

JOEL AND THE DAY OF THE LORD

(1) THE PROPHET OF PRAYER

2 Chronicles 22:10-12; Joel 1:1

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SCRIPTURE

Now when Athaliah, Ahaziah's mother, saw that her son was dead, she set about to destroy all the royal family of the house of Judah. ¹¹But Jehoshabeath, the king's daughter, took Joash son of Ahaziah, and stole him away from among the king's children who were about to be killed; she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus Jehoshabeath, daughter of King Jehoram and wife of the priest Jehoiada—because she was a sister of Ahaziah—hid him from Athaliah, so that she did not kill him; ¹²he remained with them six years, hidden in the house of God, while Athaliah reigned over the land (2 Chronicles 22:10-22 NRSV).

The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Let us say that your doctor informs you that you have a serious illness that can lead to an untimely death. Let us also say that your doctor tells you that there is a way to successfully treat this illness but it requires your wholehearted commitment. Are you willing to listen to what your doctor has to say?

Let us say that a representative from God tells us we have a serious condition that can lead to spiritual death. Let us also say that this representative tells us that there is a way to successfully treat this condition but it requires our wholehearted commitment. Are we willing to listen to what this representative has to say?

This latter situation is precisely what we have with the Prophet Joel. Unfortunately, the prophecy of Joel is often overlooked by modern Christians even though there are significant quotes from it and allusions to it throughout the New Testament. This small, three chapter book contains powerful incentives to come before God in wholehearted prayer to receive healing, hope and wholeness.

1. PROPHECY FROM THE LORD

“The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel” (1:1).

Joel was a prophet. There are many words for prophet in the Bible but the most common

one in the Old Testament is *nabi* (naw VEE), meaning “one who is called to speak in front of others.” The most common New Testament term is *prophetes* (from which we get our English word “prophet”) and it means "to speak before" or "to speak for." The prophets were people called by God to speak God’s message.

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Peter 1:20-21 NRSV).

When you hear the word “prophet” do not equate it with Jean Dixon or Cleo the Psychic or some other charlatan who claims to predict the future. For that matter, very few people are good at predicting the future:

"Everything that can be invented has been invented." – Charles H. Duell, Commissioner, U.S. Office of Patents, 1899.

"Man will never reach the moon regardless of all future scientific advances." – Dr. Lee DeForest, Inventor of the television.

"The bomb will never go off. I speak as an expert in explosives." – Admiral William Leahy, U.S. Atomic Bomb Project.

"There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." – Ken Olson, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977.

"The concept is interesting and well-formed, but in order to earn better than a 'C,' the idea must be feasible." – A Yale University management professor in response to Fred Smith's paper proposing reliable overnight delivery service. (Smith went on to found Federal Express Corp.).

“They’re OK but you won’t hear that played in America.” – Me, when I was visiting my cousin Per in Stockholm and he played me a recording of a group that had won a local music contest. The group was called Abba.

So, predicting the future can be problematic.

A biblical prophet is not one who guesses about the future. The original word meant to speak in front of others and historically it has meant speaking on behalf of someone else in front of others. The Old Testament prophets spoke on behalf of God. The prophet did

not say, "Excuse me. I have a helpful suggestion." No, it was, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says!"

The prophets of the Bible were primarily preachers. Any time the Word of God was applied in order to bring encouragement or bring change we may in some sense say that prophesying took place. It was the duty of the prophet to proclaim and interpret the message of God to their situation. When we try to understand the words of the prophets today we must first try to understand what those words meant to the original hearers.

The prophets were prodders. Just as cattle prods are used to direct cattle in the right direction so too when the prophets saw that the people had gone astray they sought to prod them back to the right way. When they saw injustice they goaded society into making changes that put them on the path of righteousness. It is in this sense we can say that people like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., are examples of modern day prophets.

The prophets were preachers and prodders. The prophets were also predictors. They announced judgements and deliverance, as well as events relating to the coming of the Messiah. So Joel was a preacher, prodder, and predictor.

We know little about Joel's personal life. The fact that he is identified by referencing his father (Pethuel) rather than a residence suggests he was from Jerusalem (see Is 1:1). The name Joel means "the LORD¹ is God." It was quite common. Do not confuse the Prophet Joel with Samuel's son, Joel, who was a decidedly wicked man (1 Sam 8:1-4).

We do not know when Joel lived. A persuasive argument can be made that he lived during the time of Athaliah in the 9th century B.C., though many others think it was much later. Athaliah was the only Queen of Judah and the only woman to usurp the line of Davidic kings.

Athaliah was from the northern Kingdom of Israel and was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (The same Jezebel whose name is synonymous with evil; see 1 Kings 16:31-33; Rev 2:20). She was given in marriage to King Jehoram of the southern Kingdom of Judah for purely political reasons and the results were disastrous. Her husband died and her son became king. Then her son died. But she had grown accustomed to the power that came from being queen mother and did not want to give it up. So she slaughtered all her grandchildren – all but one, Joash, who was whisked away to safety and kept hidden until Athaliah died.

¹ *Yahweh.*

Athaliah reigned for 6 years. Ruthless and vindictive she brought great fear to the palace and the nation. Under her sponsorship the worship of Baal was vigorously promoted. Her particular version of Baal worship brought temple prostitution and the sacrifice of children to the Kingdom of Judah. It was a dark and destructive time.

2. DAY OF THE LORD

The wickedness of Athaliah may have shaped Joel's development as a prophet². Joel was one of the first prophets to develop the biblical concept of the "Day of the Lord." Do not confuse this with a similar term called, "the Lord's Day." The Lord's Day refers to the first day of the week or what we call Sunday. Even before the New Testament was completed, the first day of the week was referred to as the Lord's Day in remembrance of the resurrection of the Lord from the dead (see Rev 1:10). The Day of the Lord, on the other hand, is something different.

Joel did not invent the term. It was a common phrase in his day. The Israelites believed that a day was coming when God would destroy all of Israel's enemies and usher in a new golden age where the Israelites would be blessed beyond imagination. They called this the "Day of the Lord."

But Joel realized that the Lord had something different in mind. Whereas the people thought of the Day of the Lord as a reckoning for their *enemies*, Joel recognized that it was a reckoning for *them*. The people believed that a day was coming when they would receive a great blessing *regardless* of how they lived. Joel informed them they would not be blessed but judged *because* of how they lived.

The Day of the Lord as it is used in Scripture has a dual nature. It is a critical time of judgment and grace. It is the warning for some to change their ways and encouragement for others to persevere in the face of difficulty. Whereas Amos thought of the Day as "darkness, not light" (Amos 5:18). Joel thought of it as the darkness before the light. It could be both judgment and blessing.

The invocation of the Day of the Lord was usually triggered by an ominous event such as an invasion or a natural disaster. For Joel it was a plague of locusts. He interpreted it as a warning from God for his people to return to him.

There are events that can be classified as a kind of Day of the Lord even though they may not be explicitly named as such. Biblical events would include Noah and the flood, the

² If not Athaliah then perhaps a later ruler who nonetheless followed in Athaliah's footsteps.

exodus from Egypt and the Babylonian conquest. Historical events could include the rise of Constantine, the Protestant Reformation, and D-Day June 6, 1944 – Critical moments of judgment and grace, pain and redemption.

Some personal experiences can also be seen as a kind of Day of the Lord – The loss of a job, struggling with an addiction, the breaking apart of a marriage, getting arrested, the passing of a loved one, struggling with doubts and despair, having a serious health problem, being diagnosed with a terminal illness. Have you ever experienced a Day of the Lord?

Whether such an experience becomes judgment or blessing, a warning or an encouragement, depends on the condition of your heart before God.

The Day of the Lord can be used in the temporal sense and also in the ultimate sense. Past events worthy of the designation "Day of the Lord" provide a taste of things to come, and provide continued opportunity for a change of heart before the arrival of the final day.

The New Testament speaks of the Day of the Lord in the ultimate sense. It is associated with the return of Jesus Christ and the final judgment of the world. The “Day of Jesus Christ” or its equivalent is a variation of the Day of the Lord. Paul writes:

He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns (1 Cor 1:8 NLT).

Are you ready for the Day of the Lord?

3. PRAYER TO THE LORD

Joel may have been inspired by the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. Part of Solomon’s prayer goes like this:

“If there is a famine in the land or a plague or crop disease or attacks of locusts or caterpillars, or if your people’s enemies are in the land besieging their towns—whatever disaster or disease there is— and if your people Israel pray about their troubles, raising their hands toward this Temple, then hear from heaven where you live, and forgive. Give your people what their actions deserve, for you alone know each human heart. Then they will fear you as long as they live in the land you gave to our ancestors” (1 Kings 8:37-40 NLT).

Joel was a witness to the moral apathy and spiritual complacency of his day. Triggered by

a great plague of locusts, he sensed that God had intervened to provide a critical moment for his people to shake off their complacency, push away from their apathy, and restore their relationship with God. For Joel, the key to making this happen is prayer. More than anything else, Joel is the prophet of prayer.

We live in an age when people are highly critical of prayer. Celebrities and politicians try to out do each other in their condemnation of prayer and the people who promote prayer. In their view, prayer is at best a waste of time or, worse, an excuse for bigotry and inaction. The phrase “thoughts and prayers” has been branded as politically incorrect and an anathema is placed on those who say it.

Now, of course, there are people who talk about prayer and don’t really mean it. Such hypocrisy does not help the person who really needs prayer and it does not put the cause of faith in a positive light. But that hardly justifies condemning all prayer and the people who practice it.

If Joel lived in our time he would be astounded to hear someone tell him that prayer does no good. He would reply, “On the contrary, no lasting good can be accomplished without it.”

Samuel Chadwick has said:

The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.

CONCLUSION

We do not know when a moment in time will become for us a Day of the Lord nor do we know the time for the ultimate Day of the Lord. We need to live our lives ready for any day. Darkness may come, but as Joel reminds us, the light follows. The book of Joel contains a powerful exhortation to come before God in wholehearted prayer to receive healing, hope and wholeness.

To learn more about the call to prayer and answers to prayer – you need to come back next week!