 28 through 32, that God will reside among His people. In this passage, it is evident that no amount of prosperity means much at all without the presence of God himself. So, it is here in this most familiar passage that Joel prophesies of Pentecost and God's presence with His people. Peter would later quote this same passage in his first sermon after the ascension in Acts 2:16-18, knowing it was an initial fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. At the very core of our salvation is God's restoration of His people to himself. This final promise makes verse 2:32 the key to the entire book. God want His people to desire salvation through Him to restore a right relationship to Himself.

Summary

So, to summarize, the book of Joel is prophecy given by one we know little about. Yet, he is able to survey a current catastrophe with eternal perspective, receiving God's message of judgment and His call to repentance. Joel is then able to offer the hope of salvation to God's people through God's promises of His protection, His Prosperity, and His presence.

Information taken from the following sources:

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