

“Darkness before the Dawn”

Joel 1

There are certain events and dates that we will never forget because of the traumatic impact they made on people. Some of them were man made like the Stock Market crash of Oct. 28 1929, Pearl Harbour Dec. 7, 1941, and of course Sept. 11, 2001. Natural calamities like Hurricane Katrina or Andrew or Sandy or the Indian Ocean tsunami on Dec. 26, 2004 were life-changing events for many people who lost family members or homes and possessions. All calamities remind us that we live in an imperfect world where we are reminded once again of the brevity of life and the need to look beyond things and people of earth for hope.

This morning we begin a series on the small book of Joel. In Joel’s day there was a cataclysmic event that the people in that day would remember for years to come; a devastating locust plague that was so severe it wiped out entire crops leaving nothing but bare bark. But this locust plague is a warning for an even more devastating calamity; a future judgment from God on Israel if they don’t repent of their sins and return to God. Joel warns the people of Israel about two future days of the Lord. The day of the Lord is when God Himself will discipline Israel through calamity of some kind. In Joel it will be a foreign nation, Babylon. But the locust plagues and Babylon serve as warning signs for the future great Day of the Lord judgment on Israel prior to the return of Jesus Christ. Yet the final Day of the Lord is not just judgment because when that is done Jesus will return and restore God’s blessings to Israel and we will all enjoy peace and prosperity for 1000 years.

So the book of Joel is a call for Israel to return to God so God can restore them with His blessings. That’s the way God works in all of His people’s lives as well. God wants to bless us and use us for His glory, but sometimes we drift away from Him and need to repent and return. Sometimes God needs to use a calamity in our own life to wake us up and see our need to make things right with Him.

Jesus pointed this out Himself in Luke 13

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

We always want to know why disasters happen. Well, Jesus just told us in Luke 13! So we'll pay attention to God. So let's open Joel 1 and see what warnings we might have to heed but also, how we as God's people act as God's watchmen today to warn a lost world that a Day is coming when God will have one last warning before Jesus returns.

The book of Joel does not give us much information about the time. When it comes to the prophets their message is always related to Israel's exiles. The northern part of Israel went into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC and the southern kingdom was taken by Babylon into exile from 605-586 BC. Yet Israel returned as God promised to their land in 536 BC and rebuilt the temple that the Babylonians destroyed. So basically the prophets were pre-exilic (warning Israel that if they don't shape up spiritually) God would send them into exile or they were post-exilic, either to encourage them to stay focused on God and remind them that exile could happen again. Thankfully, God saw to it that when the Old Testament was collected and organized the pre-exilic books Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah were placed before the post exilic books, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. And generally the Minor Prophets are arranged somewhat chronologically. As are the Major Prophets. Isaiah speaks 75-100 years before the Babylonians came, Jeremiah speaks just prior and into the beginning of Babylon's coming, Ezekiel was in Babylon and prophecies about the temple's destruction but also future rebuild while Daniel takes from the beginning to the end of the Babylonian exile. God arranged it fairly simply so we could follow it better.

So Joel prophesied sometime before Israel's exile to Babylon and we don't know much more than that. The book perhaps is intentionally non-detailed so that God's people can apply it to almost any time. There is almost no introduction to the book – his name and his father's name – and then he gives them a dire warning;

²Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? ³Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.⁴What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.

This locust plague had already happened. It was one for the books. Check with your grandparents and ask them if they had ever seen anything like this before? Answer – no! Typically locusts come, they eat, they leave; but they don't take everything. The farmer can't stop it and prays they won't completely ruin the crop. But this time there were 4 waves of locusts and the branches were stripped clean ("white" v.7). This was no ordinary locust plague; God allowed this.

Why? When calamities of any kind strike

God Calls us to Pay Attention When Calamities Happen (1:1-7)

“Hear this . . . listen” (v.2), “Wake up” (v.5), “Wail” (v.6). As we saw last week, the word ‘hear’ is one of the most important Hebrew words in the Old Testament. “Hear” [shema] means to listen so as to obey. The call for ‘drunks’ too wake up implies carelessness, complacency, desensitized to what God is doing. “Listen” and so act. “Wail”; be shocked and disturbed by what God has done and will do. Joel gives us a hint that perhaps the locusts is pointing to something more when he says in v.6

⁶A nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness.

How do we know this is a warning for more, in particular exile into a foreign country? Because God already pre-warned them in Deut. 28. God gave Moses Deuteronomy just prior to the Israelites entering the Promised Land. In Deut. 28 God lays out His plan to bless Israel in the land as long as they obey God’s Word (28:1-14). But from 28:15-68 He lists all the ways He will discipline them should they choose not to obey. Most of the ways God disciplines them is through loss of crops and cattle. In 28:38-42 we read,

³⁸ You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it. ³⁹ You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. ⁴⁰ You will have olive trees throughout your country but you will not use the oil, because the olives will drop off. ⁴¹ You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity. ⁴² Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land.

The prophets’ primary role was to tell Israel what God’s Word already said. If you read through Deut. 28-29 you can pretty well understand how the rest of the Old Testament goes. Look what Deut. 28:46 says about all these signs;

⁴⁶ They will be a sign and a wonder to you and your descendants forever. ⁴⁷ Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, ⁴⁸ therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.

So God uses calamity to draw His people’s attention back to Him, especially when we have taken Him for granted and not served Him with joy during the good times. And as Jesus pointed out in Luke 13, even general calamities that do not directly affect us are to make us pause and think about our relationship with God. If we find we have drifted from God what should we do? Joel 1:8-14 help us see what God wants.

God Desires Genuine Repentance of our Sins

(1:8-14)

Joel's message outlines 3 ways we show we mean business with God.

⁸*Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the betrothed of her youth. ⁹Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the LORD. ¹⁰The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails.*

Some translations say betrothed or husband. When a Jewish couple are engaged to be married it is considered a Legal marriage even though the wedding hasn't happened yet (much like Joseph and Mary's situation in Matt. 1). The bride-to-be's fiancé has died before the wedding so she is still a virgin. This is tragic and is the example of what God means by mourning for our sin. We need to show genuine,

Remorse

Not just sorry we got caught or feel bad that we can't have victory over sin. When the prodigal son came to his senses he realized he needed to repent and return. He said 'I have sinned against God and my father.' There must be a recognition that we have hurt our Father and Jesus who has already paid for those sins.

In v.11-12 we read,

¹¹*Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. ¹²The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree— all the trees of the field—are dried up. Surely the people's joy is withered away.*

'Despair, wailing and grieving' are verbal expressions of having sinned. God wants to hear from us genuine,

Confession

This simply means to agree with God. It's interesting that Joel doesn't list many sins. It's somewhat general. Why? Could be that if Joel is working with another prophet like Isaiah or Micah that they have made the sins known. However, some-times you don't have to specify what sins have been committed; a general confrontation makes us all deal with our sins as the Spirit brings them to our minds.

The third way of response is found in vv.13-14,

¹³ Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. ¹⁴ Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

Sackcloth was a sign of mourning over one's sins followed by fasting and. . .

Prayer

The language that God loves to hear. Did you notice the prophet has called the people to gather for a "sacred assembly" near the altar of God and yet there is no food for sacrifices? As we saw last week in Amos, so often God's people worshipped out of habit and performance thinking that this is what pleases God. It might make others happy and make us feel good but if it's not from the heart God is not impressed. Later in ch. 2 God will call Israel to rend your hearts not your garments. The latter can be done for show so the call for the internal breaking of one's heart before God.

We read the Lord's prayer earlier-we don't even have to read it, we know it by memory- but the Lord's prayer calls for us to confess and forgive. When was the last time you and I confessed and asked forgiveness of some sins we committed? I hope we can say this past week but if we haven't don't you think we need to? When did we sin last? Probably this morning or at the very least yesterday. But so often our sins are silent and of the mind only. God knows them. They too need to be confessed.

The road to forgiveness and restoration is always travelled on our knees. God does not measure our prayers by their length or by how many times we say God or Father or by our King Jamesness, but rather like the tax collector in Luke 18:13 who simply said 'God have mercy on me a sinner.'

What happens when we don't deal with sins in our life?

We Lose our Joy and Purpose if We Don't Repent **(1:15-20)**

Listen to vv.15-20,

¹⁵ Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. ¹⁶ Has not the food been cut off before our very eyes— joy and gladness from the house of our God? ¹⁷ The seeds are shriveled beneath the clods. The storehouses are in ruins, the granaries have been broken down, for the grain has dried up. ¹⁸ How the cattle moan! The herds mill about because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep are suffering. ¹⁹ To you, LORD, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness and flames have burned up all the trees of the field. ²⁰ Even

the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness.

Because everyone is hurting due to the shortage of food life is hard. Life in general loses its joy when most of your life is just trying to make ends meet. Even the cattle and sheep are hurting due to lack of food and water – wild animals are panting for “God” because God is the provider of water. This lasts long enough that there is no grain to store in barns and the barns are falling apart due to disuse. When life is so busy taken up with pursuing our basic needs – or in our culture, our preferred wants over what God wants –we lose our joy and our purpose.

God sends a temporary famine that is harsh enough that you can’t even bring sacrifices to the temple. God’s trying to make a point; you were coming to Me without any real intention of worshipping me.

There’s a song we sing occasionally called ‘When the music fades’ written by Matt Redman. While his home church was growing in numbers and they had great worship teams there was something missing in the church. The people had defined worship by the music. So the leaders decided to remove all musical instruments for a few months and return to the heart of worship – Jesus and His Father.

This is what God was doing, taking away the things people thought worship was about and forcing them to see God again. Their worship and their walk was ritualistic and stagnant. God sent them a warning – the locust plague – but there was another Day of the Lord coming, the Babylonians were not many years from becoming a powerful adversary. And if Israel didn’t repent here, God would send an even greater Day of the Lord until they turned back to Him.

And that’s been His pattern over history. The plagues of Egypt was a day when he broke into the world and saved His people while judging others. But the shocking news of the prophets was God will do it to you too Israel, if you don’t turn to Him. So these written warnings and historical examples to Israel are meant (according to Paul in 1 Cor. 10:6 *“as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did”*). Jesus reminds that all calamities – worldwide, local or personal – are reminders we live in a fallen world and that we always need to be ready for the future Day of the Lord that is still yet to come.

There are two things we need to keep in mind as we look at the book of Joel as a whole:

Rejoicing follows weeping

The Bible consistently teaches us that because sin exists in the world we will have struggles. A lot of it is stuff anyone can experience but because we are God’s

children God designs to use it to help us become more like Jesus. So God reminds us in His Word that for the child of God there is always a brighter future and a God-purpose in everything we experience. The latter half of the book of Joel will clearly show us this but for now 2:25 says,

²⁵ "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you. ²⁶ You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. ²⁷ Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed.

The Psalms are full of reminders that future joy follows present struggles. Here's just two reminders;

Ps. 30:4 Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people; praise his holy name. ⁵ For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

Even if we are experiencing God's disciplinary hand it is always temporal. He is waiting with open arms like a parent for us to come back and say we're sorry Daddy, forgive me.

Ps. 126 is a very brief psalm about when God brought Israel back from exile.

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. ² Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." ³ The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. ⁴ Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. ⁵ Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. ⁶ Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Notice the weeper never stops sowing seeds – obeying God, trusting God-believing that the new season of growth and joy is just around the corner. If you're in a season of weeping right now, trust God, keep the hope, weeping may stay for a season but joy is around the corner. And speaking of sowing seeds, here's another perspective we have to keep in mind when we read the prophets:

*****We are the Joels of today who need to warn the lost***

Some of the people Joel and other prophets spoke to were undoubtedly people who had never placed their hope in God. They thought because they were Israelites they were okay but they had never rent their hearts to God, only went through the motions. The Word of God tells us this world is heading for destruction. 2 Peter 3 even tells us people will deny this in the last days, so what kind of people ought we to be?

Holy, blameless and speed its coming and the only way we do this is by sharing the gospel. We all know John 3:16 but do we know what Jesus said right after that?

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Many people are in spiritual darkness totally unaware of a future terrible day of the Lord and an eternal lake of fire that awaits those who prefer the darkness of this failing world to the light of eternal Jesus.

Romans 10:14-17 says how can they hear if we don't go? We have a unique advantage over the lost because we know how the world will end. We know what happens to people when they die; believers and unbelievers. We are the Joels and Amoses of today. We have to get the word out in a gracious manner because as Joel will remind the people of Israel in His day,

2:12 "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." ¹³Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net