

JOEL AND THE DAY OF THE LORD
(2) THE CALL TO PRAYER

Joel 1:2-2:17

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SCRIPTURE

Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? ³ Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children 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. ⁵ Wake up, you drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you wine-drinkers, over the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. ⁶ For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. ⁷ It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white. ⁸ Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth. ⁹ The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. ¹⁰ The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails. ¹¹ Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. ¹² The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple— all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people. ¹³ Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. ¹⁴ Sanctify 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. ¹⁵ Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. ¹⁶ Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? ¹⁷ The seed shrivels under the clods, the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are ruined because the grain has failed. ¹⁸ How the animals groan! The herds of cattle wander about because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dazed. ¹⁹ To you, O LORD, I cry. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flames have burned all the trees of the field. ²⁰ Even the wild animals cry to you because the watercourses are dried up, and fire has devoured the

pastures of the wilderness (Joel 1:2-20 NRSV).

MESSAGE PART ONE – THE CALL TO PRAYER: FOR REASON’S SAKE

The Day of the Lord is a phrase used in Scripture that refers to a critical time of judgment and grace. The prophets believed that such a day was prompted by God either directly or indirectly. Identifying a specific time as the Day of the Lord was usually triggered by an ominous event such as an invasion or a natural disaster.

The Prophet Joel spoke of the Day of the Lord. Triggered by a great plague of locusts, he sensed that God had intervened in this calamity to provide a critical moment for his people to shake off their spiritual complacency, push away from their moral apathy, and restore their relationship with God. For Joel, the key to being restored to God is prayer. A large portion of the book that bears his name is an appeal for people to come before God in wholehearted and contrite prayer to receive healing, hope and wholeness.

As we consider Joel’s call to prayer we see that he appears to take three different approaches. In the first approach he appeals to reason. He describes the problem and expects that once people recognize the problem they will then take steps to resolve the problem.

He summons the leaders (elders) and all the people and challenges them to wrap their minds around the devastation of the locusts. Joel uses four different terms for locusts: cutters, swarmers, hoppers (meaning young ones), and destroyers. Multiple nicknames suggests familiarity. Such a disaster has happened before.

Locusts are a type of grasshopper. As grasshoppers they are more or less innocuous but under certain conditions they start to migrate and form swarming masses that devour most every kind of vegetation in their path. That is when these grasshoppers are referred to as locusts.

Plagues of locusts have been around throughout history. They are mentioned in the writings of Homer, the Bible, and the Quran. Swarms have devastated crops and created famines.

In response to the scourge of locusts, Joel addresses different groups within society. Oddly, he starts with drunkards. In Joel’s day it was commonly thought that people drank themselves into a stupor in order to avoid having to deal with reality. Joel tells them to wake up, not from sleep, but from their reality avoiding intoxication. Why? Because they have no choice. The locusts have destroyed all the ingredients necessary for making their preferred beverage. Like it or not they will have to take a sober look at their very real

problems.

Of course, Joel is not just addressing drunkards but anyone who is unwilling to come to grips with the implications of what is going on. The church in the world faces many challenges and yet there are many Christians who do not wish to be engaged in the church's struggle. They remind me of the man who was sitting in the stern of a lifeboat when the people in the bow discovered a leak and asked him for help and he said, "Hey, that's your problem, not mine."

Joel speaks to the priests. Worship in those days depended heavily on agriculture. But Joel points out that the daily cereal offerings, the libations of wine, and even the animal sacrifices were going to come to a grinding halt. The ceremonies in the Temple would stop. Joel tells the priests that it was going to feel like a woman engaged to be married losing her husband-to-be the night before the wedding takes place. What are the priests to do? What could they do but weep and pray.

Joel turns to the farmers and fruit growers. With no crops they will become destitute. People will go hungry. There will be no joy of the harvest because there will be no harvest.

So we see that throughout this section (1:2-20) Joel makes his case to the differing groups within society. In spite of their differences he has demonstrated a common problem and urges them to unite in faith for a shared solution. Their worries must be turned to prayers. They must shake off their complacency, push away from their apathy, and turn with all their hearts to the living God.

But Joel discovered in his day what is still true today. Most people are not persuaded by reason.

SCRIPTURE

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the 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 spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. ³ Fire devours in front of them, and behind them a flame burns. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, but after them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. ⁴ They have the appearance of horses, and like war-horses they charge. ⁵ As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame

of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle. ⁶ Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale. ⁷ Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall. Each keeps to its own course, they do not swerve from their paths. ⁸ They do not jostle one another, each keeps to its own track; they burst through the weapons and are not halted. ⁹ They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls; they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief. ¹⁰ The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. ¹¹ The LORD utters his voice at the head of his army; how vast is his host! Numberless are those who obey his command. Truly the day of the LORD is great; terrible indeed—who can endure it? (Joel 2:1-11 NRSV).

MESSAGE PART TWO – THE CALL TO PRAYER: FOR FEAR'S SAKE

Joel's second approach is to appeal to fear. I must confess this is an approach with which I am not comfortable. I would much rather talk about grace than damnation. But sometimes appeals to reason are not enough. There is a part of the human psyche that only seems to respond to fear. At such times an overwhelming dread of terrible consequences brings about a heightened sense of the reality of God. More than one person has come to faith after God got their attention through fear. There is an old saying, "There are no atheists in fox holes," and there may be a measure of truth to that.

In Hebrews we read:

For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. . . For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:26-27, 30-31 NRSV).

Jonathan Edwards preached what may have been the most famous sermon ever preached in North America. It was called, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."¹ Edwards painted a horrifying picture of our souls poised on the brink of hell. We are like spiders clinging to a rock, which God holds over the fire, and it's only God's mercy that keeps us from eternal destruction. Edwards borrowed his language straight from the prophets – prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Joel. It was reported that people fainted in fear when they heard Edwards preach.

¹ A.D. 1741 in Northampton, Massachusetts, and later in Enfield, Connecticut.

Edwards started with fear but ended with grace and the hope of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. He is regarded as the greatest theologian in American history and was almost single-handedly responsible for the spiritual renewal that swept the colonies known as the Great Awakening. The Great Awakening provided the spiritual impetus for a formation of a new nation – the United States of America.

Fear is a common experience. We all have to deal with it in one form or another. Some say there are only five types of fear: 1) Terror, 2) Panic, 3) 14 missed calls from Mom, 4) Our computer indicating that the username or password is incorrect, and hearing someone say to us, 5) "We need to talk."

Have you heard about the man with an irrational fear of empty spaces? Nothing scares him. But that does not describe me. There is a lot that scares me and I am guessing you are no different.

Joel starts his fearful approach by calling for the blowing of the trumpet. This was a ram's horn (shophar) used to warn of the approach of an invading army. The natural reading of the text indicates Joel is talking about the plague of locusts – a terrible disaster in its own right. But Joel's language and imagery can also be understood as a foreshadowing of a future calamity with a real invading army, an army that will be used as an instrument by God to judge his people if they do not change their ways.

Joel likens the locusts to soldiers. They are so numerous they appear as a monstrously huge dark cloud. They destroy everything in their path. No one, nothing is spared. And their commander is known to the people. The commander is the Lord.

Joel deliberately strains the feelings of his listeners. He generates an intense sense of foreboding and unbearable tension. The final question evokes helpless despair:

“Truly the day of the LORD is great; terrible indeed—who can endure it?”
(2:11).

SCRIPTURE

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. 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? ¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the

people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. ¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” (Joel 2:12-17 NRSV).

MESSAGE PART THREE – THE CALL TO PRAYER: FOR LOVE'S SAKE

Joel’s third approach is dramatically different from the two previous approaches. It is not cold hard logic. It is not fear-evoking fire and brimstone. It is the tender affection of a loving parent who longs for an errant child to return home:

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (2:12,13).

The deliberate ripping of one’s clothing in public was a sign of intense distress as a result of great grief or great shame or both. Defection from God was considered a kind of death. The command to, “rend your hearts and not your clothing,” is the Hebrew way of saying that inward contrition is more important than an outward show of remorse. For the ancients, the heart was the seat of moral and spiritual decisions. It is the heart that must be addressed for any worthwhile change to take place. To “rend you hearts” means to change your whole attitude.

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly” (2:15).

Once again Joel orders the trumpet to be blown. Only this time it is not to warn of an invading army. Trumpets were also used in worship and that is the meaning here. God wants his people to make use of the house of worship rather than occupy the ramparts. He wants hands raised in prayer not swords raised in anger. All are to participate – men and women, rich and poor, young and old, farmer and priest. God calls us all to turn to him and make a wholehearted commitment to him.

This idea of God being like a loving parent who longs for an errant child to return home would find its clearest expression in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Consider the well know story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This story is the third of three similar stories that are told by Jesus in response to the criticism, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (15:2). The story is not an allegory. In an allegory, every part

of the story is meant to represent something else, to convey some important truth. But the story of the prodigal son is what we call a parable. A parable paints a picture in the mind, out of ordinary happenstance, that leaves the listener with a single idea or theme. In the story, a father welcomes back an errant son. This tells us something about God. God is incredibly gracious and does, in fact, welcome sinners.

But before God can welcome us back we have to come to our senses and realize we have been going in the wrong direction and we need to return to the One who made us. Has that happened to you? If so, what was it that God used to get your attention? Was it reason? Was it fear? Was it love?

Today you may be painfully aware of your own shortcomings. You may feel like you have taken a thousand steps away from God. But the Good News is it is always only one step back to God. God's mercy triumphs over our failings.