

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 50

Joel: The Day of the Lord

Earthquake, tsunami, tornado, hurricane, flooding, drought: What do you think of when you see one of these natural events occurring in our world? Do you write it off as naturally occurring events, or the result of cyclical climate change, or the consequences of manmade global warming? Or, do you ever wonder whether an event like one of these could be an act of God intended to judge sinners, or to get the attention of saints?

The belief that natural disasters are intentional acts of God dates back to the Puritan days in Colonial America. According to Stephen Prothero, a Boston University religion scholar and author: “When the Great Colonial Hurricane raced up the east coast and lashed New England in August 1635, its 130 mph winds and 21-foot storm surge were almost universally viewed in supernatural rather than natural terms—as a judgment of God on the unfaithful.”¹ But that was 376 years ago, before modern science, before meteorology, before Accuweather and Live Doppler Weather Radar. Do people in our day still believe God is at the root of what are otherwise natural disasters?

A recent survey found that 40 percent of Americans do believe that natural disasters are signs from God.² Television evangelist Pat Robertson, no stranger to controversy, stated publicly that he believed the earthquake in Haiti was God’s continuing judgment on the Haitian people for having made a pact with the devil more than 200 years ago. Robertson labeled Hurricane Katrina as God’s judgment on “bad religion and widespread abortions.”³ It would seem that most Americans, and certainly the media, easily dismiss Robertson and such claims as extreme and far-fetched.

On the other hand, John Piper, well-respected Pastor and author, suggested that a 2007 tornado in downtown Minneapolis was God’s judgment on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The unexpected tornado struck the convention center and the Central Lutheran Church across the street at the exact moment the convention was to decide on whether or not the practice of homosexuality should disqualify a person from pastoral ministry. According to witnesses, the tornado hit the church and convention center, then, lifted out of sight.⁴ Piper’s beliefs may not be so easily dismissed.

¹ Prothero, Stephen. *My Take: God no longer in the whirlwind*. CNN Belief Blog. August, 2011.

² Green, Lauren. *Poll: Nearly 4 in 10 Americans Say Natural Disasters Sign from God*. Foxnews.com. March 24, 2011.

³ Prothero, Stephen.

⁴ See John Piper’s *The Tornado, the Lutherans, and Homosexuality*. Desiring God. August 19, 2009.

Another preacher, or Prophet, also held strong convictions that God worked in and through natural disasters. Not just passively or permissively, he believed God used calamity both actively and intentionally. The Prophet Joel saw the hand of God in a plague of locusts that devastated the land of Judah. It seems that Joel alone recognized the spiritual significance of the event. He also recognized that it was only a prelude to the coming judgment of God on unfaithful Israel and the faithless nations of the world.

Joel passionately proclaimed the coming Day of the Lord. His call was a call to repentance and a call to return to Yahweh, in hopes that Yahweh would relent the sending of overwhelming judgment upon his people. Should they return, Joel reminded the people that Yahweh might repel their enemies, restore his people fully, and remain in their midst forever. Joel envisioned an ideal state where the people of God would know Yahweh is God and lives in an unending time of fellowship and prosperity.

Joel and the Period of His Ministry

We can say with certainty that Joel was the son of Pethuel, and that his name means “The Lord (Yahweh) is God.” Beyond that, scholars can only speculate as to his identity. For example, Andrew Knowles states: “Joel seems particularly interested in the temple and concerned for the worship. He may have been a priest or a ‘temple prophet’ who worked there.”⁵ On the other hand, W. Brian Aucker points out that his “address to priests (1:9, 13; 2:17) and elders (1:2, 14; 2:16) likely eliminates him as a member of either group.”⁶ We do know that Joel was a prophet whose message was collected along with eleven others as part of the Minor Prophets within the Old Testament canon. Minor, of course, because of the length of the book, not the significance of its content.

The date of Joel’s prophecy is also the subject of much debate. No information is given within the book that can be used to clearly establish the time of his ministry. Suggested dates range from as early as the ninth century B.C. to as late as the fourth century B.C. Scholars typically debate the merits of: 1) an early pre-exilic date before the fall of the northern kingdom; 2) a late pre-exilic date of around 590 B.C. before the fall of Judah; or 3) a post-exilic date of around 500 B.C. during the Persian period and the second temple. Robert Chisholm includes an excellent summary of these three possible dates along with the merits and challenges of each. He summarized:

⁵ Knowles, A. (2001). *The Bible guide* (1st Augsburg books ed.) (358). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

⁶ The English Standard Version Study Bible. See Introduction to Joel. (1643). Wheaton: Crossway

...it is impossible to be dogmatic about the date of the writing of Joel. The language of Joel 3:2b seems to favor a postexilic date. This verse suggests that nations in the future will be judged for having continued the policies of ancient Babylon in scattering the Israelites and dividing their land. Such a view is consistent with (but not proved by) several other observations (such as the reference to Phoenician-Ionian slave trade, the form of government implied in the book, and the literary parallels with other prophets). If one accepts a postexilic date, the references to the temple necessitate a date sometime after 516 B.C. However, all this must remain tentative. Understandably, conservative scholars differ on the date of Joel.⁷

Auker, in his introduction to Joel in the English Standard Version of the Bible, states:

While no consensus has been reached, most scholars hold to a date after the exile (586 B.C.) for the following reasons: (1) the exile is treated as a past event (3:2-3); (2) the conquest of Jerusalem is mentioned (3:17); (3) no king is mentioned; (4) the temple plays a positive function, while there is no prophetic denunciation against the idolatry and syncretism mentioned in Hosea and Amos; and (5) the anger expressed toward Edom is best explained by its treatment of Judeans during the Babylonian conquest (Joel 3:19; Obad. 1-21).⁸

Finally, the Jewish Study Bible assigns an even later post-exilic date to Joel of between 400 and 350 B.C. Berlin and Brettler note the mention of Ionians, or Greeks from Ionia, as evidence for such a late date.⁹ In addition, Berlin and Brettler believe that Joel was often quoting from other biblical texts and prophecies, thus requiring a later date. However, as Chisholm points out in his summary work, the Ionians have been shown by Kapelrud to have been in Judah as early as the seventh century B.C., much earlier than previously thought. Chisolm also noted the difficulty in knowing exactly who quoted from whom when there is common text between authors. For the purposes of our study, I will choose the period between 500 and 450 B.C. as the time of Joel's prophecies.

Joel: Organization and Flow

⁷ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *Vol. 1: The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures* (1408–1410). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁸ Auker, ESV Study Bible, Introduction to Joel.

⁹ Berlin, Adele and Marc Zvi Brettler (ed.).(1166) *The Jewish Study Bible*. (1166) Oxford: University Press.

The book of Joel is one of twelve Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. The book is not minor in terms of significance, but because of its size. Joel consists of only three chapters. Common to other works of prophecy, the book of Joel follows the pattern of prophetically announcing both judgment for sin and salvation as the result of repentance. Thus Joel is often viewed as one book in two parts.

The writings of Joel contain a connected prophetic proclamation, which is divided into two equal halves by Joel 2:18 and 19a. In the first half the prophet depicts a terrible devastation of Judah by locusts and scorching heat; and describing this judgment as the harbinger, or rather as the dawn, of Jehovah's great day of judgment, summons the people of all ranks to a general day of penitence, fasting, and prayer, in the sanctuary upon Zion, that the Lord may have compassion upon His nation (Joel 1:2–2:17). In the second half there follows, as the divine answer to the call of the people to repentance, the promise that the Lord will destroy the army of locusts, and bestow a rich harvest blessing upon the land by sending early and latter rain (Joel 2:19b -27), and then in the future pour out His Spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28–32), and sit in judgment upon all nations, who have scattered His people and divided His land among them, and reward them according to their deeds; but that He will shelter His people from Zion, and glorify His land by rivers of abundant blessing (Joel 3). These two halves are connected together by the statement that Jehovah manifests the jealousy of love for His land, and pity towards His people, and answers them (Joel 2:18, 19a).¹⁰

L.O. Richards, in *The Bible Readers Companion*, outlined the content of Joel following this two part formula. This outline is especially helpful:

CONTENT OUTLINE OF JOEL¹¹

- I. The Locust Plague (1:1–2:27)
 - A. The Locusts (1:1–4)
 - B. Joel's Interpretation and His Warnings (1:5–20)
 - 1. Awaken to danger (1:5–7)
 - 2. Mourn (1:8–10)
 - 3. Despair (1:11–12)
 - 4. Repent (1:13–18)
 - 5. Call on God (1:19–20)
 - C. A Near "Day of the Lord" (2:1–27)
 - 1. An invading army described (2:1–11)

¹⁰ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (2002). *Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Joe). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

¹¹ Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (532). Wheaton: Victor Books.

2. A plea for heart repentance (2:12–17)
 - a. Seek God’s mercy (2:12–14)
 - b. Seek God’s grace (2:15–17)
 3. God’s reply to Judah’s plea (2:18–27)
- II. God’s Commitment to Judah’s Future (2:28–3:21)
- A. God Will Pour Out His Spirit (2:28–31)
 - B. God Will Save All Who Call on Him (2:32)
 - C. God Will Execute Judgment (3:1–16)
 - D. God Will Bless His People (3:17–21)

Key Concepts in the Book of Joel

A Supernatural Disaster (1:1-4)

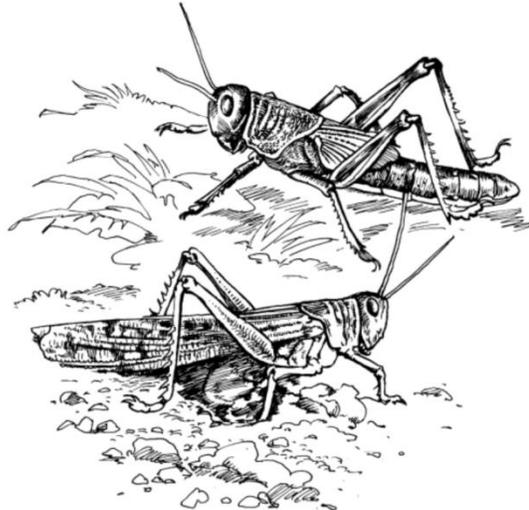
It is important to remember that the prophecy of Joel is the word of the Lord. Joel was not a creative writer with an overactive imagination, he was proclaiming a message that the Lord first proclaimed to him. Should we begin to think that Joel was extreme and far-fetched in his understanding of the circumstances Judah faced, we should remind ourselves that the book of Joel is *“the word of the Lord that came to Joel...” (Joel 1:1)*

⁴What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. (Joel 1:4)

The circumstances in question involve a massive swarm of locusts that destroyed everything in its path and devastated the land and its people. According to James Smith in *The Minor Prophets*, such a swarm of locusts can still be seen in modern times.

Researchers who have experienced twentieth century locust plagues in the Near East confirm the accuracy of Joel’s graphic depiction. The mature desert locust has a wingspan of about four inches, and a body length of about three inches. Locusts look like large grasshoppers. Technically, what distinguishes a true locust from a large grasshopper is behavior. When conditions are right, grasshoppers that normally act as solitary individuals begin to swarm. Great clouds of the insects will rise during daylight hours in search of moist green vegetation. The sky can be blackened to an altitude of five thousand feet over tens of square miles. A swarm can contain over a billion creatures that, all together, can weigh more than three million pounds. When a species of grasshoppers exhibits this type of behavior they are called locusts.¹²

¹² Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Minor Prophets*. Joplin, Mo.: College Press.



To demonstrate how easily a swarm of locusts can destroy everything in its path, Smith describes the migratory pattern of the desert locust.

Israel is the northernmost range of the migratory desert locusts. During a single day a locust swarm can travel sixty miles. During the course of a migration a swarm may move up to six hundred miles. In 1959 a locust plague in Ethiopia lasted six weeks. A conservative estimate is that these locusts consumed enough food to feed one million people for a year. Newly hatched locusts resemble ants or tiny roaches. Fully developed, these “hoppers” as they are called form marching bands up to ten miles wide and ten miles long. These bands move forward at a slow pace of about 250 feet per hour. Within their path they consume virtually every blade of grass or legume. No obstacle can stop this irresistible insect army.¹³

Smith details the process, beginning with the hatchling that consumes the tender ground vegetation first. Then the hopper completes the destruction of ground vegetation, followed by the winged hopper which attacks the branches. Finally the mature locust strips even the bark from the trees.

¹³ Ibid.

It is clear that Joel recognized the spiritual significance of the plague of locusts. It was not a naturally occurring event, or the result of cyclical climate change, or the consequences of manmade global warming. This disaster was the work of God, the judgment of God on his people for their sin.

A Spiritual Response (1:5-20)

What is the appropriate response to such devastation, especially when it is clear that God was working in the swarm to bring judgment on the people of Judah? Joel believed the right response was to cry out to God. Unfortunately it seems that only Joel recognized the spiritual significance of the locusts. Joel called out to the ministers, the elders, and all the inhabitants of the land with a plea to wake up and recognize the connection between the plague and their sin. The fields, vineyards and orchards were all destroyed. There was nothing left to sustain the people or even to offer to God in sacrifice.

In response, Joel called for a spirit of brokenness among the people in view of God's judgment on their sin.

***⁸Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.
(Joel 1:8)***

Joel believed that the appropriate sentiment among the people should equal the anguish of a young bride whose bridegroom died before the wedding. As noted by Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset and David Brown, this was a time "...when the affections are strongest and when sorrow at bereavement is consequently keenest. Suggesting the thought of what Zion's grief ought to be for her separation from Jehovah, the betrothed husband of her early days (Je 2:2; Ez 16:8; Ho 2:7; compare Pr 2:17; Je 3:4)."¹⁴

Having been confronted with their sin, the people should cry out to God with a deep sense of sadness, regret, shame, and loss. The consequences of their sin should have brought them to their knees and more importantly to their God with mourning and weeping. Joel called the nation, and especially its leaders, to action:

¹⁴ Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. (Joel 1:14)

¹⁴ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Joel 1:8). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

While Joel called on the leaders to lead, he did not exclude himself as the prophet of God. Joel was entrusted with a word from the Lord for the people, but he did not see himself as removed from the people or above the need to respond personally. He said: ***“To you, O LORD, I call.” (Joel 1:19)*** Joel recognized his own need for repentance and restoration as well as that of the people he challenged. Perhaps more significantly, Joel recognized that given the dire circumstances, they had nowhere else to turn but to the Lord. Nothing else but their sin caused of this devastation, and no one else could help them but the Lord.

The Day of the Lord (2:1-2)

¹Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, ²a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. (Joel 2:1-2)

The ESV Study Bible points out that the concept referred to as “The Day of the Lord” is found in eight of the Old Testament prophets: Isaiah 13:6,9; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7, 14; and Malachi 4:5. The term is used to refer to a time when the Lord would intervene on behalf of His people and make things right once again. Nationally, the concept carried with it the hope of the final restoration of Israel to a place of prominence among the nations, and to God’s judgment and punishment on the nations of the world for their treatment of the people of God.

But the term also meant that God would judge his own people for their unfaithfulness as well. Amos used the term to refer to the northern kingdom’s fall to Assyria. Zephaniah used the term to refer to the southern kingdom’s fall to the Babylonians. In both cases, the events were seen as the judgment of God on his own people in response to their unfaithfulness. As Chisholm states:

“The day of the LORD,” then, encompasses several specific past “days” or events (cf. A.J. Everson, “The Days of Yahweh,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93. 1974:329-37). These include the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, the Babylonian Exile, Babylon’s conquest of Egypt, and the fall of Babylon. These examples of the Lord’s intervention in history prefigure that final time period when He will annihilate His enemies on a more universal scale and restore Israel (for a thorough development of this relationship between history and eschatology, see Isa. 13-27).¹⁵

Old Testament prophecies often can be understood as containing both near-term and long-term fulfillment. Micah and Joel use the term to refer to a day still further out into the future. “All of this indicates that the ‘day’ is not unique, but may be repeated as circumstances call for it.”¹⁶

The Army of the Lord (2:3-11)

¹¹ The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it? (Joel 2:11)

Joel recognized that the plague of locusts was an instrument of God’s judgment on the sin of his people. The intent of that judgment was to bring them to their knees in repentance and cause them to return to him in covenant faithfulness. But should they not heed the warning and respond appropriately, a far worse judgment would fall.

The account is patterned after that of chapter 1, the army being described in locust-like terms in many respects (cf. Hans W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, p. 42). In this way the close relationship and continuity between the plague of chapter 1 and the army of chapter 2 is emphasized. Both were instruments of the Lord’s judgment—one past, the other future. Locusts had come—more “locusts” were coming!¹⁷

In essence, as bad as a devastating plague of locusts must have been, Joel saw a far worse scenario on the horizon. If the people refused to return, they would fall victim to an even greater disaster than an insect infestation. Richards notes the similarities between these two events, the plague of locusts and an invading army.

The vision of the locust horde dissolves into a vision of an invading foreign army (2:1–2). There are many parallels. They find the land a garden and leave it a waste. They swarm, unstoppable, over the whole land. And, as God caused the insect infestation, so He Himself leads the foreign hosts against His own people (vv. 3–11).¹⁸

¹⁵ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *Vol. 1: The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (1412–1413). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹⁶ The English Standard Version Study Bible. See notes for Amos 5:18-20. (1669). Wheaton: Crossway

¹⁷ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *Vol. 1: The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (1410–1411). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Joel is not hesitant to credit the Lord with leading both of these great armies against his own people. As he stated in v. 11, the invading army is Yahweh's army to lead. The same is true for the army of insects, as noted in verse 25:

²⁵ I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you. (Joel 2:25)

Some may have been hesitant to see God working to bring judgment in the swarm of locusts, but Joel confidently assigned the responsibility of both the locusts and the invading army to God, and God accepted full credit in his word to Joel.

God was active and intentional in leading both the locusts and the invading army. He is the sovereign Lord and both the insects and the foreign armies are his to command. Smith states:

In 2:11 Joel reaches the climax of his description of the judgment army. At the same time, this verse interprets what has been presupposed in the previous ten verses. First, the judgment army would be marshaled by Yahweh himself. He "utters his voice" (lit., "thunders") at the head of his army. He, who in time past had been Jerusalem's protector, would now direct the attack against the city. Second, the numerous and powerful people of 2:2 are now identified as "Yahweh's camp." Third, this army is strong in the execution of the word of Yahweh. Fourth, what has been described in the preceding verses is the great and terrible "day of Yahweh."¹⁹

Modern science, meteorology and geology may indeed explain the workings of modern day natural disasters. But the fact that we may understand how these events happen does not mean that God is not active in them. The laws of the universe, of science and of nature, are still under his authority and the wind is still his to command.

Urgent and True Repentance (2:12-17)

As is common in such prophecies as Joel's, there remains the possibility that all is not lost, at least not yet. There is still hope for the people of God, if they will respond in repentance, obedience and faithfulness. It is as if the foreign army is lining up for the final assault, but Yahweh extends an offer in the final minutes before the battle begins.

¹⁸ Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (534). Wheaton: Victor Books.

¹⁹ Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Minor Prophets*. Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

¹² “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2: 12-13)

The Lord urges his people to turn before it is too late, allowing for that possibility even in the final moments before judgment begins.

In this we see a powerful and wonderful aspect of the character of Yahweh. He is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Based on the devastation caused by the locusts and the potential for destruction at the hands of a foreign army, we might suspect that God is full of anger, vengeful and spiteful. But Joel recognized that God is anything but those things. It was the sin of his people that required God’s intervention, based on his righteous, just and holy nature. And yet, he is willing to step back in once again and give his people every possible chance to avoid the disaster they have brought on themselves.

In order to take advantage of this final opportunity, God’s people must repent and return to him with all their hearts. A simple adjustment in their behavior will not suffice. God demanded more than reform, he insisted that the people be transformed. This repentance and return must come from the heart and must involve the whole heart. The people of God have been caught in their sin. The test will be whether they are truly sorrowful and repentant, or will do whatever is needed outwardly to avoid the consequences of their sin. Simply going through the outward motions of corporate repentance will not save the people. As Wolf states: “Only a complete ‘return’ can change the Day of Yahweh from a day of judgment to a day of salvation.”²⁰

Given the urgency of the hour and the impending judgment of God, Joel made an urgent appeal for action. The appropriate response from the heart of God’s people is of utmost importance and highest priority. The attitudes and actions of repentance will not wait, nothing is more important.

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. ¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ ” (Joel 2:15-17)

²⁰ Wolf, (13).

The trumpet (or shofar) warned the people of imminent danger. In this case, the people were not to run to the walls to defend the city, but run into the presence of God for deliverance. As to the location between the vestibule and the altar, Jamieson, Fausset and Brown explain: “The suppliants thus were to stand with their backs to the altar on which they had nothing to offer, their faces towards the place of the Shekinah presence.”²¹

In verse 17, Joel recognized not only the need for repentance among the people of God, but also the need and the opportunity to protect and advance the namesake of God himself. God might relent for the sake of his own name and reputation among the nations, since these were his own people and his own nation. Instead of judging them and making them a mere afterthought among the nations, God could use this situation in the lives of his people to further demonstrate his mercy and grace, as well as his power and might among the nations.

Yahweh Responds to True Repentance (2:18-27)

Joel introduced the possibility in verse 14 that the Lord might relent of his plans for judgment and instead leave a blessing behind. He is careful to respect the sovereignty of God and humble in even bringing up the possibility of a different outcome. But true to his merciful and gracious character, God does respond to the repentant hearts of his people.

¹⁸ Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. (Joel 2:18)

Chisholm states: “The Lord’s jealousy is His passionate loyalty toward what is His, a loyalty that prompts Him to lash out against anything that would destroy it (cf. Isa. 26:11; Ezek. 36:5-6; 38:19; Zech. 1:14; 8:2).”²² In this complete reversal; God steps in to begin the process of restoration instead of continuing the destruction. He commits to fight for his people instead of against them, driving the invading army back and destroying them completely.

God not only demonstrated his mercy in protecting his people from the devastation they deserve, he also demonstrated his grace by restoring all that had been lost. The restoration would be as complete as the destruction had been.

²¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Joe 2:17). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

²² Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures* (Joe 2:18). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

²⁵ *I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you. (Joel 2:25)*

According to Smith:

Joel intends in this paragraph to reverse the bad news which he was forced to deliver in the opening chapter of the book. Whereas joy and gladness were absent from the land (1:16), now he twice urges both upon the people (2:21, 23). Whereas the land had experienced a drought (1:17–20), now an abundance of rain would fall (2:23). The wild beasts which had suffered (1:20) would now have abundant pasture. The pastures which were barren (1:19–20) would again be clothed with green verdure (2:22). Fruitless trees (1:19) would again produce fruit (2:22). Repentance is the key which unlocks the bounty of God's grace. In chapter 1 Joel called upon drunkards, farmers and priests to lament (1:5, 8, 11, 13). Now he calls on land, beasts and people to rejoice (2:21–23).²³

The goal of God's activity is more than the consolation and comfort of his people. He is primarily interested in restoring much more than their land and crops.

²⁷ *You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame. (Joel 2:27)*

God intervened in order to restore his people's knowledge of him and their relationship to him. The devastation of a locust plague and an invading army were used by God to cause his people to return to their unique covenant relationship with him and to a life of faithfulness to him.

The Continuing Activity of Yahweh (2:28-3:21)

Joel clearly spoke of a period when all that was lost in the devastation and destruction would be fully restored. That would be a blessing to God's people. However, God had more in mind for his people than restoring what was lost. God also promised that a new era would begin when he would deal with his people differently than ever before.

²³ Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Minor Prophets* (Joe 2:18–22). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

²⁸ *“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, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)*

In the Old Testament, the Spirit came upon selected individuals for specific purposes. Joel saw a new day approaching when God would pour out his Spirit on all of his people. God promised his presence and power for all in ways they had never seen or experienced. James Smith writes:

In Old Testament times the Spirit endowed chosen individuals for leadership or other skills. In the messianic age a more general dispensing of the Spirit was anticipated by the prophets (cf. Ezek 39:29; Zech 12:10). Joel stresses that the Spirit would be poured out regardless of sex, age, or societal status. Even lowly servants would receive the Spirit in those days. Paul would later echo the same thought with regard to those who are in Christ (Gal 3:28). Peter was probably alluding to the phrase “your sons and your daughters” when he told the Jews on Pentecost that the promise [of the Spirit] was “to you and to your children” (Acts 2:39).²⁴

These events take place as Joel stated **“before the great and awesome day of the Lord.” (Joel 2:31)** While that day will bring blessings to the people of God, it will also bring judgment and destruction upon the enemies of God. Joel made it clear that the answer in that day will be the same as it was in his day:

³² *And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. (Joel 2:32)*

There is but one hope of escaping the just judgment of God on sin. Sinners must heed the warning, turn to God and call on the name of the Lord! There will, of course, be those who refuse to turn to God before the day of the Lord. They are the enemies of God who are set on their own ideas and agendas, regardless of whether they are right or wrong. As surely as God will bless his people in their faithfulness, he will judge his enemies in their faithlessness.

¹ *“For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, ²I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on*

²⁴ Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Minor Prophets* (Joe 2:28–29). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land, (Joel 3:1-2)

The Valley of Jehoshaphat, which means Yahweh has judged, is to be the place of final judgment. The nations will stand before the Lord in that place and receive the just results of their rebellious actions. The nations will also be repaid in full for their rejection of his sovereign rule and on behalf of his people whom they have severely mistreated.

Joel extended an invitation to those who would oppose God; it would be an invitation to war. His invitation is an encouragement to the nations to bring every weapon they can find or make, even from basic farming tools. He also invites them to bring every warrior they can muster, even the weak. With all of this, they will be no match for the weaponry and the warriors God will bring to the battle.

⁹ Proclaim this among the nations: Consecrate for war; stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near; let them come up. ¹⁰ Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a warrior." ¹¹ Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD. ¹² Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. (Joel 3:9-12)

Joel sees **“multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision.” (Joel 3:14)** The multitude is not there to make a decision; they have already made their final decision. They are in the Valley of Jehoshaphat to hear God’s final decision and receive his judgment on rebellious and sinful humanity. But as Richards states: “The picture of a great final struggle is found in many prophets (cf. Isa. 17:12; 24:21–23; Micah 4:11–13; Zech. 12:2–3) as well as in Rev. 16:14–16; 19:17–19. Man’s last hostile attack against God’s people is put down by God, and ushers in an era of universal peace.”²⁵

¹⁷ “So you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it. ¹⁸ “And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD... (Joel 3:17-18)

As Knowles beautifully states: “Joel ends by describing Zion, God’s city — high and holy, safe and secure. Just as God’s judgment has been described in images of war and devastation, now his blessing is pictured in terms of peace and plenty. The Lord reigns in Zion, and all is well with his people forever.”²⁶ Joel brings the matter home with

²⁵ Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (535). Wheaton: Victor Books.

²⁶ Knowles, A. (2001). *The Bible guide* (1st Augsburg books ed.) (359). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

the promise that God will settle all accounts. The guilty will be paid in judgment and those who belong to Yahweh will be blessed forever in his presence.

Points for Home

- 1) **When disaster strikes, whether natural or man-made, look for God.** We know that we are going to go through difficult times on this earth. Sometimes we are the direct cause of our circumstances; sometimes it seems that we are merely innocent bystanders. Jesus taught us that the Father is always working, so look for God in the midst of your circumstances. God may have very well created the circumstances to get our attention and cause us to return to him, or he may have allowed the circumstances to prove our faithfulness and improve our character. Either way, he is not sitting back and watching. He is active in the circumstances of life to bring glory to his name and good to his children. No matter what is happening around you, look for God, he is there!

- 2) **In the midst disaster and human tragedy, turn to God.** The circumstances of life can cause us to turn to, or away from, the Lord. But it makes absolutely no sense at all to turn our backs on the Lord in anger or despair, when he is the very one, and perhaps the only one, who can and will help us. We have what Joel and the people of his day could only dream about, the indwelling presence of his Holy Spirit. He is always with us to comfort and to guide, to encourage and to enable, and to complete the work in us that he began in us when he saved us in Christ. The source of the circumstances in life is not nearly as important as the solution. No matter what the problem is, ultimately Jesus is the answer! Turn to him in your time of need and he will be there for you.

- 3) **No matter what the world throws at you, never lose your confidence in God.** He is able to handle anything, because everything is under his power and dominion. As surely as the swarm of locusts and the invading armies were subject to his authority, so are the circumstances we face. It may not seem in the moment that God is even aware of our circumstances, much less in control. But God is far-sighted and sees everything from an eternal perspective. He will act, according to his divine will and in a manner consistent with his just and loving nature, at exactly the right moment. He will ultimately intervene to settle up on all accounts and his children will receive the inheritance he has promised. This world is not our home, but we are headed home soon. Never surrender your confidence in him or your hope in Heaven!

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)