

Joel ~ Sermon Notes

What kind of dreams do you have? Fantasy? Real people and situations? Lots of detail? Not much detail? How many of you can remember more than a smattering of your last dream? I'll have a vivid detailed novel-length dream with wild animals, a flight to Mars, high school friends and by breakfast it's vaporized.

What if you had a long, detailed, vivid dream and could remember every event in it and exactly what was said well enough to write it down or type it out, word for word the next day? And in the dream God told you to go to Senegal and tell the people of Dakar what will happen to them if they don't repent?

What would you do? Would you be like Gideon and say, "God, if that was really you asking me to do this would you kindly keep this sheepskin rug completely dry from the dew that comes tonight." And God does it. Well, Gideon still isn't completely convinced so then he says to God, "how about tonight you let the moisture form on the sheepskin and keep the ground completely dry?" And, again, God does it. That would certainly be me. I'd want a lot of proof that it was actually God speaking to me.

Well, from what we know, Joel doesn't show any of these doubts. He just launches into a warning to the people of Judah about a plague of locusts. He's so anxious to blurt out his message that he doesn't even bother putting a date on his scroll or saying "I'm writing this in the time of King Joash" or "after the return of the exiles" or anything at all. In fact, the only things we know from the book is that Judah is inhabited and the temple is functioning—the first temple built by Solomon or the rebuilt second temple, we just don't know. He mentions Tyre, Sidon, Egypt, and Edom as enemies but that's no help because they've been enemies right from the earliest days of Israel. For all we know, this book could have been written in the ninth century BC, which would make Joel one of the earliest prophets, or it could have been written as late as 350 BC during the Persian period, which would make him one of the latest prophets.

There are 12 men in the Old Testament with the name Joel but none of them are this Joel. All we know is that he says he is the son of Pethuel. Other than that, we know nothing about him. Of course, the fact that the book was preserved by church leaders as "the word of the Lord" gives it a place in both Jewish and Christian Bibles. Joel is considered one of the so-called Minor Prophets. Actually, the only difference between the 4 major prophets and the 12 minor prophets was the length of their writing. And then you add prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Mi-cai-ah and many others who didn't write anything and it gets a bit confusing.

Nevertheless, this is an incredibly important book of prophecy because Joel is one of the only prophets who isn't just doom and gloom and God's fearsome judgement, but he also looks on the bright side and describes God's compassion and blessings as well. We can learn a lot from this book.

There are three key themes in the book: first—and by far the major theme—is what is called the Day of the Lord. In other books of the Bible this is sometimes called the day of judgement, or the day of God's wrath, or sometimes just “that day.” The phrase is found 26 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the New Testament. The second theme in Joel is the striking contrast between judgement and salvation, and his third theme is the outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord and blessings on those who repent and call on his name.

The book starts off with Joel urging the elders and people in the land to hear what he has to say, and to pass this information on from generation to generation. He says right in Chapter 1, Verse 3: “Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.” What he's saying is that this is a story for people then and for people today—a story for all times.

Why listen to him? Because a terrible plague of locusts is coming. It will be followed by a drought and widespread fires, all of which will bring on a great famine and destroy the country. It is difficult for us in America to appreciate the dire threat of a locust plague, not only in Biblical times but even today. For example, in 1988 the civil war in Chad prevented international cooperation in attacking the locust hatch, and a destructive swarm spread throughout North Africa devastating literally thousands of square miles in Sudan, Niger and some of the poorest nations and threatening to migrate up into Europe. The effect of a locust plague on health, mortality, and the economy is just staggering.

A little sidebar about locusts: It was only in 1921 that researchers determined that the swarming locust was none other than an ordinary species of grasshopper. However, when moisture and temperature conditions favored a large hatch, the crowding, unceasing contact, and jostling of the nymphs begins to stimulate changes in coloration, physiology, metabolism, and behavior, so that the grasshopper nymphs make the transition from solitary behavior to a swarming gregarious behavior that leads to a plague. Once they enter this gregarious phase, the locusts eat absolutely everything in their path—ground crops, vines, even trees, they continue to reproduce so the swarm expands, and as a result they have to migrate ever outward to find more and more food. In 1889, one swarm in the Red Sea area was estimated to cover two thousand square miles. That's the size of the state of Delaware or about the entire inhabited area of Israel.

Back to the book of Joel. In Chapter 1, Joel describes this impending plague of locusts that will be followed by widespread fires and a devastating famine throughout the land. Why is this plague—God’s punishment—coming to destroy everything? He doesn’t say. Almost every other prophet goes on at length describing the sins of the people, their worship of idols, and their turning away from the Lord. In Hosea, the book just before Joel, 7 of the 14 chapters describe God’s charge against Israel. But not in Joel.

Just as he assumes people know the date that he is writing the book, he also assumes they know the reason they are being punished. And isn’t that true with us too? Does God have to spell out your sins? Don’t you know in your heart what you did wrong? You know when you’ve given in to temptation, don’t you? You know when you’ve cheated, when you’ve lied, when you’ve been self-indulgent, when you’ve let your pride take over you life.

So Joel essentially says to the people, “you’ve turned away from the Lord and he’s going to punish you with a plague of locusts.” He urges the people to mourn their loss. In fact, he says that drunkards and drinkers of wine should mourn because the grape vines have been destroyed. He says the land itself should mourn. Farmers should mourn. And priests should mourn because there are no more grain offerings or drink offerings.

He says in verse 13, tear your garments, put on sackcloth, and fast—which shouldn’t be difficult as there was no food. Then the people should cry out to the Lord for deliverance from this devastation. Several commentators call this a “local day of the Lord.” It is a day of judgement—but not the final judgement or Day of the Lord—rather it’s a judgement that is directed at just the people of Judah.

In verses 16-20, Joel describes this local day of judgement. He says food has been cut off. Gladness and joy are no more. Seeds have shriveled up, the granaries have collapsed. Cattle and animals suffer. Fires have burned up the pastures and trees. The streams of water have dried up. It’s a horrible scene. Couldn’t be worse.

But then Joel goes on in Chapter 2 and says, “oh yes it could. These locusts? They’re like gnats in comparison to what’s coming in the future.” There’s going to be a much more fearful event: the coming of the army of the Lord. He describes this in Chapter 2, verses 1-11. Let me read these verses from the NLT.

1 Sound the alarm in Zion! Raise the battle cry on my holy mountain! Let everyone tremble in fear because the day of the Lord is upon us. It is a day of darkness and gloom, a day of thick clouds and deep blackness. Suddenly, like

dawn spreading across the mountains, a great and mighty army appears. Nothing like it has been seen before or will ever be seen again.

3 Fire burns in front of them, and flames follow after them. Ahead of them the land lies as beautiful as the Garden of Eden. Behind them is nothing but desolation; not one thing escapes. They look like horses; they charge forward like cavalry. Look at them as they leap along the mountaintops. Listen to the noise they make—like the rumbling of chariots, like the roar of fire sweeping across a field of stubble, like a mighty army moving into battle.

6 Fear grips all the people; every face grows pale with terror. The attackers march like warriors and scale city walls like soldiers. Straight forward they march, never breaking rank. They never jostle each other; each moves in exactly the right position. They break through defenses without missing a step. They swarm over the city and run along its walls. They enter all the houses, climbing like thieves through the windows.

10 The earth quakes as they advance, and the heavens tremble. The sun and moon grow dark, and the stars no longer shine.

11 The Lord is at the head of the column. He leads them with a shout. This is *his* mighty army, and they follow his orders. The day of the Lord is an awesome, terrible thing. Who can possibly survive?

In the face of this coming Day of the Lord, what does Joel say to do? Repent! Call on the Lord! Remember in Chapter 1, verse 13, he said tear your garments, put on sackcloth. In contrast, here in Chapter 2, also verse 13, he says, “Don’t tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead. Return to the Lord your God, for he is *merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love*. He is eager to relent and not punish.” By the way, almost these exact same words to describe the Lord appear in Exodus, Numbers, Nehemiah, Jonah, Nahum and in three Psalms. Just in the Old Testament, this phrase is repeated *eight* times: “The Lord your God is *merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love*.”

So Joel says, “repent, return to the Lord.” And then what will the Lord do? Joel describes the Lord’s response in Chapter 2, verses 18 to 27. He says the Lord will have pity on you. He will repel the northern armies (Judah’s enemies usually came from the north). The trees will bear fruit, you’ll have abundant rain, good harvests. The Lord says, “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten, you will have plenty to eat.” But then he adds this little zinger, “then you will know that I am the

Lord your God.”

Now in the Hebrew Bible, this is the end of Chapter 2. Chapter 3 consists of the next five verses that in our Christian Bibles are Chapter 2, verses 28 to 32. There is good reason for these five verses to stand alone. This is the all-important proclamation that in the future Day of the Lord, Yahweh will pour out his spirit upon those who call on him. The Lord’s judgement will be swift and harsh, but those who have called on his name will be delivered and saved forever.

There are some great lines here. Verse 31: “The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” Can’t you just hear Basil Rathbone or James Earl Jones saying those words? Here’s a copy of a painting by John Martin that hangs in the Tate Gallery called the Great Day of His Wrath. The original is huge: 10 feet by 6-1/2 feet.

This then leads into Chapter 3 in our Bibles and Chapter 4 in the Hebrew Bible that further describes the days of judgement and the blessings for God’s people. It’s kind of a repeat of Chapter 2 but with a little more detail about the enemies of Israel and the vindication of the people of Judah and Jerusalem. A key message here in Chapter 3 is that the Day of the Lord or the day of judgement doesn’t just apply to those people who believe in God, but to all people. That’s a pretty strong message today to people who say, “well, you have your God, but I have mine.” Guess what, everyone, no matter who or what you worship, is going to be judged in the final day by the Lord God and it’s going to be a darned, harsh judgement for those who have not called upon his name.

What’s the message for us here? The day of the Lord is imminent. It could occur a thousand years from now or it could occur tomorrow. Be prepared. The Day of the Lord is both a day of judgement, a day of wrath, a day of punishment, but also a day of restoration and salvation for those who have repented and called on the name of the Lord. In fact, we’ll see as we get further along in the Bible, and especially into the New Testament, that for Christian believers the Day of the Lord is a day to look forward to. It’s a day of salvation. It’s the day that you inherit eternal life and enter the kingdom of God. It’s going to be a fantastic day.

Joel is talking to the nation of Judah. Today, he’s talking to nations like France and England that in the past were walking with the Lord but today have turned away. He’s talking to nations that have turned to other religions. But he’s also talking to individuals like us. He urges people to return to the Lord. He’s speaking to a nation, Judah, that has apparently turned away for years. But returning to the Lord doesn’t have to mean years. It could be weeks, it could be days, it could be

an hour, it could be just a few minutes. There may be some things in your life that have been there for years while others crop up every day.

Now...My questions to you are: Is there something in your life that is standing in the way of you returning to the Lord, of calling on his name, of turning your life over to him? What are your idols? What is it that you need to repent of and for which you need to ask forgiveness? Is it greed? Adultery? Pornography? Is it ego? Anger? A desire for revenge? Alcohol addiction? Drugs? Maybe a lack of compassion? Bitterness? If the Day of the Lord came tomorrow, are you ready for it? Or would you say, "oh, give me a little time; could you wait until next week? Take these other people first?" Maybe you're walking completely with the Lord, you've turned over your life to him, and none of these are issues for you—and that's great! But speaking for myself, I'm still susceptible to temptation and every day I find myself saying, "Lord, I blew it again. Please forgive me. Please take me back."

In closing, remember Chapter 2, Verse 13, the line I said appeared in eight other places: "Return to the Lord your God, for he is *merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love*. He is eager to relent and not punish." That is so encouraging. Isn't it awesome to have such a wonderful, loving, forgiving God? And all you have to do is call on his name. WOW. What a great and awesome God we have. WOW!

Dave Ahl ~ November 2010