

JOEL

Background

Disaster struck the southern kingdom of Judah. A plague of locusts had descended upon the land leaving devastation in their wake. The prophet Joel seized the occasion. He used the *current* disaster to draw attention to the *coming* “Day of the Lord.”

Joel makes mention of the Day of the Lord five times in his book. He is the prophet who introduces this theme in the Bible. The Day of the Lord is a very technical phrase when used by the prophets. It is the whole period of time beginning with God’s dealing with the nation of Israel after the rapture of the Church at the beginning of the Great Tribulation and extending through the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and His one thousand year reign on the earth unto the creation of the new heavens and new earth.

Joel used the *current* disaster to draw attention to the *coming* Day of the Lord in three ways:

1. In chapter one he draws attention to a discussion of the Day of the Lord. He mentions the Day of the Lord suddenly in verse fifteen, inviting a discussion of how it relates to their situation.
2. In chapter two he draws attention to a description of the Day of the Lord. The verses describe many aspects of God’s future dealings with the Jews.
3. In chapter three he draws attention to the decisions in the Day of the Lord. He speaks of the “multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision.”

Joel has a skill for putting current events in their future perspective. A study of his book provides a valuable lesson in reaching our own generation. People are more curious today than ever regarding prophecy and the Day of the Lord... And we have so much more to share with them than ever before!

[Read chapter one...]

Chapter One

Introduction

Locusts had invaded the southern kingdom of Judah. The devastation and destruction that was left in their wake touched everyone in every profession at every level of their society. It was a **crisis** of enormous proportions.

You face times of **crisis** in your life. The crisis may be global... It may be national... It may be local... It may be personal. We are currently enduring an energy crisis; but some of you are enduring crises of a more private nature.

Joel counsels people in their time of crisis. I see two types of people in this first chapter – those he addresses *before* verse fifteen, and those he addresses *after* verse fifteen:

1. The people Joel addresses before verse fifteen have **wandered from** the Lord. God uses the crisis to **call** out to them
2. The people Joel addresses after verse fifteen are **walking with** the Lord. The crisis is a **consolation** to them.

We'll organize our thoughts around these two points: #1 A Crisis Is A Call To You Who Have Wandered From The Lord, and #2 A Crisis Is A Consolation To You Who Are Walking With The Lord.

#1 A Crisis Is A Call To You Who Have Wandered From The Lord (v1-15)

Joel was contemporary with Elijah and Elisha. He is considered by most solid Bible scholars to be the first of the writing prophets. God chose him to introduce the subject of the Day of the Lord. He did it by beginning with the crisis at hand.

Joel 1:1 The word of the LORD that came to Joel the son of Pethuel.

Joel 1:2 Hear this, you elders, and give ear, all you inhabitants of the land! Has *anything like* this happened in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?

Joel 1:3 Tell your children about it, let your children *tell* their children, and their children another generation.

The locust plague was like nothing they had ever experienced. It demanded all of their attention. No one could distract you from it with stories of their own. It would become legendary as it was passed down generation after generation.

By the way, it's important to pass down to your children through words what the Lord has done for you.

Joel 1:4 What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten.

It has been suggested that these words describe four successive stages of growth in the life cycle of a locust. It is more likely that Joel is referring to four successive swarms of locusts.

Locusts were *often* sent by God as a judgment, but they were not *always* sent by God as a judgment. Joel never says that they were a judgment from the Lord. They seem to be a natural plague.

You need to be careful when you announce that a disaster is a judgment from God. Some are; but others, and likely most disasters, are simply the result of the curse of sin upon the earth. They are the consequences of living in a fallen world. I've heard Christians proclaim AIDS as the judgment of God upon our planet. Perhaps it is; but it's more likely that AIDS is the natural consequence of sin.

Beginning with verse five and continuing through verse twelve Joel addresses various groups of people affected by the plague of locusts. The words he uses in addressing them indicate that these people had **wandered** from the Lord. He tells them to "awake," "lament," "be ashamed," and "wail." The people he addresses after verse fifteen seem to be in a different category. In fact, Joel doesn't really address them; they comment upon the disaster from a spiritually mature perspective. They are those who are **walking** with the Lord.

The first group of those who have wandered from the Lord are drunkards.

Joel 1:5 Awake, you drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the new wine, for it has been cut off from your mouth.

Joel 1:6 For a nation has come up against My land, strong, and without number; his teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he has the fangs of a fierce lion.

Joel 1:7 He has laid waste My vine, and ruined My fig tree; he has stripped it bare and thrown it away; its branches are made white.

The locusts are compared to an invading army. They were as terrifying as they were destructive. They destroyed the vineyards and the fig orchards. They stripped the bark right off the trees.

No vineyards, no grapes; no grapes, no wine; no wine, only *whining* from the *winos!* It's interesting that drunkenness is the only sin Joel mentions in his book, and drunkards are the first group of people you encounter. Apparently the nation suffered from alcohol abuse.

It is **not** a sin to drink alcohol. It **is** a sin to be drunk on alcohol. I'm not really sure where you draw the line between drinking and being drunk. You could apply the legal definition of blood alcohol content and go around testing yourself. I've seen a lot of people who have a pretty good buzz who would deny that they are under the influence of alcohol. One of the problems with booze is that it impairs your judgment, so you're drunk but won't admit it.

I have a *personal* concern about drinking, and I have a *pastoral* concern about drinking:

1. My personal concern comes from the fact that I was once a drunk! Jesus set me free from alcohol and drugs to serve Him.
2. My pastoral concern comes from firsthand observation of the destruction drinking has brought into people's lives. I've never known anyone whom alcohol has helped. I've known far too many whom alcohol has hurt.

It has become somewhat fashionable for Christians to drink in moderation. It's a dangerous trend. Even if you are among the very few who really can pull it off, you run the risk of stumbling others. Consider carefully what you're doing and why it is so important to you to drink.

The next group who have wandered from the Lord are the priests.

Joel 1:8 Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth.

Joel 1:9 The grain offering and the drink offering have been cut off from the house of the LORD; the priests mourn, who minister to the LORD.

Joel 1:10 The field is wasted, the land mourns; for the grain is ruined, the new wine is dried up, the oil fails.

The destruction of the crops made it impossible for the priests to bring offerings to the Lord in the Temple at Jerusalem. If verse eight is addressed to the priests and they are like a young bride whose has lost her husband, then it is a picture of their wandering from the Lord. It is a way of saying that they had left their first love. They still went through the motions of sacrifice and offering, but their relationship was more *ritual* than *real*.

Christians can leave their first love; Christians can be more ritual than real. Times of crisis reveal the nature of your walk with the Lord. When everything fails, do you still have the Lord and the joy of the Lord? You read in Habakkuk 3:17-18,

Habakkuk 3:17 Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls -

Habakkuk 3:18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Joel next addresses the farmers.

Joel 1:11 Be ashamed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley; because the harvest of the field has perished.

Joel 1:12 The vine has dried up, and the fig tree has withered; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree - all the trees of the field are withered; surely joy has withered away from the sons of men.

Why “be ashamed?” **Because their joy was bound-up in material rather than spiritual prosperity.** As their crops withered, “surely joy... withered” from their hearts. The plague was a crisis that revealed where their treasure lay.

There is hope for you who have wandered from the Lord! The crisis is a call to return. You are to *come* to the Lord and *cry out* to Him.

Come to the Lord:

Joel 1:13 Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; for the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.

They had nothing to bring so they were to “come” just as they were. It was not the ritual that was important, but their hearts.

Your crisis is usually *not* a judgment from God. It is a natural consequence of living in a fallen world. God uses the crisis. God is calling you in your crisis so He might give you peace and joy in a relationship with Him.

Cry out to God:

Joel 1:14 Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders *and* all the inhabitants of the land *into* the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

The people were to consecrate a fast and come together to the house of worship; this was how they were to **cry out** to God.

1. Fasting promotes a change of focus from material things to spiritual things.
2. The house of worship is the place where God's presence dwelt, and where He promised to meet with them.

God is calling you in your crisis; you cry out to Him and make the connection!

Verse fifteen is dropped suddenly into the discussion:

Joel 1:15 Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD *is* at hand; it shall come as destruction from the Almighty.

They were **not** in the Day of the Lord. Why mention it here? Its mention elevates your thinking from the earthly to the heavenly, from immediate things to ultimate things. It is a reminder that your life is more than your immediate circumstances. You belong to God and exist to have a relationship with Him – crisis or not.

The people in verses five through twelve had to be reminded of this. The people we encounter in verses sixteen through twenty remembered this from the start and had a very different perspective on the crisis.

#2 A Crisis Is A Consolation To You Who Are Walking With The Lord (v16-20)

The tone of these verses is very different. These people are able to analyze the crisis and counsel themselves. They receive consolation and are able to console others. I'm using "consolation" in the New Testament sense of *strength which is sufficient to endure* a crisis. It is the supernatural strength of the Spirit of God for you to *endure* crisis and to *encourage* others in the crisis.

Those who are walking with the Lord do two things in a crisis: they *survey* the crisis and they *seek* the Lord.

Survey the crisis:

Joel 1:16 Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God?

Joel 1:17 The seed shrivels under the clods, storehouses are in shambles; barns are broken down, for the grain has withered.

Joel 1:18 How the animals groan! The herds of cattle are restless, because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep suffer punishment.

Joel didn't have to tell these people anything. They surveyed the situation and were already looking to God for strength.

It also seems that they wanted to strengthen others. Their calm survey of the crisis was a prelude to their counsel.

Often we try to minimize the crisis in some way. We have a whole lot of cliches we use. When we minimize the crisis, we give people a false hope and keep them from seeing their need to cry out to God.

Seek the Lord:

Joel 1:19 O LORD, to You I cry out; for fire has devoured the open pastures, and a flame has burned all the trees of the field.

Joel 1:20 The beasts of the field also cry out to You, for the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the open pastures.

The references to "fire" and "flame" are a further description of the locust plague. The land looked as though a fire had swept through it.

These people immediately sought the Lord. They were not told to "awake," "lament," "be ashamed," or "wail." They simply

acknowledged the Sovereignty of God. Even if God had not sent the locusts as a judgment, He had allowed it to occur as a natural plague. They were submitted to His cosmic plan. They knew that eternal issues and decisions were at stake.

Conclusion

Eternal issues and decisions are **always** at stake. Crises occur, but not because God is angry and pouring out His wrath upon sinners. They occur because sin has brought a curse upon creation.

God will pour out His wrath upon sinners during the Day of the Lord which we will read about in chapters two and three. The crises you face today are to **call** you or **console** you. They focus your heart on eternal issues and decisions. They can *drive* you **from** God, or *draw* you **to** God.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.