

## Joel 1 - Responding Rightly to Plague

Well, with the Coronavirus going around this is a unique time in history to be a Christian. It's not unprecedented - the people of God have endured plagues of one kind or another since the early chapters of Genesis. Whether it's the flood in Genesis 6 or a famine several chapters later in Genesis 12:10 during the time of Abraham, or the 10 plagues that God unleashed on Egypt leading up to the Exodus - there has always been plague.

What makes this unique is the ability for Christians to connect with one another through digital means in the midst of plague. If you can imagine lepers in Jesus's day having Facetime and Facebook maybe they wouldn't have sought healing. Initially I wasn't sure if this would be a helpful format. Digital recordings of sermons are not technically the church - but maybe it allows us to have a sense of connectedness around the Word of God through this time.

In regard to that, I wanted to turn our attention from our normal study through the Sermon on the Mount that we've been going through to the book of Joel. We're going to spend a total of 3 weeks in the book of Joel. We'll be in Joel for 2 weeks. Then Easter Sunday we'll tie a passage in Joel to Peter's sermon in Acts 2. And then we'll finish up the book. At a chapter a week, this is going to be a high level overview.

It's my hope that Joel will be helpful to look at in our current situation because it deals with God's people who have been stricken with plague. And who are being threatened with more plague. I hope it will give us a sense of perspective and direction and hope in our strange time.

I think most of us know that the biblical solution to plague isn't how to keep from being bored or how to manufacture toilet paper or how to critique government policy - as though we could change it anyway. Over and over the remedy to the threat of plague is to repent. In biblical terminology dress ourselves in sackcloth and ashes - visible signs of repentance - and pray for God's mercy. Will that save the people from disaster? Well, maybe. It saved Nineveh from disaster when Jonah preached repentance; maybe it'll save us.

Now there are several things that make Joel a unique book in the Bible. First, we don't know exactly when Joel was written. Scholars give it a range from somewhere between 900 years before Jesus and 500 years before Jesus, probably closer to the 900 date. But that's a big window and we can't pinpoint the exact situation he was addressing.

Nor do we actually know for sure all of the sins he's addressing in his book. Usually when the OT prophets pronounced judgement on Israel they would specify exactly why judgment was coming. There was a list of sins. We don't have that with Joel. Aside from a mention of drunkenness and a few Gentile nations are condemned for their disregard for human life and plundering the Temple, there's not a lot in the way of specific sins Joel seems to be addressing.

But don't let that bother you, it actually makes the principles in the book easier to apply because we don't have to translate the context.

We'll dive into the text in just a couple of minutes, but let me just address 2 other things that I think will be helpful to note about Joel.

First, is understanding prophetic language.

If you didn't have a chance to watch the Bible Project video on understanding the prophets, I'd encourage you to watch that.

Most folks realize that when they start reading the prophets the language changes. Reading Joel is not like reading Ephesians or the gospel of John. There's imagery and repetition there are historical allusions that we might miss on a quick reading. The more familiar you are with the Bible, the more of those you'll see. But initially it can be hard to navigate and you might be asking, "what in the world does that mean?!"

My encouragement to you is don't get too bogged down over every phrase and depiction. The question we want to ask is: what is the big picture here? What's the gist of what God is trying to get across in this chapter?

So here's the big gist of chapter 1: God's people need to know the past well in order to respond correctly in the present. There's a lot going on here, but stepping back and seeing the big picture will help us navigate that.

Second, the minor prophets often get a bad rap because they feel so negative. The minor prophets are the last 12 books in the OT - and Joel is part of that group. They are called minor prophets simply because the length of these books are generally smaller than the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The prophets, by definition, are writing because people are in sin. They have violated God's Law and as result judgment is coming. The prophetic books are not primarily about telling the future - although there is that. The prophets are primarily about calling people back to heart-felt obedience to God's covenant. And to do that, they often repeat warnings over and over.

So the prophets can feel negative. But listen, even God telling people to repent is an act of mercy and kindness. He wants them to repent. He could just say nothing and let judgment come in. But he doesn't. He calls his people to repentance. In fact, look at 2 passages that we probably know from Joel. **Turn to 2:12-13.**

**Read**

This is essentially the heart of the whole book. All of these warnings, all of these threats are to call people to repent with their whole heart. Not just make a show of repentance. But to turn back to God from the heart. Why return to God? Because he is gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love.

There's a lot of tough love in the book of Joel. But at the end of the day it is **love**. **Look** down to the end of chapter 2. **Read 28-32**

Now, this passage probably sounds familiar to most of you. This is God's promise of pouring out his Spirit - his Holy Spirit - on all flesh. And it's quoted by the apostle Peter in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost.

Not only is God telling his people to repent because he is merciful, here God is promising to do something among his people that is a game-changer. Where in the OT his Spirit guided the prophets and kings, in the future his Spirit would indwell all of his people. And of course as we read this promise on this side of Jesus we know God has done this work in sending his Spirit into all of his people. We as believers are reaping the benefits of God's promises to Israel through Jesus.

So let's dive into this a little bit. Remember the big picture here in chapter 1 is that God's people need to know the past well in order to respond correctly in the present.

So we're going to break this chapter into 3 sections.

1) God expects us to know the past. **Read 1-4**

As I mentioned before we know nothing more about Joel that what we read in the opening verse. We don't know who his father is or precisely when God came to him with this message.

But what we do know is that it seems to have been sometime shortly after a locust invasion. And God is going to do here in the book of Joel - especially in chapter 2 - is use this past locust invasion as an illustration of what is about to happen with an invading army. God is saying: You know how those locusts ravaged the land? That's what this army is going to do.

Now, most of aren't really familiar with locust invasions but they are absolutely horrendous. Actually, did you know that there is a locust invasion happening right now across northeastern Africa and the Middle East? In Saudi Arabia and Yemen and the horn of Africa - there is an unprecedented locust invasion happening right now. Like right now. We're all talking about Coronas and government stimulus and right now on the other side of the world thousands of square miles are being absolutely ravaged by swarms of locusts larger than anyone has seen in decades. You can Google a video later but what this looks like is when we get a snow fall with those really big flakes. Not the small ones that drive straight down. The really large floaty flakes. Except instead of snow flakes they are massive cricket like things. And these things absolutely devour every green thing in their path.

And because of how locusts breed, there are often waves and waves of locusts. That's why God says in **Vs. 4. Read 4**

This is absolute devastation. When locusts come through there is nothing green left behind. You can't spray enough pesticide to keep up with them, you can't keep them out of the house, they are just everywhere. And they are always looked upon as a plague. In fact if you remember, locusts were the 8th plague as God absolutely destroyed the food supply of the Egyptians.

That's what God wants Israel to remember. **Read 2-4**

Usually when people are done going through a hard time they want to forget that it ever happened. God says just the opposite. Remember this plague. Tell it to your children. And tell them to tell it to the next generation.

God doesn't waste plagues. In fact, the Bible portrays God as sovereign over plagues. Remember the 10 plagues in Egypt? Who was sending those? And throughout Israel's history God sent plagues against his own people because they were caught up in sin. And it was always God who took full responsibility for the plague. God is sovereign over all life and death. All souls belong to God and he determines the number of our days.

And plagues in the Bible are used by God to get peoples' attention. Even with the Coronavirus it seems people are reprioritizing what matters most in life.

But those lessons are easily forgotten. History is forgotten and therefore history repeats itself. But God expects that his people will know and learn from history.

Christians know that history matters. Our whole faith is built around a chain of history with God as it's author and the cross as the centerpiece. We believe in a historical creation, a literal historical Adam and Eve who ate of an actual tree in space/time history. We believe in a Messiah who came in space and time and history. Who died on a cross 2,000 rotations around the sun ago. We believe that he literally physically rose from the dead and ascended bodily into heaven. And we believe that he will again appear. Not in our heart, not just in some wishful thinking. That he will appear in space/time. Our faith is an historical faith.

And more than that, we also believe that everything else the Bible records happened in space/time history and is important for us to know. God expects us to know history even though it's often overlooked.

**Ecc. 1:11:** There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

That's Solomons way of saying the only thing anyone learns from history is that no one learns anything from history. But he expects his people to know history, to learn from history.

The apostle Paul talking about some of the stories in the OT says in **1 Cor. 10:11:** Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

The reason, Paul says, we have the OT with us today is to learn from it. To be instructed by it.

**Rom. 15:4:** Whatever was written in the former days - that's the OT - was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The history of God's people Israel - who by faith are our family - is recorded that we might be instructed.

**2 Tim. 3:15-17:** how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The sacred writings that Paul had in mind were the OT writings. Obviously the NT is also the Word of God and so this applies to the NT as well. But the OT equips us to teach, reprove, correct and train people for righteousness as well. There's a lot of history of God's people in the OT that we would be remiss to not know about.

So all that to say, God expects us to know and value history because history is a teacher. It instructs us.

The Coronavirus is not the first plague that ever hit God's people. And it's not the only plague that's happening on planet earth right now. And it probably won't be the last plague to ever hit us.

Which leads to point 2.

2) God's people respond to plague with sober sadness. I'll read this section in just a moment, but notice there are 5 main commands here with explanations.

There's a command in Vs. 5: Awake you drunkards.

There's a command in Vs. 8: Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth

Vs. 11: Be ashamed

Vs. 13: Put on sackcloth

Vs. 14: Consecrate a fast.

We'll unpack each one, but those are all calls to be sober minded about the situation in a sorrowful manner. This is God tossing a cold bucket of reality on his people who are misunderstanding the significance of the plague. **Read 5-14, 16-20**

So this is where we wade into the deeper water of the minor prophets. Those 2 elements I mentioned a bit ago are ringing true: there's a lot of judgment and the language is a little confusing.

What Joel seems to be saying here is: the way you should be responding to the last plague is with sober sadness. And as we'll see in chapter 2, the way we should respond to a coming plague is with sober sadness.

And there's some interesting plays on concepts here. In chapter 1, the plague of locusts is sometimes described as an army of invaders - **Vs. 6** says a nation has come up against my land: that's a nation of locusts. And then in chapter 2 the plague of invaders is sometimes described as a swarm of locusts: **Vs. 3** says the land looks like the Garden of Eden before, then like a wilderness after. This army is going to strip Israel like a locust invasion.

Which is actually sort of the unifying problem: the locusts have hit the food chain and this is affecting everyone. It affects the drunkards, the priests, the farmers, the sheep and the cattle. Everyone is affected by the plague in some way. No one is exempt. Okay, let's look at these:

In **Vs. 5** Israel is called to wake up out of it's drunkenness. Now, Israel throughout the ages had a drinking problem.

**Isa. 5:11:** Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink (beer), who tarry late into the evening as wine enflames them.

**Isa. 5:22:** Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, an valiant men in mixing strong drink.

Where God had given Israel beer and wine to enjoy his goodness, they had perverted the good gifts of wine and beer through drunkenness. And what the Lord is saying through Joel to these drunkards is: You guys, your source of alcohol is cut off! The locusts have destroyed all the plants including the ones that make your wine. Wake up!

If you saw the movie Pirates of the Caribbean there's a scene where Jack Sparrow is marooned on an island with a gal. And they're drunk and happy because they have a massive stash of alcohol, but the next morning

she burns it all to make a distress signal. And he's coming to the realization that his fun is all gone and he yells out: Why is all the rum gone!? He's sober now!

God is saying to Israel: you're drunk and I've destroyed all the plants that make your wine and beer away. Wake up and repent!

In the same way, the priests and ministers of the Lord should mourn as well. **Read 8-10**

So the imagery here is of a young woman who was betrothed to a man, and the man died. Betrothal in Israel was stronger than what we would call an engagement because legally the man and woman were husband and wife, though they hadn't taken their final vows or consummated the marriage. That's why she's called a virgin who mourns her husband.

What was happiness and excitement at the thought of being married has now been turned into a funeral. Sackcloth was a dark outfit that signaled to everyone around that a person was in mourning and sorrow.

And so Israel is called to mourn just like that. They are to be in sackcloth. Why? In **Vs. 9** Joel says the grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The locusts have destroyed everything so there's nothing to offer at the Temple. This is the OT equivalent of they can't go to church.

"To such deep mourning does Joel summon the citizens of Jerusalem. Their world, orbiting as it did around the temple, the cultic center of Judah, had been shattered. Normal temple services had been suspended." (Allen, L. C. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (p. 53).

The very thing that the people God gathered around - the sacrificial system - was gone. The grain offering was the twice daily offering the priests would make and it would usually be mixed with wine or offered with wine. They couldn't do that.

We should feel that too. We can't meet. We can't take the Lord's Supper. We can't gather. That should cause us to mourn. If you don't mourn that you can't gather together with the people of God on a regular basis you're missing what God has done in Christ by bringing us together in one body in local churches. God wants his people to gather.

The priests are called to mourn too, by the way. **Read 13**

They mourn for the same reason, don't they? The offerings are cut off, corporate worship is cut off.

I've had a few Zoom meetings this last week with pastors and I'll tell you we're all just kind of out of sorts. We know God is sovereign, we know even through a virus Jesus will build his church, we know that these trials are of God and we can make the most of them. But we mourn that we can't gather. We can use technology or small meetings to do our best to keep in touch but it doesn't replace corporate worship - seeing each other, praying together, reading the Word together, singing together, taking the Lord's Supper. We should long for those things.

Joel says crop farms and animals are affected. **Read 11-12, 16-18**

Israel was largely an agrarian society. Most people either grew crops or raised animals. Even if they had some other profession, they usually had a small farm. Be ashamed, Joel says. Or maybe a better translation is "despair." The locusts were an existential threat to survival - everything was affected.

Even the political leaders were to mourn and fast. **Read 14**

The elders of the city were the governing officials. Call for a fast. Whatever you think of President Trump I think it was right for him to call for a day of prayer a couple of weeks ago.

So stepping back, as a result of this plague that Israel had endured, everyone - top to bottom, farmer to political leader, priest to worshipper, drunkards and all inhabitants - are to respond with sober sadness. To respond with repentance and prayer and turning to the Lord.

With this virus we've seen the worst of humanity. We've seen hoarding toilet paper, people eating fish bowl cleaner, people rejoicing when others are infected, people rejoicing that this means Trump won't get reelected, rejoicing that Trump will get reelected, people mocking those who don't agree with them about virus information or economic policy in light of all of this.

You know what we should be doing? Weeping. And mourning. There should be a sober sadness that we live in a sin stained world. There should be a heaviness in our heart that people are dying. There should be crying out to God for wisdom for our our political leaders as they try to navigate an onslaught of information and disinformation and how best to help our neighbors. We should respond in mourning and crying out to the Lord.

### **Read 19-20**

To you, O Lord, I call. Call to the Lord. Pray.

### **3) We are reminded of the Day of the Lord. Read 15**

What is the Day of the Lord? We'll talk about it more throughout the book but essentially the Day of the Lord is when the Lord comes in judgement. It's the Day that God's patience has run out and he comes in vengeance. Two things about the Day of the Lord:

First, the Day of the Lord is something that happens over and over throughout history and it anticipates the final coming of Jesus in glory. There have been many days of the Lord. Israel's exile to Babylon, God's judgment on Babylon, Israel's exile to Assyria, God's judgment on Assyria - these were all days of the Lord. These plagues that Joel is talking about are days of the Lord. The Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a Day of the Lord. And all of those ultimately point to Jesus coming again in glory in the final Day of the Lord.

Second, the Day of the Lord is a fearful thing for those who do not know God, but it is a glorious day for those who trust in him.

Whether OT or NT, when the Day of the Lord came, evildoers were to fear and tremble because they would be wiped out in a moment. And the same is true now, those who do not know Christ are to fear for the coming judgement. **Vs. 15** says that the Day of the Lord is a destruction from the Almighty.

But for those who do know the Lord, it's a day of relief. It's the Day when God finally puts all the unrighteous to shame and punishes them forever. And it's a day when the saints are glorified.

Listen, if there's one thing we need to be reminded of with Coronavirus it's that we're all going to die one day. Whether by virus or something else. We're all going to stand before the Lord in judgment. And our only hope in life and death to escape judgment is to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. To trust in his death alone to forgive our sins. And to trust in his resurrection alone to clothe us in righteousness.

What should the church be doing in the midst of plague? Remembering that God is in control of all of this. Weeping over lack of godliness around us. And calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus. Tell your children of it, let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.

### **Pray**