

Pre-Exilic Prophet: Joel

INTRODUCTION

Not much is known about the prophet Joel himself, but his focus on Jerusalem and Judah indicates he most likely lived in or was delivering a message to Judah. Scholars estimate the book was written between the ninth and fourth centuries B.C. Some argue it was written after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C., since the book seems to mention the capture of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile as past events (Joel 3:2-3, 17). Others argue it was written pre-exile, given the placement of Joel in the mostly chronological order of the Minor Prophets, as well as the fact that the enemies of Israel that are referenced in Joel are more representative of centuries before the exile, rather than afterward.

The book of Joel speaks at length of the “day of the Lord,” which is a day of both judgment and salvation. Chapter 1 describes the destruction, pain, and desolation the earth will experience on the day of the Lord’s judgment. The purpose of Joel’s message was to encourage the people of Jerusalem and Judah to repent and to return to the Lord. He encourages them to repent by sending locusts, by making an impassioned appeal to his people through Joel, and by showing his people mercy.

God reminds his people through the book of Joel that he keeps his promises and that he delights in being present with his people. The book of Joel ends with a promise that God will dwell with his people and that he will never leave them or forsake them.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

The invasion of locusts is featured prominently in the book of Joel. The locusts served as judgment against (unspecified) sins in a physical sense, but also a foreshadowing of Judah’s oppression by a foreign military power. Locusts are often individually harmless, but when locusts join a large swarm, they become one of the most destructive pests in existence—with the ability to eat their own weight in a day, destroying crops and fields and leaving famines in their wake. The gravity of the locusts’ destruction was meant to lead the people to repent and return to the Lord.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

The IMMEDIATE Day of the Lord: Locust Plague (Joel 1)

The IMMINENT Day of the Lord: Foreign Army’s Invasion (Joel 2)

The ULTIMATE Day of the Lord: Second Coming (Joel 3)

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF JOEL

- Joel foretold of a day when God said he would “pour out [his] Spirit on all flesh” (2:28). This specific prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17).
- The apostle Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32a in his speech in Acts 2:17-21. Joel foreshadows the coming of Jesus Christ and salvation through faith in him alone: “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” (Joel 2:32)
- The picture of God dwelling with his people in Zion (Joel 3:17, 21) is a reminder of God’s nearness. It foreshadows God sending his Son Jesus to dwell among his people as a man and then sending forth his Spirit to equip and indwell believers.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW WE SHOULD READ THE BOOK OF JOEL

OBSERVATION

- The locust invasion caused the Israelites to lose their crops and their livestock (1:17-18) and even interrupted their ability to worship in the prescribed manner (1:13). In the midst of such tragedy, the people had no choice but to return to the Lord (2:12-13).
- God reminds us in the book of Joel that sin has consequences, and there is a day coming when sin will be judged by the Lord. But there is good news of salvation for “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.”

INTERPRETATION

- Consider the consequences of sin, a broken world, and the judgment of God apart from knowing Jesus Christ. Consider the vivid imagery that the Lord uses as he speaks through Joel. What connections can you draw to the broken world today that is in need of Jesus?
- Consider the contrast between the Lord’s judgment and the redemption of his people. God’s holiness cannot tolerate sin, but the work of Jesus Christ on the cross provides an atonement for our sin.
- Israel endures some harsh circumstances throughout the narrative of Joel, but the book ends with a promise. Consider the undeserved kindness of God’s promise to the people in Joel 3.

APPLICATION

- Joel calls on the people to truly repent and turn to the Lord. What areas of your life are in need of repentance?
- What does the book of Joel reveal to you about the character of God?
- What does it look like for you to dwell with the Lord? Are you in a season when you are abiding daily, or are you in need of encouragement in this area? Share with your community group.

PRAYER

- Pray for God's help in being a faithful follower of Christ in your interactions with those who are not repentant or not believers in Jesus.
- If you are in the midst of a tough season or know those who are, pray that the Lord would reveal himself in new ways to remind you of his character, his love, and his faithfulness.
- Thank God for his goodness in every season. Thank him for being a God who keeps his promises.

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF JOEL

In the worst times that can ever happen, there is still salvation for men. When day turns to night, and life becomes death, and the staff of life is broken, and the hope of man has fled, there still remains in God, in the person of his dear Son, deliverance to all those who will call upon the name of the Lord. We do not know what is to happen: reading the roll of the future, we prophesy dark things; but still this light shall always shine between the rifts of the cloud-wrack: "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered."¹ - Charles Spurgeon, A Free Grace Promise



CITATIONS REFERENCES

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 - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/joel/>
- The Gospel Coalition: Irv Busenitz Commentary on Joel

¹ <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/a-free-grace-promise/#flipbook/>

- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/joel/>
- Details on locusts
 - <https://www.timesofisrael.com/biblical-plague-explained-israeli-study-suggests-why-locusts-form-massive-swarms/>