

## Return to Me Joel 1:1-3:21

### Introduction:

**Minor Prophets:** Series (“Major Lessons from Minor Prophets”). One book (Twelve parts). They highlight the sin and idolatry of Israel and the hope and promise of God’s salvation.

- They are “minor” simply because they are “short” (article vs. book).
- Going through **one book a week**. We looked at **Hosea** last week. I hope you were able to read **Joel** before you came tonight (12 minute). Check out **Amos** next week (24 min). I think you can carve out half an hour in a week. If not, need to peek at your schedule.
- If you don’t read these books, it’s going to be awkward when you get to heaven and run into Nahum or Habakkuk (who?) and they ask how you liked their book of the Bible.

**Joel:** <sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel (1:1). We know almost nothing about Joel (etym. “YHWH/Lord is God”; cf. Elijah in reverse) other than his Father’s name (Pethuel).

- We don’t really know where he prophesied (but some clues to the Southern Kingdom) or when he prophesied (though I have a theory).<sup>1</sup>
- Joel will let the *other* minor prophets give more specifics about the sins of Israel, he is more concerned with a clear call to **repentance**.
  - The focus is not on him or his life but on his message (**it’s about the message, not the messenger**).
  - His message is one that endures from generation to generation, it called to the first Israelites who heard it, it called to the early church, and it calls to us!
- It’s a message meant to be passed on from generation to generation. <sup>2</sup>Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? <sup>3</sup>Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation (1:2-3).

I think the overall message of Joel could be summed up in one command: **return to the Lord before it is too late**.

### 1. A Plague of Judgment

**Plague:** He starts with a warning of a plague of destruction that will leave nothing untouched. <sup>4</sup>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 (1:4).

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<sup>1</sup> Some evidence for contemporaneous with Ezra-Nehemiah because of familiarity with other books and prophets, assumes familiarity with other prophets, alludes to destructio of Jerusalem as a past event, etc. *Contra* Greear, et al, who argue for a pre-exilic date (after Solomon, before exile, possibly student of Elisha).

- A plague of locusts would be familiar to the Israelites from their history coming out of Egypt. God sent locusts as one of the judgments on Pharaoh to *persuade* him to let the people go.<sup>2</sup>

I went down a little bit of a rabbit hole on locust plagues. They still can happen in different parts of the world.

- Fully grown, these locusts are like 3-inch armored grasshoppers. They multiply rapidly laying up to 70,000 eggs in one yard of soil. Modern history has recorded swarms in the hundreds of millions, they can consume food and vegetation equivalent to what 50,000 humans eat in a day. They are so numerous they can block out the light of the sun. The sound alone resembles the noise of chariots!
  - They devastate the land, the economy, and the psyche of the people.

**Wake Up:** I am still not sure whether this is a real plague of locusts that God is using to point to an even greater problem or just a metaphor for the problem that Israel faces. Is he saying that this problem of locusts is small compared to the greater threat that faces Israel? In either case, the locusts are quickly substituted for armies and warriors.

- **The point is that Israel needs to wake up and pay attention** (🎵 Sister Act 2).
- <sup>5</sup> Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth <sup>6</sup> For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. <sup>7</sup> It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white. <sup>8</sup> Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth. <sup>9</sup> The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. <sup>10</sup> The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes (1:5-10).
- There's a problem of sin and the promise of judgment on the horizon, if Israel doesn't get her act together, it's going to be too late.
  - The temptation is to ignore the problem (e.g., drunkard). Not looking doesn't make a problem go away (bank account, honest). Many people distract themselves from the problem of sin, but it's still there.
  - We should **lament** sin to the same degree that a bride would lament if her groom died before the wedding. *That's how serious it is.*
  - This plague is so bad that even the **ground mourns**: <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (Rom 8:22).

**Warning:** <sup>1</sup> Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for **the day of the LORD is coming**; it is near <sup>2</sup> a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. <sup>3</sup> Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing

<sup>2</sup> Ex 13:8, 14; Deut 4:9; 6:4-7, 20-21; Ps 78:4-6.

escapes them. <sup>4</sup> Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run. <sup>5</sup> 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 (2:1-5).

- Play the *Reveille*. Blow a trumpet. Warn the people of God. **God is sending judgment on his people**. Yes, it might be foreign nations that will be the *instrument* of his judgment, but don't forget that he is in control (i.e., "The Day of the *Lord*").
  - God judges actively and passively, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, sending and permitting, restraining and releasing.
- Not all suffering is God's judgment. Sometimes it's just from the brokenness of the world (still an opportunity to trust him). Sometimes we suffer *because* we are following Christ (again, an opportunity to trust him). Not all suffering is from personal sin, but all suffering comes from someone's sins.

But in our sin, God can and does send judgment.

- *If* God has sent judgment on your life because of sin, don't blame God. It is your sin that has led to this. God doesn't destroy, sin destroys. In fact, **God's judgment is an opportunity to experience his grace, if you'll allow it**.
  - That financial catastrophe? Medical diagnosis? Job loss? Maybe he's letting it get eaten up so you'll turn to him. "There is no refuge *from* God, only *in* God."

**What's the Problem?:** Joel doesn't accuse Israel of a specific evil, but we can tell from the surrounding *books* that they **fail to love God**. They fail to trust and obey him. It shows up in their worshipping false gods, giving their allegiance to other nations, perpetuating injustice against the vulnerable, and more.

- But all of these "surface" symptoms flow from a root cause — **sin**. Sin is the basic problem. "Sin is saying 'no' to God and doing what we want instead of what God wants."
- Go to the doctor. Touch shoulder: hurts. Touch head: hurts. Two things: You broke your finger. Stop touching things with it. Everything Israel touches (politics, economy, relationships, religion, etc.) "hurts."
- We are dead in our sin but hope is not lost. God is calling us to turn to him.

## 2. A Call to Repentance

**A Call to Israel:** Joel calls Israel and us to *repentance*. "To repent means to turn *from* sin and turn to *Jesus*." <sup>12</sup> "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup> and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster <sup>14</sup> 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? (2:12-14).

**Heart Repentance:** Notice what repentance is. **It is first from the heart**. He is saying return to me with all your heart. "Rend your hearts, not just your garments."

- Martin Luther famously said “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>3</sup> Repentance isn’t a task to accomplish but a mindset of dependence on God. It’s not a hoop to jump through but a lifestyle of trust and obedience.
- This isn’t apologizing to avoid punishment (i.e., I got caught).
- God desires “repentance that comes from a broken heart not just a bent will” (Grear).
- “Most of us prefer remorse to repentance. We would rather say, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I feel really, really awful about what I have done’ than actually start doing things differently” (Taylor).

If the only motivation to repent is painful circumstance or even shame, then my resolutions are short-lived. But if I believe I hurt God and rejected his presence, then I can be changed.

- The reason some of us can’t repent effectively is that we don’t really love God, we too often want to use God to get what we want. God is not a means to an end but the end in and of himself.

**Point of Surrender:** “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to **rebuild** that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But all of the sudden He starts knocking down walls and fixing the foundation, things that hurt badly and don’t seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of — adding a new addition here, putting on an extra floor there, constructing towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage, but He is building a palace and intends to come and live in it Himself” (Lewis, *adapted*).

- In order for God to bring you to your senses, he has to bring you to the end of yourself. The Bible talks about a “new heart” not a reformed lifestyle. It’s a spiritual heart transplant.
  - The gospel wounds us to heal us. **You don’t need spiritual therapy you need spiritual surgery.** And it will hurt but it will heal. As God cuts out the sinful idols of our heart we find life in him, life that is worth living.
- For some, he’s been calling out to you for years but you haven’t been ready to listen because you haven’t come to the end of yourself.
  - In order for God to make you new, he’s got to rip out the old. He has to tear you down. So, don’t be surprised if your world keeps crumbling.
- I’ve seen a lot of people come in and out of church to explore the whole God thing. But a lot of people don’t want real change, they just want God to fix their immediate problem, to slap a new coat of paint on their life and scrub away the rust.
  - God doesn’t want to polish up the old you, he wants to make you a new person. He’s not trying to help you turn a new leaf, but live a new life..

**Return to God:** Turn to God. I plead with you, turn from sin and trust Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> 95 Theses: “Dominus et magister noster Iesus Christus dicendo, ‘Penitentiam agite etc. Omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit.’”

### 3. A God of Restoration

**Wrath or Love:** The judgment of God is real. His holiness demands that sin is punished. Every sin must be paid for or he wouldn't be just (e.g., child predator). But it is not *really* fear of punishment that should motivate you to repent, it is the love and grace of God.

- Knowing that you are a sinner and yet God loves you and wants to forgive you should call you to repentance. The fact that he loves you in your sin is the real pull out of sin.
  - “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4). We don’t return to God to earn his love but because he first loved us.
- This is who God is: <sup>6</sup> The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex 24:6-7a).

God’s mercy is more powerful than his wrath. **Mercy triumphs over judgment** (Jas 2:13).

- You will learn to repent when you believe God loves you, truly loves you. He loves you more than you deserve, but nonetheless he loves you.

<sup>14</sup> 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? (Joel 2:14)

- Relent (mercy) and blessing (grace). **Mercy** = withhold punishment you deserve. **Grace** = give gifts you don’t deserve. E.g., break into a house: not call cops (mercy); give you money to help you out of your situation (grace).

**Restoration:** The grace of God is that he not only **forgives** he **restores**. <sup>24</sup> “The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. <sup>25</sup> I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you. <sup>26</sup> “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. <sup>27</sup> You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame (2:24-27).

- That’s why Jesus quotes Isa 61 when he starts his ministry: <sup>1</sup> The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup> to grant to those who mourn in Zion— to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. <sup>4</sup> They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations (Isa 61:1-4).
- In Christ, God can restore the years that were taken. How does he do this? He does this with himself: You shall be satisfied. The greatest gift God can give you is satisfaction, contentment, untouchable joy. And, the truth is, that can only come in God himself.

- Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! (Ps 34:8).
- I think it was John Chrysostom who I remember describing a truly wealthy person as someone who doesn't need more because they are content with what they have in God, and a truly poor person is someone who always needs more yet can never be satisfied.

**When Will This Happen:** "In that day"; "the day of the Lord"; "in those days and at that time"

- Joel is looking forward to a day when not only Israel's enemies, but all the nations, will be brought under the rule of God. **A day when God will not just heal Israel, but all of creation.** He (along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) pointed to **a day when God's presence would not just fill the temple but would fill God's people.**

For Joel, all of these promises look forward, for us, we've seen them break into our lives through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

- <sup>10</sup> The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. <sup>11</sup> The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it? (2:10-11).
- <sup>30</sup> "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. <sup>31</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. <sup>32</sup> And it shall come to pass that 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 (2:30-32).

- Jesus institutes the last days. The kingdom of God draws near.

And that's why Peter sees Joel's promise as breaking into fulfillment at Pentecost in Acts 2: <sup>28</sup>

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that 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. <sup>29</sup> Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (2:28-29).

- "It was clear to the NT authors that a great deal of prophecy had gone unfulfilled or was only partially fulfilled, but" in Jesus and the early church they are being fulfilled (Marshall, CNTUOT).
- The people of God are filled with his Spirit. Every person who belongs to the people of God is empowered to spread God's word by God's Spirit.
  - The Spirit of God **doesn't just save you, he fills you** so that you can proclaim his glory to others. "God doesn't just revive and restore you so that you feel better on the inside but he makes you a witness of his glory on the outside."
- What we see in Jesus and his church is a down payment of an eternity where all of creation will be redeemed, all sin will be eradicated, and all evil will be defeated.
  - Joel 3 shows a valley of decision, a future with two sides: (1) salvation and blessing for those who call on the name of the Lord -or- (2) judgment and destruction for those who go their own way.
  - Which side are you on?

## Conclusion:

### So What? What Can We Learn and What Should We Do?

1) **Sin is destructive.** We learn just how dangerous and destructive our failures and sins are. Sin destroys God's world, it destroys God's people, and it *will* destroy you.

- "Saying 'no' to God and doing what we want instead of what God wants" will lead to heartache and judgment and despair.

2) **God is calling you to repent.** God *longs* to show mercy to those who will repent. He is a loving father waiting with open arms.

- God is calling you to **own up** to your sin, **confess** it, **acknowledge** it, **and turn from it**.
- He wants repentance *from your heart* that results in real change.

3) **There is hope.** Joel pointed us to the future when Jesus came to defeat our sin.

- For those who believe, we receive the Spirit of God as a down payment of salvation.
- His Spirit **empowers** us to follow him, to live as witnesses of him, but also as a promise that he will come back to finish what he started, that he will come back to make all things new.
- We can **live in that power** now even as we wait for God's full redemption to come.

This is the message from the prophet Joel to you and I: return to the Lord before it's too late.