

The Prophets, Book 7

Joel

Joel was a prophet to Judah, the Southern Kingdom; he was one of its earliest prophets, if not the earliest. He didn't date his book, nor mention a king who reigned in his time (the common method for dating documents and records in that day); but he is generally believed to have ministered about 800 BC, at the time of King Uzziah in Judah, and of Jeroboam II in Israel. It was a time of prosperity in both kingdoms. He would have been older than Isaiah, but almost certainly knew him, and may have been his mentor. His name means "YHWH is God." Because he frequently addresses the priesthood, he may have been a priest; but this is only speculation.

The Anonymous Prophet of Pentecost. Because nothing is known about Joel the man except for what he wrote in the first verse of his book, he has been called "the anonymous prophet." Not even the identity of his father is known, beyond his name, Pethuel, given in the first verse. Also, because of the content of Chapter 2, he is sometimes called "the prophet of Pentecost." On the day of Pentecost Peter quoted from Joel's Chapter 2 to explain the amazing things taking place that day, and to call the crowd to repentance (Acts 2:14-21). In view of all this, we might think of Joel as "the anonymous prophet of Pentecost."

The Man and His Message. Because Joel made frequent mention of Zion, Judah and Jerusalem, it is likely that he lived in or near Jerusalem. However, as interesting as such speculations may be, if his identity and place of residence really mattered, we would know them. What does matter to us is the content of his dual message, and this little book is loaded! Joel was a prophet with a message for his day; and he was also a prophet with a message of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the end times. He had a vision of events to come which were unimaginable to the Hebrew mind of his day.

In these three small chapters, Joel has a very great deal to say, and he says it in vivid, powerful, poetic language. And, because his message was for his present time, the near future (50-100 years), and for the far-distant future, it is sometimes difficult to know to which period a passage applies.

A. Author. The human author was the prophet Joel, son of Pethuel; nothing else is known of him, except by inference and deduction.

B. Place and Date. Joel's book was probably written in or near Jerusalem, about 800 BC.

C. Occasion. The occasion for his writing was a destructive plague of locusts, and drought in the land, symbolic of God's judgment.

C. Theme. His theme is two-fold: first, the soon-coming judgment and destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by Babylon; and, second, the far-distant, End Times judgment and ultimate restoration of Jerusalem and the reunited Kingdom of Israel.

Highlights. This little book of only three chapters is rich, both in terms of its significant content, and its vivid expression; highlights include:

1. Utter Ruin Is on the Way! (Chapt 1)

The people of Judah are prospering and feeling secure; things haven't been this good for them since the time of David and Solomon. And in their prosperity and ease, they have forgotten the Lord and are given over to idolatrous sin. Then comes Joel, telling them that their prosperity and security are not only going to come to an end, but that they are faced with utter ruin and desolation so complete that it is difficult to describe adequately. With a plague of locusts and other destructive pests as a setting, he warns them in powerful, poetic, imagery that the people cannot fail to understand¹. An eloquent example of his unwelcome message is found in 1:17: "The seed is rotten under their clods." What could illustrate more vividly the completeness and hopelessness of crop failure (and the judgment to come upon them) than rotten, dead seed, planted under dry, hard clods? And, he tells them, not only will their crops and trees be dead and dried up, but fire will then consume what is left, leaving only blackened waste. With these, and many such powerful words, Joel tries to get their attention.

2. And Then a Conquering Army! (2:1-11)

But the coming crop destruction and drought are not the only bad news: there is also coming a mighty, irresistible, foreign invader, the largest and most powerful army in history. To express the hopelessness of the army of Judah before this invading juggernaut, Joel describes their relentless advance, never breaking ranks, and says that even if struck with the sword, this enemy will not be wounded. The enemy's army will be so great that the earth will tremble as they advance, and they will swarm over the city like an unstoppable plague of insects, going into the houses and doing all the terrible things that invading armies do to the people. And, in case the people wonder, Joel makes it clear that this invading enemy will be the instrument of the LORD².

¹ Some commentators see the destructive insects in v 4 (and in 2:25) as four different species; others see them as four stages of the same species. Which ever is correct, the result is the same: they will leave "not any green thing" (Ex 10:15).

² Some commentators (e.g. Finis Dake and Merrill Unger) see this conquering army as the supernatural army of God at the final battle of Rev 19; others see it as a prophecy of the coming invasion of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar and his unstoppable Babylonian army. I am inclined to believe that both interpretations are correct.

3. And Yet, a Message of Hope. (2:12-27)

With the prophecy of soon-coming judgment, Joel reminds the people that God is merciful to those who truly repent ("rend your heart, and not your garments")³. He calls the entire nation to repentance ("Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly"); and he specifically challenges the priests to weep for their own sins, and for the sins of the people. If they will do this, the Lord will restore all that has been destroyed by insects, drought and fire, again making it clear that Nebuchadnezzar's army will be his instrument of judgment ("my great army which I sent among you"). In the promised restoration He will send abundant rain, both the former and latter rains at the same time. The streams will flow, the land will bloom again, and the people will prosper--but only if they will repent.

4. Prophecy of Pentecost. (2:28-32)

In five amazing verses Joel prophesies of a period to come "afterward" when the Holy Spirit will be poured out "upon all flesh," i.e. upon everyone, regardless of nationality, hereditary position, age, wealth, or poverty. This life-changing gift of the empowering Spirit of God will not just be for priests, prophets and Levites--not even just for Israelites; instead, this precious, life-giving, "Breath of Heaven" will even be freely bestowed "upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days." Slaves and children will prophesy! This concept is not only radical to the listening Jewish ears--it is unthinkable! This prophecy will begin to be fulfilled in about 800 years, on the day of Pentecost when Peter, in his first Spirit-empowered preaching, will quote these verses to explain to the crowd why the disciples are shouting and praising God in tongues⁴.

5. A Two-Fold Promise of Deliverance. (3:1-8)

Joel, continuing to speak of judgment and future restoration, actually promises two restorations: the one nearly 200 years into the future, when God will deliver the people from Babylonian captivity; and the far-distant, ultimate, restoration at the second coming of Jesus. He seems to speak of the defeat of the enemies of Judah, gathered in "the valley of Jehoshaphat"⁵. He promises justice to be brought upon the heads of their traditional enemies: Tyre, Sidon, and the Philistines ("coasts of Palestine")⁶. The pagans, who have sold the Israelite children into

³ This kind of vivid poetic expression not only grips the hearer (and reader), but makes him think.

⁴ Acts 2:14-21.

⁵ This valley of Jehoshaphat (vv 2, 12) may mean the Valley of the Brook Kidron, just east of Jerusalem, where the Lord had given Jehoshaphat a great victory and where, about 50 years into the future, He would give Hezekiah a great victory over the Assyrians. On the other hand, it may refer figuratively to the Valley of Megiddo, the scene of the final, end-times defeat of the enemies of the people of God. Perhaps it means both.

⁶ This is the only place in the Bible where the word "Palestine" appears. A variation of it ("Palestina") occurs in Exodus 15 and Isaiah 14. It is derived from "Philistia," the coastal land of the Philistines. The Romans will later (2nd Century AD) apply this name to the entire Promised Land, as a deliberate insult to the Jewish people.

slavery, will themselves be sold as slaves to the Sabeans, an Arab people in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, meaning that they would probably never return to their homes⁷.

6. God's Challenge to the Enemies of His People. (3:9-13)

In powerful metaphor, Joel speaks of a coming battle when the enemies of God's people will come against them in overwhelming numbers. The Lord issues a challenge to the pagan nations to make their best preparations for war ("Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears...")⁸. Mocking them, He tells them that no matter how strong they think they are ("...let the weak say I am strong."), they will fall before His mighty power, like grapes in a winepress⁹.

7. In the Valley of Decision. (3:14-17)

Then the Lord speaks of the great, end-times victory over the enemies of His people when the Sun and the Moon shall be darkened and the stars will not shine in the sky. The ground will tremble at the sound of the Lord's voice, as He roars out words of final judgment on the pagan nations. Once and for all, it will be known that the strength of the people of God is not their own, but is His strength giving them victory over an uncountable multitude, gathered against them "in the valley of decision"¹⁰.

8. The Ultimate Restoration in Zion. (3:18-21)

Joel's book closes with a beautiful promise of the final destruction of the enemies of God's people, and the ultimate restoration of their land, under the kingship of YHWH ("the LORD"). Israel's perpetually hostile, pagan enemies will have been permanently destroyed because of their relentless sin, particularly the shedding of innocent blood.

Peace, prosperity and righteousness (the essential factor whose absence has been the cause of all of Israel's grief for such a long time) shall prevail, the LORD will make Jerusalem His dwelling place, and on Mount Zion shall be His palace.

NOTE the vivid, beautiful imagery of v 18, and compare it with Ezek 47:1-12, Zech 14:4-11 and Rev 22:1-2. This word picture of the pure River of God, flowing from the throne of God and bringing life to all that it touches, must be extremely

⁷ Arabs, since earliest times, have been leading dealers in slaves; thus slaves sold to them could then be sold to any place in the known World. Slavery and the slave trade are still practiced in some parts of the Muslim world.

⁸ Micah 4:3 is the inverse of this, speaking of the prevailing peace and prosperity with the second coming of Christ and the millennial period, when swords and spears will no longer be needed.

⁹ This verse has been used, completely out of context, by the teachers of positive confession to mean that if we are weak but say that we are strong, we will become strong. It is very clear, however, that in this entire passage, the Lord is saying to His enemies, "Do what you will, say what you will, your cause is hopeless and you will be crushed in utter defeat. You can say that you are strong--but you will still be weak and powerless before Me."

¹⁰ "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision" (v 14) is quoted by some to refer to people who must choose to follow Jesus or reject Him; the primary meaning, however, seems to be a reference to the great, end-time, final, battle of Rev 19.

important, for it appears in the writings of three Old Testament prophets, and in the very last chapter of the very last book of the Bible. In addition, in Zechariah's account, there is also the awesome picture of Jesus at His second coming, standing in triumph over evil, atop the Mount of Olives. This is particularly significant because it was there that He had spent so much time with His friends, there He had done so much teaching, there where, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He fought His great spiritual battle on the night in which He was betrayed, and it was there from which He had ascended into Heaven. It is his triumph over sin that makes possible the ultimate redemption of God's people, the out-flowing of the River of Life, and the ultimate fulfillment of God's great plan for mankind. Glory to His wonderful name!