

## The Contemporary Day of the Lord Joel 1:1-20

### **Slide 1**

Today I'm starting a new series called, "*Lessons from a Minor Prophet*" taken from the book of Joel.

That doesn't mean Joel is a "lesser" prophet. It simply means that being considered a Minor Prophet, he just had a shorter book than a Major Prophet.

For your information, there are twelve Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

While there are only four Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The reason I picked Joel out of those twelve Minor Prophets is that the lessons from Joel are relevant for today.

If you're older than twenty-five, perhaps the most devastating national event you experienced was the September 11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers in New York City.

Like those of us who were around when President Kennedy was shot, you probably remember where you were when you heard about that attack.

Because of all the uncertainty at the time, the stock market closed on Wednesday, the day after 9/11.

Then, when the stock market reopened on Thursday, stocks fell 684 points, a 7.1% decline, setting a record for the biggest loss in exchange history for one trading day.

At the close of the week, the Dow Jones was down over 14%. An estimated \$1.4 trillion in value was lost in the first week of trading.

As devastating as that was for us, if there had been a newspaper in Joel's day, the headlines would have read, in bold capital print, "LOCUSTS INVADE THE LAND!"

Then, in slightly smaller capital print, "NATION FACES SEVERE ECONOMIC CRISIS," and finally, a third heading, still in large print, "No End to Drought in Sight."

When Joel wrote this book, the nation had just experienced a devastating attack by locusts. It was this event that God led Joel to use for the backdrop of his message.

## **Slide 2**

Here, in chapter one, Joel teaches us to pay attention to what God's saying to us through contemporary circumstances.

Joel 1:1, *"The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel."*

This first verse is about God's call to the prophet. Now, there are about twelve men named Joel in the Old Testament. We know nothing about our Joel, except what's written in this book.

When you do a word study, you find that Joel's name means "*Jehovah is God.*" This first verse also tells us that he was the son of Pethuel, which gives us less information because we know nothing about him.

Many commentators believe that Joel was perhaps the earliest of the Old Testament's writing prophets who probably lived in or near Jerusalem where he prophesied.

Scholars differ widely over the date of Joel's prophecy, but it's generally accepted that Joel wrote in the eighth century BC.

However, many scholars quote John Calvin on this question. He wrote, *“But as there is no certainty, it is better to leave the time in which he taught undecided; and, as we shall see, this is of no great importance.”*

Perhaps the reason Joel didn't give us many details about himself was to keep his readers' attention focused on his message, not on himself.

Moreover, Joel also stressed that the Word of the Lord “came” to him. How did it come to him? We don't know. He didn't tell us.

Commentator O. Palmer Robertson writes, *“No true prophet of the Lord ever created by himself the divine word that he delivered. God's word always came by the divine initiative. As a consequence, this word must be heard with the same awe demonstrated by Israel as the trembling nation stood at the foot of the shaking, smoking Mt Sinai. Whether this message appeals to us personally or not, it must be accepted as God's word and not man's word.”*

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Now that we know all about this prophet, let's examine his call to the nation. The occasion for Joel's message was a devastating invasion of locusts.

In verses 2-12, Joel uses the total devastation that had come upon the land to bring the peoples' attention to their ungodly ways. He began his prophesizing by addressing the elders first.

He probably did this for two reasons. First, they were respected citizens in the land and second, they had lived a long time and could authenticate what he was saying.

With their support, he wasn't just a lone voice crying in the wilderness. They agreed with Joel about the severity of the devastation that had come upon them.

They could affirm that the nation faced a catastrophe of monumental proportions, the likes of which had never been seen.

Joel 1:2-3, *“Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.”*

Then, in verse 4, Joel went on to describe the severity of the devastation, *“What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.”*

Now, scholars are not clear what Joel meant by describing four different kinds of locusts. Some think that it represented the four different stages of locust development.

Others think it represented four different kinds of locusts. The point, however, is clear: there were locusts, locusts, and more locusts!

Commentator James Montgomery Boice wrote, *“In 1915 a plague of locusts covered Palestine and Syria from the border of Egypt to the Taurus mountains. The first swarms appeared in March. These were adult locusts that came from the northeast and moved toward the southwest in clouds so thick they obscured the sun.*

*The females were about two and one-half to three inches long, and they immediately began to lay eggs by digging holes in the soil about four inches deep and depositing about 100 eggs in each. The eggs were neatly arranged in a cylindrical mass about one inch long and about as thick as a pencil. These holes were everywhere.*

*Witnesses estimated that as many as 65,000–75,000 eggs were concentrated in a single square meter of soil, and patches like this covered the entire land from north to south. Having laid their eggs the locusts flew away.*

*Within a few weeks the young locusts hatched. These resembled large ants. They had no wings, and within a few days they began moving forward by hopping along the ground like fleas. They would cover four to six hundred feet a day, devouring any vegetation before them.*

*By the end of May they had molted. In this stage they had wings, but they still did not fly. Instead they moved forward by walking, jumping only when they were frightened. They were bright yellow. Finally the locusts molted again, this time becoming the fully developed adults that had invaded the land initially.”*

According to another description of this plague by John D. Whiting in the December 1915 issue of National Geographic Magazine, the earlier stages of these insects attacked the vineyards.

*He wrote, “Once entering a vineyard the sprawling vines would in the shortest time be nothing but bare bark. When the daintier morsels were gone, the bark was eaten off the young topmost branches, which, after exposure to the sun, were bleached snow-white. Then, seemingly out of malice, they would gnaw off small limbs, perhaps to get at the pith within.”*

Whiting describes how the locusts of the last stage completed the destruction begun by the earlier forms. They attacked the olive trees, whose tough, bitter leaves had been passed over by the creeping locusts.

*He writes, “They stripped every leaf, berry, and even the tender bark.” They ate away “layer after layer” of the cactus plants, “giving the leaves the effect of having been ‘Jack Planed.’*

*Even on the palm trees they had no pity, gnawing off the tenderer ends of the swordlike branches and, diving deep into the heart, they tunneled after the juicy pith.”*

This is exactly what had happened in Joel’s day. The devastation caused by the locusts was extremely severe. Everything was gone.

You may think of a little grasshopper when you hear the word locusts, but here’s a picture of what came on the land in the millions.

**Slide 4** - Picture of locusts.

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What’s so remarkable about Joel’s description of the severity of the devastation caused by the locusts is how he dealt with it.

He didn’t minimize the seriousness of the devastation. He didn’t treat the disaster lightly. He understood that something terrible had struck the people of God.

He wanted the people to understand its importance. That’s why he called on various groups in the land to mourn with him.

*Joel 1:5, “Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips.”*

Interestingly, in addition to pointing out the insincerity of some of the worshipers, drunkenness is the only other sin that Joel mentioned in his book.

Now, Joel might have been talking about people who drank a lot, or he could’ve been using that phrase to represent all the careless people in the land whose primary interest was self-indulgence.

Then, in verse 8, he tells the entire nation to *“Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the betrothed of her youth.”*

Joel uses the picture of a young bride who, while getting ready for her wedding, learns that her groom has died. She exchanges the beautiful wedding gown for the coarse sackcloth of mourning.

Joel 1:9-10, *“Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the Lord. The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails.”*

The locusts had killed everything that would’ve enabled the nation to bring their worship offerings to the Lord.

This especially affected the priests as they received a portion of each worshiper’s offering. They were about to starve because there was no longer any offerings available to be given.

Then Joel addressed the farmers. Joel 1:11-12, *“Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree—all the trees of the field—are dried up. Surely the people’s joy is withered away.”*

The gladness and joy that characterized God’s people was gone. Joel called the nation to sorrow and mourn with him over the devastation that had been caused by the locusts.

He wanted the people to understand what God was saying to them through that natural disaster.

In our own day, people all over the world experience natural disasters like earthquakes, droughts, famines, floods, health epidemics, wars and so on.

We experience personal disasters. The death of loved ones, financial setbacks, relational failures, health breakdowns, accidents, etc.

In all the issues that come our way, Joel wants us to ask, *“What is God saying to us?”* Joel wrote this book so people would know that God was trying to communicate through critical events.

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Next, Joel focused on the ministers by addressing two points. First, by calling on the ministers to lead in repentance, he wanted them to recognize the need for their people to repent.

Joel 1:13a, *“Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God.”*

The reason for repentance wasn't because the locusts had eaten all the food; it was because God's worship was affected.

Joel 1:13b, *“For the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God.”*

When God's judgment falls on God's people, God's ministers must take the lead in repenting. At the same time, however, ministers must call the people of God to repent as well.

Joel tells the ministers in verse 14 to *“Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”*

God's ministers sometimes call the congregation to pray and to repent of their sins, but here Joel issued a call to ministers to lead in that repentance.

However, as children of God, Christians don't live in terror. A child who has loving parents doesn't live in terror of them.

Even though the child may be disciplined occasionally, the child is secure because he knows his parents love him deeply.

In the same way, when God's people go through difficulty and disaster, they have hope.

O. Palmer Robertson said, *"God's call to repentance must mean that He stands willing and ready to receive those who will return to Him."* God delights to receive those who ask His forgiveness.

The second point Joel addressed was the need for prayer. It's here that Joel brings us to the theme of his book.

He says in verse 15, *"Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty."*

Robertson writes, *"The Lord has His own special day, which Scripture calls the 'Day of the Lord.' In one sense, every day is the Lord's. But just as we have birthdays, anniversaries and holidays, so the Lord has His special days of celebration, His holy holidays."*

The day of the Lord is a theme repeated throughout the Old Testament. The day of the Lord may be defined as "the time of the decisive visitation of Yahweh.

A time when He intervenes to punish the wicked, deliver and exalt the faithful remnant who worship Him, and establish His own rule. Both judgment and salvation are prominent aspects.

Through the visitation of these locusts, the people in Joel's day had experienced a contemporary *"Day of the Lord"* and it had devastating effects on the land, the people, and even the animals.

Joel 1:16-18, *"Has not the food been cut off before our very eyes—joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seeds are shriveled beneath the clods. The storehouses are in ruins, the granaries have been broken down, for the grain has dried up. How the cattle moan! The herds mill about because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep are suffering."*

However, Joel's contemporary *"Day of the Lord"* was intended to cause the people of God to know that a future *"Day of the Lord"* was near.

Like Joel's time, today a contemporary *"Day of the Lord"* should cause people to repent and return to the Lord because a day's coming when it will be too late to repent.

Finally, we have Joel's call to prayer. Joel himself led the people because he wasn't outside of the Lord's judgment and salvation. He prayed not only for the people but for the beasts of the field, too.

Because of the drought and the devastation of the locust, the land was a tender box that ignited under God's wrath.

Joel 1:19-20, *"To you, Lord, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness and flames have burned up all the trees of the field. Even the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness."*

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### Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed a contemporary *"Day of the Lord,"* we must recognize that we must turn to God in total dependence upon Him.

There was an incident where Pilate had his soldiers kill some Galilean worshipers and then mingled their blood with their sacrifices.

Jesus was asked how God could allow such a thing to happen when His people were in the midst of worshiping Him?

Another time a natural disaster occurred where the tower of Siloam fell and killed eighteen innocent bystanders.

Jesus was asked whether these eighteen were more sinful than others that they deserved to be struck and killed by a falling tower?

How did Jesus answer? Did He say, *“Well, accidents happen. God can’t be responsible for everything that goes wrong in the world!”* No!

Luke 13:2–5, *“Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*

What is Jesus saying? He’s saying that those who object to tragedies like the locust plague, 9/11, an accident, a cancer diagnosis, etc. do so because they’re asking the wrong question.

They ask, *“Why should disaster fall upon those people? Why should God strike innocent people?”*

When, what they should be asking is, *“Why have these disasters not fallen on me? Why have they not destroyed me?”*

As James Montgomery Boice says, *“We’ve forgotten that it generally takes a disaster of unparalleled proportions to wake us from sin’s lethargy.”*

Our problem is that we so easily forget how sinful we really are.