

The Locust Horde and the Day of the Lord

by John Piper

God's purpose is to be God alone in the eyes of all the world, and he will fight against us to bring us to repentance if our hearts wander from him.

Topics: "Judgment And Repentance", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Piper delves into the book of Joel, highlighting the two main themes: God's judgment on His people for their lack of allegiance and His promise of pouring out His Spirit on all flesh in the future. The first half of the book describes God's discipline on Israel through a locust plague, leading to repentance and restoration. The second half prophesies a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a final judgment on the nations. Piper emphasizes the importance of wholehearted devotion to God, repentance, and earnestly seeking the Holy Spirit for a great awakening.

Transcript

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Joel

The book of Joel falls naturally into two parts. In 1:1-2:27 we read about a terrible locust plague that came over Israel as a judgment from God and how the people repented and God restored their fortunes. Then in 2:28 to the end of the book we read about how God at some future time is going to pour out his Spirit far and wide to bless his people and how he is going to gather for judgment the nations which have rejected him and his people. Or to put it another way, the first half of the book describes how God fought against his own people to make them honor him alone. And the second half of the book describes how he will fight against the nations who refuse to honor him alone.

What I would like to do this morning is guide you through the whole book in a summary way, then go back and focus on the main messages of the two halves as they apply to us today.

Let's begin with Joel 1:1. "The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel." We know almost nothing about this prophet. And that does not matter too much in the end, because his intention is to be a mouthpiece for God, not himself. In verses 2 and 3 he says that his message should be passed on from generation to generation. Then in verse 4 he describes the catastrophe of the locust plague: "What the cutting locust has 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." The results of this locust plague were utterly devastating. Verse 5: all the wine is cut off from the drunkard's mouth. Verse 7: the fig trees have splintered. Verse 9: there is not even enough grain for the cereal offerings in the temple. So in verse 13 Joel calls for Israel to cry to the Lord because he sees in this catastrophe the judgment of God leading up to the great and terrible day of the Lord.

Gird on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because cereal offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of the Lord your God; and cry to the Lord. Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near and as destruction from the Almighty comes (vv. 13,15).

Chapter two begins with another warning that the terrible day of judgment called "the day of the Lord" is coming and that this locust horde is the dawn of this day of the Lord. "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness." Then in verses 3-11 Joel describes the locust horde again as a raging army with horses and chariots and warriors. Verse 3: "The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but after them, a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them." Verse 9, "They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls; they climb up into houses, they enter through windows like a thief." And in verse 11 they are said to be the army of the Lord. "The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his host is exceedingly great; he that executes his word is powerful." Then for a third time the locust horde is described as the advance troops of the day of the Lord: "for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it?"

So far, then, we learn that God is fighting his people for some reason. We're not told why. Which probably means that Joel intended for us to learn more about God here than about ourselves. God has sent his army of locust against Israel and threatened that the end is near. He is fighting against his people. But is only destruction in his mind? No. Verses 12-14 tell us more about this warrior God:

'Yet even now,' says the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; 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 repents of evil. Who knows whether he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him, a cereal offering and a drink offering for the Lord our God?

Even though God has threatened destruction of his own people (since he can raise up from stones children to Abraham! Matt. 3:9) yet he holds out the opportunity of repentance and salvation at the eleventh hour. If they will repent, he will repent. If they will rend their hearts, he will cease to rend their land.

So in verses 15-17 Joel calls for fasting and the priests pray for God not to make his heritage a byword among the nations. They humbled themselves and appealed to God's jealousy for his chosen people; and he responded in verse 18: "Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people." He turned away from judgment; the climactic day of the Lord which had been threatening withdrew into the more distant future; and verses 19-27 describe the stunning restoration which God promises to the land.

Verses 25-27 show what God was really after in fighting with his people.

I will restore to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer and the cutter, my great army which I sent among you. 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. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I the Lord am your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

The ultimate aim of God in sending the locust horde against his people is to secure their undivided allegiance: "You shall know that I, Yahweh, am your God and there is no one else." Evidently, the cause of the locust plague had been the people's half-hearted allegiance. Some of their affections had gone after things other than God. He was not their all-consuming love. So he fought against his own people. For few things are more dishonoring to God and dangerous for us than love to God which is only half-hearted.

That is the first half of Joel's book. He had said that the day of the Lord was near (in 1:15; 2:1,11). But then God repented and the final judgment did not fall. What becomes of it? Evidently it was "near" not in the sense that it had to happen soon, but in the sense that it was on the brink of happening; conditions were ripe for it; the massed troops were just across the border; the trumpet was on the lips, when the commander raised his hand and made peace with his rebellious people. But now what of this promised day?

In the second half of the book Joel lifts his eyes to the future and, inspired by the Spirit, predicts the events that will precede the day of the Lord. Verse 28: "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions." Sometime in the future Joel sees a time of overflowing spiritual blessing beyond the prosperity which God provided after the locust plague. But this benefit applies only to those who "call on the name of the Lord" (according to verse 32) because the day of the Lord approaches again with darkness and destruction. Verses 30-32:

And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered.

So Joel sees two things coming as the day of the Lord approaches: one is a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit (2:28,29) and the other is a terrible time of divine judgment. He had fought against his own people in the past to lead them to salvation. He will fight against the nations in the future who reject his salvation and his people.

This final world-end judgment is described in chapter three. First, verses 1 and 2, "Behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat and I will enter into judgment with them there." The word Jehoshaphat means "Jehovah judges." Joel sees a great day coming when God will vindicate his name by judging all who have spurned him. Verse 12 describes the scene as a great judgment: "Let the nations bestir themselves and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the nations round about." Verse 14 describes multitudes in the valley: "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision." This does not mean people come there to make a decision, they come to experience God's decision. God is the Decider in the valley of decision. The valley of decision is the same as the valley of Jehoshaphat and "decision" (or verdict) is virtually the same as "judgment."

So Joel sees a future with two sides: salvation and blessing for those who call on the name of the Lord, but judgment and destruction for the people who go their own way. The contrast is laid out finally in verses

16-21: "The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But the Lord is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel." At the end of the age, when the day of the Lord comes, God will meet us either as a roaring lion to devour or as a quiet refuge of delight.

And now, just as the first half of the book ended in 2:27 with the purpose of God: "You shall know that ... I am the Lord your God and there is none else," so the second half of the book draws near its close in 3:17 with the same purpose expressed: "So you shall know (in view of all that's happened) that I am the Lord your God." The purpose of God in the historical locust horde and the purpose of God in the final day of the Lord are the same: to make known that he alone is God and is to be loved and worshipped and served above all things.

That's an overview of Joel's message from the Lord. Now what is God's word to us in these two halves of Joel's prophecy? There are four things I think we should take to heart. First, let us never lose sight of God's purpose in history--from grasshopper swarms to world-wide judgment to the dissolving of sun and moon--his purpose is to be God in the eyes of all the world. "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I the Lord am your God and there is none else!"(2:27, 3:17). If we are God's people everything we do must have this as its aim. The American church is weary with having man and his relationships and feelings and self-concepts at the center of our attention for so long. We are bored with the very unamazing results of standing in front of the mirrors of psychology and anthropology and sociology. And it is time that, at least in the church, we hold our eye to the telescope of theology. Untold numbers of puny personal problems would be swallowed up if we could learn to stand atop the Mt. Palomar of divine revelation and gaze at the God whose purpose is to be God alone, and before whose unutterable majesty, every knee will bow whether in heaven or on the earth or under the earth. My prayer as we study the prophets this fall is that we might see God the way they see God, and that the word will spread, "They have a big God at Bethlehem." The first lesson of the prophet Joel for our man-centered 20th century is this: From devouring grasshoppers to vanishing galaxies God has a purpose and he will achieve it--to be God alone in the eyes of all the world.

Second, if our hearts wander from this God, he will fight against us to bring us to repentance. I have seen it in my own life: if I begin to become proud and self-confident and prayer starts to feel unnecessary, God clogs my way. He brings me down. Things will go sour at home. Tensions arise at work. Sleep is not sweet. Depression builds. Everywhere I turn there is no joy. He boxes me in and clogs my way. He fights against me in my pride. For he is a jealous God and will have our heart's trust 100%. When he says in 2:12, "Return to me with all your heart" it is clear, isn't it, what he is fighting for: all our heart, not a piece on Sunday and a piece at mealtime and a piece at bedtime. If you are his he will fight you until you give him all your heart all the time.

Hosea describes the people of Israel going after other gods like a bride leaving her husband. And God says in Hosea 2:6,7:

Therefore, I will hedge up her way with thorns; and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them. Then she shall say, 'I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better with me than now.'

God will fight against us and clog the joy of our lives until we return with our whole heart to him. For his purpose is to be God alone in the midst of his people.

Third, therefore, as Joel pleads, rend your hearts and not your garments, awake (1:5), lament (1:8), be ashamed and wail (1:11), declare a fast and cry to the Lord (1:14) for mercy. Turn from the sin you cherish and for which you feel guilty every day. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (2:13). Don't be bitter at God because he clogs your way and frustrates your day. Every divine stroke is the discipline of a loving Father and a blow against our pride, our self-reliance, and our love for the world. Turn and kiss the rod of God and the Lord will become to you a gentle shepherd.

Fourth, and finally, let us pray and seek God earnestly for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised in 2:28,29. It is true that at Pentecost Peter said that the coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' disciples was a fulfillment of Joel 2:28,29: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). But that was just the beginning of the blessing. We have only tasted the power of the age to come, we have only received the downpayment of the Spirit. The prophecy is far from complete. How many of our old men dream dreams of God? How many of our young men see visions of God? Where are the sons and daughters who hear the word of God and bring us prophecies for our guidance? Has the hope of Moses in Numbers 11:29 really been fulfilled: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon all." We know it has not yet been fulfilled, not only because the church is so far from ideal but also because the people of Israel persist in unbelief. They have been broken off because of their unbelief, and we gentiles have been grafted in to the rich root of the covenant and made seed of Abraham and heirs of the promise (Gal. 3:14, 29, Rom. 11:17ff). But Scripture promises that one day Israel will be converted, accept Jesus as the Messiah; and then the prophecy of the Spirit will have its final fulfillment. So let us pray earnestly and call upon God to pour out his Spirit for a great awakening at Bethlehem and for the conversion of Israel that we may be united in one holy people of God. Then when the day of the Lord comes and all the nations are gathered for judgment in verdict valley the Lord will be our refuge and we will confess with unspeakable joy that he alone is God in our midst and there is none else.

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