

## Insights on Joel

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The book of Joel has arresting imagery and startling lessons, especially when read from the New King James Version. Here are five areas of emphasis in this book.

#### *AN AGELESS, GENERALIZABLE LESSON*

The book begins with a warning against minimizing its lessons.

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?  
<sup>3</sup>Tell your children about it,  
Let your children tell their children,  
And their children another generation.

Furthermore, the prophet identifies this lesson as one for all the ages, to be transmitted personally. Though the circumstances are anomalous (nothing like this has ever happened before), it is nonetheless pan-temporal, and the prophet highlights the importance of seeking implications for believers of all cultures and all times.

#### *REFLECTION OF SYSTEMATIC DESTRUCTION*

The first image of the book is one of incremental, systematic destruction personified by locusts:

<sup>4</sup>What the chewing locust<sup>[1]</sup> 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.

At first, the source of the destruction seems to be a particular physical enemy. As exemplified in 2:2-9.

A people come, great and strong,  
The like of whom has never been;  
Nor will there ever be any such after them,  
Even for many successive generations.  
<sup>3</sup>A fire devours before them,  
And behind them a flame burns;  
The land is like the Garden of Eden before them,  
And behind them a desolate wilderness;  
Surely nothing shall escape them.  
<sup>4</sup>Their appearance is like the appearance of horses;

And like swift steeds, so they run.  
<sup>5</sup>With a noise like chariots  
 Over mountaintops they leap,  
 Like the noise of a flaming fire that devours the stubble,  
 Like a strong people set in battle array.  
<sup>6</sup>Before them the people writhe in pain;  
 All faces are drained of color.<sup>[1]</sup>  
<sup>7</sup>They run like mighty men,  
 They climb the wall like men of war;  
 Every one marches in formation,  
 And they do not break ranks.  
<sup>8</sup>They do not push one another;  
 Every one marches in his own column.<sup>[2]</sup>  
 Though they lunge between the weapons,  
 They are not cut down.<sup>[3]</sup>  
<sup>9</sup>They run to and fro in the city,  
 They run on the wall;  
 They climb into the houses,  
 They enter at the windows like a thief.

However, the true foe is revealed to be an angered God, One who can not only summon humans to wreak His will, but can also cause the sun, moon and stars to go dark and who can summon earthquakes (2:10-11), thus showing His power over all natural forces. What He decrees, He enforces:

<sup>11</sup>The LORD gives voice before His army,  
 For His camp is very great;  
 For strong is the One who executes His word.  
 For the day of the LORD is great and very terrible;  
 Who can endure it? (2:11.)

### *IMAGES OF LOST POTENTIAL*

The book of Joel isn't just about what the people of his time lost; it's about the potentials of loss that would make them lose hope. These potentials are seen in three areas:

1. The potential of lost resources. One way Joel shows the utter perdition of these people is by loss of physical resources: trees have withered, vines dried up, fig trees stripped bare, harvests failed. Fires have destroyed fields and property, and drought has dried up the water sources. Even the domesticated animals and wild beasts "groan."
2. The people have lost their ability to ignore the situation. Even drunkards are unable to escape through drink, because there's no wine. True soberness will bring home the bitterness of what's happened.

3. Most terrible of all, the people have lost the ability to reconcile with God; for the failure of the crops has left them with nothing to offer in sacrifice to God:

<sup>9</sup>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.  
<sup>10</sup>The field is wasted,  
The land mourns;  
For the grain is ruined,  
The new wine is dried up,  
The oil fails.

Perhaps the most poignant image, however, of this loss of potentials is found in chapter 1, verse 8:

<sup>8</sup>Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth  
For the husband of her youth.

In Bible times, an engaged woman whose husband died was referred to as “the virgin who is a widow.” Joel uses this image to show the despair of such loss of potential: a marriage that would never be consummated, children that would never be born.

Because of all these losses of potentials and avenues of hope, joy has disappeared (1:12.)

#### *THE MECHANISMS OF GOD’S CHANGE OF DEMEANOR AND ACTIONS*

The first factor Joel mentions that will cause a change of such horrendous circumstances is repentance from religious leaders:

<sup>13</sup> 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.  
<sup>14</sup>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.

Secondly, God requires personal, individual repentance.

<sup>12</sup> "Now, therefore," says the LORD,  
"Turn to Me with all your heart,

With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning."

<sup>13</sup>So rend your heart, and not your garments;

Return to the LORD your God,

For He is gracious and merciful,

Slow to anger, and of great kindness;

And He relents from doing harm.

<sup>14</sup>Who knows if He will turn and relent,

And leave a blessing behind Him--

A grain offering and a drink offering

For the LORD your God?

<sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion,

Consecrate a fast,

Call a sacred assembly;

<sup>16</sup>Gather the people,

Sanctify the congregation,

Assemble the elders,

Gather the children and nursing babes;

Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber,

And the bride from her dressing room.

In this repentance, a "relenting" from sin, the people will experience a fellowship with a God who will Himself "relent" from His actions; a God who calls His people to be like Himself – gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love – all qualities the people had forgotten and must be taught by example.

One of the mechanisms, so to speak, that causes this change of actions of the Lord is instigated by an appeal to His reputation, both before unbelievers and also before the generations that would come after:

<sup>17</sup>Let the priests, who minister to the LORD,

Weep between the porch and the altar;

Let them say, "Spare Your people, O LORD,

And do not give Your heritage to reproach,

That the nations should rule over them.

Why should they say among the peoples,

"Where is their God?"

### *RESTORATION'S BRILLIANCE*

The zeal of God to destroy will be replaced by zeal to bless:

① <sup>18</sup> Then the LORD will be zealous for His land,

And pity His people.

<sup>19</sup>The LORD will answer and say to His people,

"Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil,

And you will be satisfied by them;

I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.  
<sup>20</sup>"But I will remove far from you the northern army,  
And will drive him away into a barren and desolate land,  
With his face toward the eastern sea  
And his back toward the western sea;  
His stench will come up,  
And his foul odor will rise,  
Because he has done monstrous things."

In addition, all the physical factors of punishment will be reversed:

<sup>21</sup>Fear not, O land;  
Be glad and rejoice,  
For the LORD has done marvelous things!  
<sup>22</sup>Do not be afraid, you beasts of the field;  
For the open pastures are springing up,  
And the tree bears its fruit;  
The fig tree and the vine yield their strength.  
<sup>23</sup>Be glad then, you children of Zion,  
And rejoice in the LORD your God;  
For He has given you the former rain faithfully, <sup>[4]</sup>  
And He will cause the rain to come down for you--  
The former rain,  
And the latter rain in the first month.  
<sup>24</sup>The threshing floors shall be full of wheat,  
And the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil.

In addition, He will restore something no one could give back: the restoration of lost time, and all its implications of loss of potential:

<sup>25</sup>"So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten,  
The crawling locust,  
The consuming locust,  
And the chewing locust, <sup>[5]</sup>  
My great army which I sent among you.  
<sup>26</sup>You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,  
And praise the name of the LORD your God,  
Who has dealt wondrously with you;  
And My people shall never be put to shame.

The purpose is not for the gratification of people, of course, but the glorification of God

<sup>27</sup>Then you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel:  
I am the LORD your God  
And there is no other.  
My people shall never be put to shame.

### *AN EXTRAORDINARY GIFT*

Because we in the twenty-first century have the outpoured gifts of the Holy Spirit, we most likely do not realize the impact that the gift of the Holy Spirit – who, in the main in the Old Testament was only mentioned in passing—would have had on this people who had every reason to lose hope.

- <sup>28</sup> "And it shall come to pass afterward  
That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;  
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
Your old men shall dream dreams,  
Your young men shall see visions.  
<sup>29</sup> And also on My menservants and on My maidservants  
I will pour out My Spirit in those days.  
<sup>30</sup> "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth:  
Blood and fire and pillars of smoke.  
<sup>31</sup> The sun shall be turned into darkness,  
And the moon into blood,  
Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.  
<sup>32</sup> And it shall come to pass  
That whoever calls on the name of the LORD  
Shall be saved.  
For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance. . .

The nations who had oppressed God's people will not escape punishment, and this will take place in "a valley of decision."

- <sup>14</sup> Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!  
For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.  
<sup>15</sup> The sun and moon will grow dark,  
And the stars will diminish their brightness.  
<sup>16</sup> The LORD also will roar from Zion,  
And utter His voice from Jerusalem;  
The heavens and earth will shake;  
But the LORD will be a shelter for His people,  
And the strength of the children of Israel.  
<sup>17</sup> "So you shall know that I am the LORD your God,  
Dwelling in Zion My holy mountain.  
Then Jerusalem shall be holy,  
And no aliens shall ever pass through her again."

### *THE BLESSINGS ABOUND*

All the physical blessings will be restored:

- <sup>18</sup> And it will come to pass in that day

That the mountains shall drip with new wine,  
The hills shall flow with milk,  
And all the brooks of Judah shall be flooded with water;  
A fountain shall flow from the house of the LORD  
And water the Valley of Acacias.

All God's people's enemies will be punished:

<sup>19</sup>"Egypt shall be a desolation,  
And Edom a desolate wilderness,  
Because of violence against the people of Judah,  
For they have shed innocent blood in their land.

And finally, God will absolve them not only of trespasses but even of guilt:

<sup>20</sup>But Judah shall abide forever,  
And Jerusalem from generation to generation.  
<sup>21</sup>For I will acquit them of the guilt of bloodshed, whom I had not acquitted;  
For the LORD dwells in Zion."

#### SOME LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOEL:

The book of Joel offers an unforgettable view of God; and the NKJV offers a unique phrase to describe Him: "the One who executes His word." Though we often think of Him as a God who originates the Word, and speaks the Word; it is less familiar to think of Him as Executor of His Word.

We often mourn our losses in this life, but the book of Joel shows that not only does God restore what we've lost if we return to Him, He also can restore all potentials—even time and space—that can't be measured because we don't know what we've lost. By giving us back "the years the swarming locust has eaten," He offers us not just "overs" on those things we feel didn't have an opportunity to experience, He extends to us an expanded sense of time as well as everything time implies: newness of experience, restoration of missed opportunities, even perhaps an erasing of all our mistakes.

God can, will and does reformulate history for nations and for individuals.