

August 10, 2025
Return: A Call to Action
Joel 1:1-20
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...When it comes to the context of the book of Joel, it's a little trickier than some of the other books we've gone through in the minor prophets. It's clear that Joel is writing to the southern kingdom of Judah, so we know it's after the kingdom of Israel split in two. There's reference to the temple, so it wasn't during the Babylonian exile, but beyond that it gets complicated to determine what specific time-frame Joel was writing in, because we actually don't know a whole lot about him. We can make some educated guesses based on the other nations he mentions but we just don't know for certain.

What is important is that he is clearly writing to God's people, and calling them to respond and return to God through intentional action, in a pattern that isn't very different than some of the other books we've covered in this series. And one of the things that makes Joel so interesting is the fact that some of what he has prophesied in this book is clearly still to come in the future, but we'll get more to that in the coming weeks.

Today, we're going to start with the first chapter, and as we read, we're going to see Joel give three specific calls to action and each call to action is followed by a description of the circumstances that makes God's judgement described here necessary. If you're able, please stand with me as I read God's word from Joel 1:1-20. [Read]

Let's start with vs. 1-4 which contain the first call to action, a call to listen and to tell. We get a brief introduction sentence, that really has next-to-no information other than a couple names and a standard statement about prophetic authority, and then we're right into the action. And right away Joel starts with making clear his audience, "Hear this you elders," which represent the leadership of the people, and "give ear, all inhabitants of the land." So basically everybody. He calls out the leaders, but really everyone needs to listen.

Then he starts calling their attention to an event that's clearly so known and recognizable that he doesn't even have to address it right away for the people to know what he's referring to. It would be like in the days and weeks following 9/11. You could say this same sentence, "Has anything like this happened in your days or in your father's days" and people would immediately know what you're referring to.

So he wants them to pay attention and listen to what he has to say about this event that has happened, but he doesn't stop with just listening. He goes on to say, "Tell your children about it, and have your children tell their children, and their children the next generation". So basically, let this serve as a warning for all who would hear about it afterwards, which we could argue, includes you and me reading it now.

And what is this big dramatic event that should be listened to, learned from, warned about? A massive plague of locusts. By the way it's described, perhaps a greater locust plague than anyone had ever seen before. Vs. 4 is very descriptive with pictures of waves upon waves of the creatures, leaving nothing but destruction in their wake. In fact, the language is so extreme that some have even gone so far as to say he is being hyperbolic, exaggerating beyond the norm for the sake of making a point.

But whether that's the case or not, we have to ask: what is the point? How do we know this has to do with the Lord or judgement on his people? Well for one, the Old Testament often talks about swarms of locusts being used as a means of discipline from God. We think of the eighth plague in Egypt when Moses was asking Pharaoh to let the people go. We see passages, like Deut. 28, where destructive locusts are specifically described as a disciplinary curse God will send against his people if they are disobedient. Combine that with Joel's clear call here to listen and warn, it's clear this is no ordinary, natural event.

And that should be enough reason for us to listen to whatever warning is coming as well. While we aren't Israel or Judah, and we want to be cautious not to apply their judgements, warnings, or promises directly to us, clearly, we should pay attention to this warning.

I don't know about you, but when someone tells me something positive, I may pay attention and listen, but it doesn't always change my opinion right away. Let's say someone tells me about a restaurant they went to and enjoyed. Maybe I'll go check it out some day, may not. But on the other hand, if I hear a negative review from someone I trust, about a bad experience they had, I have already made up my mind to never go there. I typically take a warning much more seriously than the opposite.

It's the same here. This is a very devastating event that happened to God's people, and Joel wants it shared far and wide so that everyone will listen to the warning and learn from it. And so he then spends the rest of the chapter describing how horrific this plague truly was, reminding the people and calling everyone to mourn before God for the consequences of their disobedience.

Which leads us into the next section of the chapter where we see a second call to action, a call to grieve over sin. Here, Joel addresses specific groups of people, each with a strong verb "to wail," or to "grieve." The first group he starts with is, maybe, a little bit unexpected.

In vs. 5-7, Joel first addresses drunkards. There's different theories as to why Joel would start with drunkards of all people. Some commentators think it's because he wanted to show how these consequences affected all people groups, from the so-called low end of their society, all the way up to the priests at the top.

But more likely, others have noted the contrast between the drunkards who are usually joyful and jubilant, uninterested in the cares of the world and Joel's call to mournful grieving and wailing. In this case, starting with "awake" could be a call to the people to wake up from their stupor, to open their eyes to the reality of the world around them, and that even the source of their joy was affected by this divine plague.

Think of the times you've heard some bad news and thought, "this doesn't concern me" or the times tried to ignore or distract yourself from the news by doing something fun and pretending it doesn't exist. Joel isn't leaving that as an option. "Wake up," he says, "this is real and it affects everyone."

When he talks about the vine being made a waste and the fig tree a stump, obviously there is a connection to the "drunkards" he's addressing, but it likely goes deeper than that. One commentator I read pointed out that "The vine and the fig tree were symbols of God's blessings on Israel and, even, symbols of Israel itself. So Joel probably also means that the

locusts had left the whole nation bare.” In other words, this is a big problem for everyone. Something you can't just pretend didn't happen.

The next group Joel addresses starts in vs. 8. Many have suggested that this section is actually referring to Jerusalem as a whole between the comparison to a virgin, which is common in the OT, to the clear language of temple and worship. With that in mind, vs. 9 is particularly noteworthy, because it's acknowledging the consequences are so bad that the very items required for proper worship of the Lord are unavailable, and thus the offerings have been “cut off”, causing the priests to mourn and grieve.

In fact, vs. 10 goes so far as to imagine the land itself mourning over it's ruined grain, dried up wine, and failing oil. And so the fields, plants, trees can't produce what they need, and so the people can't worship as they ought to, a theme we'll see repeated later on in the chapter.

In vs. 11–12, we read about the vine and fig tree again and the harvest of the field, but now Joel includes additional fruits and plants. The point he is making here is that it's not just the necessities that are affected but the luxuries too. The crops are all gone and along with them the very enjoyment of all the people and the nation. Because again, the crops were associated with the blessings of the Lord. No crops means no blessings, and that is something that should rob the people of their enjoyment.

Then, Joel turns his attention to the priests in vs. 13. There's a few notable things here. First, the instruction to dress in sackcloth, which we also saw back in vs. 8, is a call to proper mourning and public grieving. A common way of showing your grief over sin in those days was to exchange your clothing for a burlap sack and to cover yourself in ashes to symbolize your helpless estate before God. The fact that the call is to “pass the night in sackcloth” shows that this isn't meant to be for a brief moment in time, but this calls for mourning and grieving over their sin both day and night.

And Joel explains why, including himself with the people by referring to the priests as “ministers of my God.” Once again, the items required for the grain offering and the drink offering aren't available. And so the people can't, or perhaps even won't, worship God the way they ought to, and arguably need to. Notice back in vs. 9, it says the grain and drink offering have been “cut off” and here it says they've been “withheld”, which to me implies there's once again more being addressed here than lack of availability.

I think of those situations when you have a fight with someone you care about deeply, a friend, family member, spouse, and then you come to recognize that you are in the wrong. What you need to do to restore that relationship is humble yourself and apologize. But often times that's the last thing you want to do, because it just adds to the embarrassment and the shame.

I think the same thing is going on here. What the people need most is to return to a proper worship of their God, and whether because of their own guilt or shame, or simply the lack of availability due to the consequences of their own actions that they brought upon themselves, they can't or won't return to the proper worship of God. And for the priests who were to represent the people before God, that should be enough reason to wail and grieve.

And so, almost half the chapter, is devoted to directing “all the inhabitants of Judah,” from one end of the spectrum to the other to grieve over their sin and the divine judgement that has come for their disobedience.

What's interesting is, have you noticed yet, that in this passage at least, Joel doesn't actually name what the disobedience is. We know from our study of the other minor prophets and from the history of Israel itself. And the people Joel is addressing clearly know because they are experiencing it. I think the specific sin or sins isn't mentioned here for those reasons and because the specific sin is isn't the issue. It's the consequences of disobedience, and Joel's call to action to turn from it and return to God, which we see in the final section of this passage in a moment. What Joel is urging them to do is take their sin seriously, to grieve over it, and acknowledge the consequences of it.

It's a lesson we can learn from, as we too struggle with disobedience. We may not always face the same devastation when it comes to the consequences of our sin in the age of grace. But the reality is that even if we don't see the consequences ourselves, Christ had to face the ultimate punishment on the cross because of our sin. We still, like Joel's audience, ought to listen to these warnings of judgements past, and be grieved by our sin and the consequences of it. We, too, need to be reminded to turn from our sin and to God, so let's see how Joel does that in these last verses, starting in vs. 14.

You may have noticed the call-back to the language from vs. 2 in referring to "the elders and all the inhabitants of the land", as well as the reference to "the house of the Lord your God" connecting back to vs. 9 and 13. The words he uses here, "consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly...cry out to the Lord", are all language of repentance. And so, the final call to action is a call to repent.

Ultimately, what the people needed most was to return to the Lord in right worship and obedience, that involved first turning away from, or repenting of, whatever it was that got them disciplined in the first place. And so the command is clear, the leaders and all people, are to turn away from their sin and turn to the Lord. To repent, and seek after him.

When we look at vs. 15, the tone here is sort of like "You think that was bad? It's going to get a whole lot worse." Here we see the first of several references in this book to the day of the Lord. In this case, it seems like a caution. Judgement has come, and it was terrible. Think of how much worse it could be in the future if you don't repent and turn to the Lord. And just in case warnings of "destruction from the Almighty" doesn't get the picture across, Joel continues with a more descriptive picture of what that day of judgement will look like in vs. 16.

You already know this from what the locust plague brought. No food, lack of enjoyment, lack of proper offerings in the temple worship. And on top of that, in vs. 17-18, he describes it in even more detail. Seeds die before they grow, the reserve stores are empty and there isn't even food for the animals and they groan like the land itself did in vs. 10. The cattle wander and even the sheep, who require just a bit of grass in a pasture, have suffered. It is a bleak picture, affecting everyone and everything, serving as a warning to repent and return to the Lord before it is too late.

As this chapter comes to a close, Joel once again steps in as one of the people, in what seems to be a demonstration of what he is demanding of them in vs. 19. It's sort of the idea of "if I'm going to tell you what to do, I need to be willing to do it myself, so I'm going to start us off".

So, Joel sets the example and cries out to God in the midst of God's judgement. And I think it's important to note here that "crying out" to God is more than just asking for his

help or asking for him to relent of his judgement and show mercy. If repenting is turning away, crying out is turning to him, seeking him, relying on him and ultimately trusting him.

Crying out to the Lord is a longing of the heart and soul. Turning to the God who loves us and away from the disobedience that so easily entices us.

Just like the nation of Judah, our struggle with sin and disobedience is a constant one that we will continue to face until Christ comes again. And it's one that we can't and shouldn't try face in our own strength. For those of us who are in Christ, we have received the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to be obedient and so we need to yield to him every day. We will not get it right all the time, and thanks be to God for his forgiveness and grace. In the midst of a world marred by sin and the consequences of it, we need to hear Joel's call to action, to listen to and tell others of God's warnings and judgement, we need to grieve over our sin and the sin of our world that grieves the heart of God and will get its just due. And, as far as we are concerned, we need to continually repent of our sin, realign ourselves and turn to him as the source of every blessing and strength. Let us pray.