

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL PROPHETS AND KINGS GOD THE PURSUER *God Pursues Judah*

Today's lesson takes us back to the Southern Kingdom to find God pursuing the people of Judah. Here we see a natural disaster (a plague of locusts) being used as a megaphone from God to declare His judgment on sin. **2 Chronicles 7:13-14 (ESV)** ¹³ *When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people,* ¹⁴ *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

Joel whose name means Yahweh is God is called a 'minor' prophet because his prophecy is short (only three chapters). His prophecy mentions no kings and there are no historical events that can be tied to his writing; therefore, it is difficult to know for sure when Joel lived. Some believe he lived during the reign of Judah's King Joash; others believe he lived after the Babylonian exile. The date is not important. It is Joel's timeless message that is important. We are most familiar with Joel because of the Apostle Peter's reference to Joel's prophecy in **Acts 2**. The theme of Joel's book is The Day of the LORD.

It is difficult to give a short description of the "Day of the LORD" since it is an Old Testament doctrine found in so many scriptures. The word *day* is used in scripture in several ways. A *day* can be the hours between dawn and sunset. A *day* can mean a 24-hour period. Or, the word *day* can reference a period of time – such as The Day of the LORD –when God unveils His mighty, powerful and holy character terrifying His enemies and encouraging His people. The Day of the LORD concerns God's intervention in the affairs of human history. According to the Ryrie Study Bible, there are three facets to The Day of LORD:

- (1) **Historical** (times when God has already intervened in the affairs of men);
- (2) **Illustrative** (a time of partial fulfillment in a historical event that points to the future);
- (3) **Eschatological** (meaning prophecies to occur at the end of history).

In the midst of natural disasters, people tend to ask 'Where is God?' Erwin Lutzer says, "What we need to realize is that God can be trusted, even when it seems as if He is not on our side. We have to point people to the fact that God *has* intervened in our planet by sending Jesus Christ. There we see the love of God most clearly."

God calls His people to grieve over their own sin.

Read Joel 1:1-4 (ESV) ¹ *The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:* ² *Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?* ³

Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. ⁴ What 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.

The terms grasshopper and locust are often used interchangeably. A locust is one kind of grasshopper. The eighth plague that God sent upon the Egyptians was an invasion of locusts. Millions of these insects may be included in one swarm. In **Revelation 9**, demons are compared to the locusts that will come out of the bottomless pit of hell. The locust plague is a symbol for God's judgment.

Joel wanted the people of Judah to understand the Word of the LORD through His voice of nature. Our world still sees droughts, fires, earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. called 'acts of God' by insurance companies yet few ask, "What is God saying to us?" The word of the LORD through Joel speaks to us down through the centuries.

Joel speaks of four types of locusts. J. Vernon McGee writes, "I see a tremendous parallel between these four bands of locusts and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. During the Great Tribulation period it will not be literal locusts, but it will be something far worse that is going to ride, not just through that land, but through the entire world. The world will be totally devastated when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to the earth to set up His Kingdom.

Read Joel 1:5-7 (ESV) ⁵ *Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.* ⁶ *For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.* ⁷ *It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white.*

The sin of drunkenness is the only sin that Joel actually names in his prophecy. Bread and wine were the staples of the Jewish diet so everyone was affected by the loss. Joel speaks of the invading locusts as though they were an invading nation.

Read Joel 1:14 (ESV) 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.*

Judah was in a state of emergency! What were they to do? They were to set aside a time for fasting – physical food was not to be their focus. In both good times and bad the intent of our heart should be to reflect the heart of Jesus. **John 4:34 (ESV)** ³⁴ *Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.*

They were to call a solemn assembly and gather together. **Hebrews 10:25 (ESV)** ²⁵ *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing*

near. As followers of Christ we realize The Day of the LORD is drawing near. Why wait until we have personally reached the point of desperation – come now to His Throne of Grace.

And in those whirling locust moments, what should we do? Joel tells us to *cry out to the LORD. Psalm 50:15 (ESV)*¹⁵ *and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.*” When we feel like we have nowhere to go, it is most definitely time to go ‘up’ to the Throne Room of Grace and cry out to God! As The Great and Coming Terrible Day of the LORD approaches, let’s remember another day! **2 Corinthians 6:2 (ESV)**² *For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*

Read Joel 2:1-2 (ESV)¹ *Blow 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,² a 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.*

If the commentators are correct that Joel lived during the reign of King Joash, it may be that Joel was seeing the Assyrian army camped outside the Jerusalem gates during King Hezekiah’s day. However, at this point, this is only speculation.

The blowing trumpet or shofar warned of an invading army. The locust army is seen as a picture of the invading army during the coming Day of the LORD in the tribulation period – possibly the demon-locust invasion from **Revelation 9** or the northern army invasion described by Ezekiel.

God calls His people to return to Him in repentance.

Read Joel 2:12-14 (ESV)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.¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?*

The tearing of garments seen frequently throughout scripture was a powerful and public expression of grief. The first record of it happening was when Reuben returned to the well and found that his brothers had sold their brother Joseph into slavery. Scripture does not command that we tear our clothes. The high priest was commanded not to tear his garments separating him from the common customs of the people. The LORD through Joel told the people to rend or tear their hearts and not their garments. It has always been the hearts of men that the LORD is concerned with. David in his personal prayer of repentance said in **Psalm 51:17 (ESV)**¹⁷ *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

True repentance is about turning from our sin – not just stopping. The character of God encourages us to turn from sinning and turn to Him. God promises to restore His people by His Spirit.

Read Joel 2:18 (ESV) ¹⁸ *Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.*
Joel 2:25-27 (ESV) 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.* ²⁶ *“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 again be put to shame.”* 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 reached a turning point in his message, moving from prophesying about an outpouring of God's judgment to prophesying about an outpouring of God's forgiveness and blessing. But this would come only after repentance. Where there is repentance, there is hope.

If the Jews would never again experience a disaster like this locust plague, how do we explain the Babylonian captivity, the Jews' slavery under the Greeks and Romans, and their persecution under Hitler? Only if the people truly repented would they avoid a disaster like the one Joel had described. It seems that Joel is looking across the mountain peaks of time to after the Great Tribulation when God has promised His people will never again experience this kind of disaster. Finally, let's look at the portion of prophecy that Peter quoted on the Day of Pentecost.

Joel 2:28-32 (ESV) 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.”* ²⁹ *Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.* ³⁰ *“And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.”* ³¹ *The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.* 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.*

According to **Hebrews 1:2**, the last days began with the ministry of Jesus on earth. The last days will conclude with the final Day of the LORD. Joel promised that before the Day of the LORD begins, there would be a remarkable outpouring of the Holy Spirit accompanied by signs in the heavens and on the earth. Not every detail of Joel's prophecy is yet fulfilled, but the “pouring out of the Spirit” began on the Day of Pentecost. From that time, the Holy Spirit indwells all those who come to faith in Jesus Christ. During the Old Testament era, the Holy Spirit was given only to certain people who had specific jobs to do, like Moses and David. But the promise God gave through Joel declared that the Spirit would come upon all flesh. In his sermon Peter connected Joel's prophecy with the Holy Spirit's coming and the commencement of the church. Today, we undoubtedly need a fresh filling of the Spirit of God – a deeper working of God's Spirit urging us to share the gospel so that souls will be saved before the Great and Coming Terrible Day of the LORD!