

MESSAGE FROM THE MASTER

Pastor Steven J. Pagels, St. John, Wauwatosa

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Hosea. Joel. Amos. Obadiah. Jonah. Micah. Nahum. Habakkuk. Zephaniah. Haggai. Zechariah. Malachi. According to Babycenter.com, none of these names made the list of the top ten baby names of 2006. In fact, none of them even made it into the top one hundred.

It is interesting that the names of the minor prophets are just as obscure as the books they wrote. You probably don't know anyone named Nahum. You probably don't have a neighbor named Habakkuk. And you have probably never worked with a man by the name of Obadiah.

Of the twelve minor prophets, the only name that might be considered common these days is Joel. It's easy to pronounce. It's easy to spell. And even if Joel isn't all that popular anymore, chances are that you know someone by that name.

You might know a handful of people named Joel, but do you know the prophet Joel? Did you know that his book is only three chapters long? Did you know that he is quoted by both Peter and Paul in the New Testament? Did you know that his father's name is Pethuel? Did you know that the name "Joel" means "The Lord is God?"

One of the goals of this sermon is to increase your Bible knowledge. I want you to get to know the prophet Joel. I want you to know everything God has revealed about him in the Bible. Not so that you can impress your pastor. Not so that you can become a Bible trivia champion. It is important for Bible students to learn as much as we can about the man because that background information will help us understand and appreciate and apply the message he proclaimed.

And so as we study the inspired words of the man whose name means "the LORD is God," the prophet Joel presents us with this challenge:

KNOW THAT THE LORD IS GOD

I. By means of devastating disaster

II. By means of divine deliverance

It was not uncommon for Old Testament prophets to describe armies as swarms of locusts. For example, in his prophecy against Babylon the prophet Jeremiah declared: **"The LORD Almighty has sworn by himself: I will surely fill you with men, as with a swarm of locusts, and they will shout in triumph over you" (51:14).**

Joel uses the same imagery, except in reverse. He depicts a real locust plague as an army going into battle: **"They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defenses without breaking ranks. They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into houses; like thieves they enter through the windows. Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine" (2:7-10).**

What kind of damage did this invading army do to the Promised Land? Joel gives us a pretty good idea in the opening verses of his book: **"What 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" (1:4).**

It is not an overstatement to say that this locust plague devastated the land. Most of the people were farmers.

They depended on the land for survival. Olives were more than a nice addition to a relish tray. Figs and grapes weren't just ingredients for a fruit salad. These were the staples of every Hebrew's diet, and without any warning they were gone. The locusts swooped in and ate the fruit and the leaves and even the bark off the trees (1:7). And the people were left with nothing.

I am sure there is a scientific explanation for this phenomenon, but Joel doesn't attribute this unfortunate natural disaster to Mother Nature. Instead he declares that this locust army takes its orders from the One who is over all things: **"The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command" (2:11).**

Locust swarms travel in whatever direction the wind takes them, but the Lord directs the winds. There can be millions of locusts in a swarm, but the Lord can distinguish every single one. From a human perspective a locust plague appears to be a random event, but Joel's prophecy reminds us that nothing happens by chance.

The locust plague was God's judgment on Judah. This devastating disaster served as a call to repentance for Israel. Joel doesn't explain what the people had done wrong. There is no laundry list of sins anywhere in the book. But the prophet does give us a clue when he says: **"Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God" (2:13a).**

Joel doesn't condemn the people for worshipping idols. Joel doesn't suggest that God's people were engaging in all kinds of pagan revelry. These were people who dragged themselves to the temple when they were supposed to. These were people who offered sacrifices when they were supposed to. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him. And so instead of condemning them for all the bad things they were doing, the LORD called them to repentance for all the good they failed to do.

Apathy. Indifference. Selfishness. These aren't the kinds of crimes that can land a person in jail. These aren't the sins that make headlines in the Sunday paper. But they are sins. They are sins that God hates. They are sins that God condemns. They are sins that God punishes.

If we ever set our minds on cruise control when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are guilty. If we ever think of going to church as doing our Christian duty, we are guilty. If we ever put our personal desires before God's holy will (and we all have), we are all guilty. And the punishment we deserve for those sins is far worse than anything a swarm of locusts could ever do.

God sent a plague on his people to remind them who they were. They were his chosen people. They belonged to him. They owed their very existence to him. And when they forgot the source of their blessings, when they chose to forsake the LORD, they had to face the consequences.

God also sent a plague of locusts to remind his people who he was. God is **"gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love...he relents from sending calamity" (2:13b).** And even when the LORD allows devastating disaster to come into the lives of his people, he promises to send divine deliverance.

"The day of the LORD" is a phrase that was used by many of the Old Testament prophets, but it appears to have been a favorite of Joel. Those five words appear five times in three chapters, and the context is always negative.

According to Joel, the day of the LORD **"will come like destruction from the Almighty" (1:15).** It is **"a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness" (2:2).** It is **"near" (3:14)** and it will be **"dreadful" (2:11,31).**

The apostle Peter quoted this phrase in the text he chose for his Pentecost sermon. Peter proclaimed to the crowds in Jerusalem: **"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of**

smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord” (Acts 2:17-20, referencing Joel 2:28-31).

Both Joel and Peter are talking about the end times. They agree that there will be signs before the end of the world. There will be signs on the earth and signs in the heavens. They agree that these signs point to the Last Day, Judgment Day (aka the day of the LORD). But what Joel describes as a “**great and dreadful**” day Peter calls “**great and glorious.**”

So which is it? Will “the day of the LORD” be dreadful or glorious? Should people look forward to it or be afraid of it? It depends. It depends on your relationship with the One who will come to judge the world on Judgment Day.

For everyone who doesn’t know Jesus as their Savior the last day will be a dreadful day. Jesus himself said: “**Whoever does not believe will be condemned**” (Mark 16:16b), condemned to eternal death, condemned to eternal punishment, condemned to eternal separation from God and God’s love.

But for those who trust in Jesus, for everyone who believes that the world’s judge is also the world’s savior, the last day will be nothing short of glorious. Jesus will give us our glorious inheritance (Ephesians 1:18). Jesus will give us glorified bodies (Philippians 3:21). And we will live with Jesus in glory forever (Colossians 3:4).

What gives sinful creatures like us the right to think that we will be delivered from God’s righteous judgment? Why can we look forward to the Last Day? Why can we say “he will come again to judge the living and the dead” with smiles on our faces? Because we have hope.

The prophet Joel gave hope to people who were faced with a hopeless situation. The final verse of Joel gives God’s people of every age hope for the future: “**Their bloodguilt, which I have not pardoned, I will pardon. The LORD dwells in Zion**” (3:21)!

Jesus was never apathetic or indifferent or selfish. From day one he embraced his divine mission to deliver the world from sin, and he never wavered. Because he did what we could not do, because he shed his blood to pardon all our sins, because we are redeemed, restored and forgiven, Zion is not just a place where the LORD dwells. Heaven is our sure hope. Heaven is our new home.

There are many things we don’t know about the prophet Joel. We don’t know exactly where he lived. We don’t know exactly when he lived. But our lack of information isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It can even be a good thing. Our inability to pinpoint the date Joel was written reminds us that the message of the book is timeless.

BC or AD, eastern hemisphere or western hemisphere, it doesn’t matter. God speaks to his people of every age through the prophet Joel. God speaks to us today through the pen of the prophet Joel. And this is what he wants us to know: Know that your sins have consequences. Know that your sins have been forgiven. Know that the LORD is God. Know that the LORD is your God. Amen.

Prayer: Lord God, you are the supreme ruler of the universe. In your infinite wisdom you use your creatures and your creation, and sometimes even disaster and tragedy, to carry out your divine will on earth. When we sin, lead us to repentance. When we repent, lead us to the cross of Jesus where we find the assurance that all our sins have been forgiven. Because of his sacrifice we know that the Last Day will be a glorious day, the day when we will be united with you and all the saints and angels in heaven. Amen.

