

JOEL AND THE DAY OF THE LORD (3) ANSWERS TO PRAYER

Joel 2:18-3:21

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PREFACE

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. Most of Joel's short book is a call to prayer. Joel makes an appeal for people to come before God in wholehearted and contrite prayer to receive healing, hope and wholeness. The call to prayer ends at 2:17. While it may not be obvious, there is an extended period of time that elapses between 2:17 and 2:18. The implication is that the civil and spiritual leaders have heeded Joel's urgent request to turn to God in prayer. Starting with 2:18 and going through the end of the book, Joel describes God's answers to these prayers.

SCRIPTURE

Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people. ¹⁹
In response to his people the LORD said: I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations. ²⁰ I will remove the northern army far from you, and drive it into a parched and desolate land, its front into the eastern sea, and its rear into the western sea; its stench and foul smell will rise up. Surely he has done great things! ²¹ Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! ²² Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. ²³ O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. ²⁴ The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. ²⁵ I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. ²⁶ You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. ²⁷ You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame (Joel 2:18-27 NRSV).

MESSAGE PART ONE – ANSWERS TO PRAYER: RESTORATION

The Prophet Joel recognized the hand of God in a disaster caused by a plague of locusts. Joel used the phrase “Day of the Lord” to describe this disaster. This phrase is also used elsewhere in the Bible and it refers to a critical time of judgment and grace.

In Joel’s day, his people had grown spiritually complacent, morally apathetic, and generally uninterested in the Lord. A scourge of locusts that devoured all the crops was a wake-up call from God that things needed to change. Joel understood that it was necessary for the people to gather together and seek the Lord in prayer. But prayers based on ceremony or ritual would not be enough. These prayers had to come from the heart.

In this sense, nothing has changed in 3,000 years. Formal prayers can be a helpful guide but they are no substitute for heartfelt petitions. If you can say something like: “Eternal, almighty and gracious God of all good things, thy hand hath abundantly and gloriously supplied our deepest needs. How blessed and thankful we are to come to thee and declare unto thee our greatest longings and supplications. . .” – that would be impressive. But it hardly compares to the candor of: “Dear Lord, So far I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent. I'm really glad about that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm going to need a lot more help.” Indeed, we must call on God every day for we really do need all the help we can get.

The prayers that Joel and his people expressed to God contain two key questions: 1) “Will God have mercy on us?” (2:14) and, 2) “Will God be with us?” (2:17). Now God could have answered these questions with a ‘No.’ After all, “No” is an answer. It may not be the answer we like but it is an answer. Wise parents know that sometimes the most loving word you can say to a child is, “No.”

But God does not answer these questions with a “No.” God answers with a glorious “Yes.” Will God have mercy? Yes. And the form of that mercy is restoration. God says:

“I’ll make up for the years of the locust,
the great locust devastation—
Locusts savage, locusts deadly,
fierce locusts, locusts of doom,
That great locust invasion
I sent your way.
You’ll eat your fill of good food.
You’ll be full of praises to your God,
The God who has set you back on your heels in wonder” (Joel 2:25,26
MSG).

Joel and his people receive a blessing direct from God. There will be gracious compensation for their losses. There will be an abundant harvest once again. No, the clock will not be turned back. What happened has happened. But it will not determine their future.

I met an older pastor at a conference in Kansas City. He made a remarkable confession. He said he had only become a Christian a few years previous, even though he had been a Presbyterian minister for nearly three decades. He went on to say that he felt tremendous guilt for all the years he had wasted. He prayed about it often and without relief until one night he was reading through Joel and he came across, "I will restore to you the years of the locust" (2:25). He said he felt like God was speaking directly to him. It was as if God said to him, "I will restore to you the years of the locust. I will not let you be defined by your past. I will not love you any less. I will always be with you. I will restore to you the years of the locust."

We all make mistakes. There are wasted times we wish we could have back. Maybe this was a result of bad choices in our relationships. Or bad choices in our jobs or careers. Or bad choices in our lifestyle. But if we seek the mercy of God and call upon him in heartfelt prayer, this is what he will say, "I will restore to you the years of the locust. I will not let you be defined by your past. I will not love you any less. I will always be with you. I will restore to you the years of the locust."

SCRIPTURE

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. ³⁰ I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. ³² Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls (Joel 2:28-32 NRSV).

MESSAGE PART TWO – ANSWERS TO PRAYER: RENEWAL

Will God have mercy? Yes. And the form of that mercy is restoration. "I will restore to you the years of the locust." Will God be with us? Yes. And we can experience that presence through renewal.

God promises his people that they will become his visionary sons and daughters. This was

experienced in part in Joel's day but more completely after the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Fifty days after the resurrection, on the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter stood up and said:

“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts
2:16-21 NRSV).

Sound familiar? Peter was quoting from Joel.

Moses was a prophet who said that he hoped there would be a day when the Spirit would come upon all of God's people (Num 11:29). Joel prophesied much the same thing, "And afterward, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Joel 2:28). This promise was reiterated by Jesus who said to his followers, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). This promise came true on Pentecost. Today, every believer receives the Holy Spirit – God's personal and powerful presence.

Under the old covenant the Spirit rested only on certain leaders for special and often temporary purposes. Under the new covenant, as established by Jesus and inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit now rests upon each believer individually. In other words, it is through the Holy Spirit that each of us can have a personal relationship with God. As it says in Scripture, "For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love" (Rom 5:5 NLT).

SCRIPTURE

For then, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, ²I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the

valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations. They have divided my land, ³and cast lots for my people, and traded boys for prostitutes, and sold girls for wine, and drunk it down. ⁴What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia? Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back, I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads swiftly and speedily. ⁵For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. ⁶You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, removing them far from their own border. ⁷But now I will rouse them to leave the places to which you have sold them, and I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads. ⁸I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, to a nation far away; for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. ¹⁰ Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, "I am a warrior." ¹¹ Come quickly, all you nations all around, gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD. ¹² Let the nations rouse themselves, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the neighboring nations. ¹³ Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. ¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵ The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. ¹⁶ The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But the LORD is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. ¹⁷ So you shall know that I, the LORD your God, dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it (Joel 3:1-17 NRSV).

MESSAGE PART THREE – ANSWERS TO PRAYER: RETRIBUTION

Joel uses the theme of the Day of the Lord to interpret a scourge of locusts as a punitive visitation from God. Joel and his people come to their senses and wish to turn back to God and prayerfully ask two questions: 1) "Will God have mercy on us?" and, 2) "Will God be with us?" God's answer to each of these questions is a resounding, "Yes."

But then in chapter 3 it is as if we are starting all over gain. Only the context is not an insect plague that is likened to *a* Day of the Lord. Rather the new context is *the* Day of the Lord – the final judgment.

So in effect, the prayer questions are repeated in light of the coming of the final Day of the Lord: “Will God have mercy on us?” and “Will God be with us?” Once again God answers each question with a glorious “Yes.”

In order to show that evil will receive retribution, Joel uses the imagery of warfare – “Beat your plowshares into swords (3:10a)”. Prophets like Isaiah and Micah speak of a coming time of peace using the idea of swords being beaten into plowshares (Is 2:24; Mi 4:3). Joel does not dispute that but he is addressing an earlier stage in the divine calendar.

The Valley of Jehoshaphat ¹ (12) seems to be synonymous with the Valley of Decision (14). Neither appears to be an actual geographic reference. The first may have been named after a previous king of Judah. But perhaps a better rendering for the second would be, “Valley of the Verdict.” This is, after all, the metaphorical location of God’s judgment upon the nations. Wrongs will be righted. Justice will prevail. But God’s people have no need to fear this judgment – all those who trust in God will find mercy. As the Bible says:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1 RSV).

SCRIPTURE

In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Wadi Shittim. ¹⁹ Egypt shall become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness, because of the violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they have shed innocent blood. ²⁰ But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. ²¹ I will avenge their blood, and I will not clear the guilty, for the LORD dwells in Zion (Joel 3:18- 21 NRSV).

MESSAGE PART FOUR – ANSWERS TO PRAYER: REWARD

In light of the final Day of the Lord, will God have mercy? Yes. And though that means retribution for evil it also means the triumph of goodness. In light of the final Day of the Lord, will God be with us? Yes. And that is our greatest reward in this life and the next.

In the Book of Joel we see that God gives a double response to the prayers of his people. In the first he promises restoration and renewal. In the second he promises retribution and reward. Both responses culminate in formulas that promise the assurance of the Lord’s

¹ Literally, “Yahweh has judged.”

presence with his people as their God (“You shall know” in 2:27; 3:17).

All of God’s rewards to us are unearned including the greatest gift of all – the gift of himself. Such gifts are to be received by faith through the grace of God and are expressions of God’s great love.

We may not receive clear answers to our specific questions about pain and suffering in this life. But we are given the assurance of God's presence and the vision of a future where pain and death, sin and suffering are no more. We may not understand the answers to our prayers in this life, but we can know God, his power and his love. And there is something we can take on faith as being completely true:

"Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39 NRSV).