

# This Is What Was Spoken by the Prophet Joel

by John Piper

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*Joel's prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh is fulfilled in the Pentecostal era, where believers are called to be prophets, speaking prophetic words of praise and encouragement for the edification of others.*

**Duration:** 23:54

**Topics:** "Judgment And Repentance", "Personal Revival"

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## Description

In this sermon, Joel addresses the devastating locust plague that has hit Israel, causing a scarcity of vine and grain. He emphasizes the tragedy of the situation, particularly the loss of the cereal and drink offerings in the house of the Lord. Joel sees the locusts as the army of the Lord, a judgment upon the people for turning away from God. He urges the listeners to be deeply moved by the presence and experience of God, and to seek a personal encounter with Him. Joel also encourages a greater expression of praise and edification among believers, lamenting the reticence often found in the Baptist tradition. The sermon concludes by highlighting the relevance of Joel's message in our own day.

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## Transcript

I invite you to turn with me to the Prophet Joel in the Old Testament, if you'd like to follow along in some of the texts that I'll be referring to here at the outset. Nobody really knows precisely when Joel was preaching, but whether or not we can locate his book and his prophecies in its precise chronological location, what he saw and what he foresaw abides and is very important for us. And I want us to look at it briefly and then at its fulfillment in our day.

Joel writes in the midst of crisis, a devastating locust plague has hit Israel and virtually nothing of vine or grain remains. It says, for example, in chapter 1, verse 4, what the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten.

What the hopping locust has left, the destroying locust has eaten. And then chapter 2, verse 3, the land is like the Garden of Eden before them, but after them a desolate wilderness and nothing escapes them. So Joel says, weep you drunkards, because there are no more vines to make your liquor from.

But for him, the greatest tragedy is expressed, for example, in verse 9 of chapter 1, the cereal offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests mourn and the ministers of the Lord. And then he says, this plague was no accident.

The locusts are the army of the Lord, and it is judgment, because the people have turned away from the Lord. Chapter 2, verse 11, the Lord utters his voice before his army, and his host is exceedingly great. He that executes his word is powerful, for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible.

Who can endure it? So Joel calls now for repentance. And he says in chapter 2, verse 12, 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, who knows, who knows whether he will not turn and repent and leave a blessing behind him.

And the people do it. The people repent and turn to the Lord, and God's jealousy is kindled for his people. And in chapter 2, verse 19, it says, The Lord answered and said to his people, Behold, I am sending you grain and wine and oil, and you will be satisfied, and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.

And then after a luscious description of the restoration, Joel lifts up his eyes and looks into the more distant future. In chapter 2, verse 28, and says, 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 shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

Even upon the menservants and the maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and I will give portents in the heavens and on 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.

Joel had called the judgment of the locusts the day of the Lord back in chapter 2, verse 11. But now he lifts his eyes and he sees another day of the Lord coming, great and terrible upon all the earth, a day of judgment. He goes on to describe that in chapter 3, verse 2. I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat means the Lord judges. It's probably simply a symbolic place of judgment, since we don't know of any geographical location like that. I will bring them down to the valley of judgment, and I will enter into judgment with them there, says the Lord.

So before this cataclysmic day of judgment is coming, however, there's going to be a day in which the Spirit is going to be poured out on all flesh, a day of respite and renewal before judgment comes. Now, hundreds of years later, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stands up and announces in Acts chapter 2, verse 16, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. Last Sunday we looked at the ascension of our Lord Jesus, which took place 40 days after his resurrection.

Today we move forward about a week to the day of Pentecost. The word Pentecost means 50th, and it was a Jewish celebration 50 days after the Passover, on the Feast of Weeks, a day in which the firstfruits of the harvest were dedicated to the Lord. Today, however, Pentecost has a new meaning for Christians.

We call it sometimes With Sunday, other times Pentecost Sunday, but it's got a new meaning, and we can see what that is by looking at the first chapters of Acts. In Acts chapter 1, verse 4, Jesus had said to his disciples before he left, wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father, namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Then four verses later, in verse 8, he says, you shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

And then at the beginning of chapter 2, the Holy Spirit falls on these people in a remarkable way. They are filled with the Spirit, and the people in their surroundings hear the great things of God announced in languages they can understand, and they ask, what does this mean? And Peter gives the astonishing answer, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel, and he quotes Joel 2, 28 to 32. Now, I want to ask two brief questions about this.

One, what did Joel mean by saying that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh? And then two, what newer and fuller significance of this event can we perceive from our New Testament perspective on this side of Pentecost? So let's go and keep our minds focused, first of all, on the Old Testament perspective. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is the presence of God in the world to reveal God in action and word. The presence of God to reveal himself in action and word.

And therefore, when Joel says the Spirit is going to be poured out on all flesh, he means that the Spirit is going to draw near to individuals. He's going to come himself. God is coming close to men to reveal himself and to make himself felt in a very powerful way.

There's a big difference, isn't there, between seeing a lake in the distance and being thrown into the lake and immersed in the water. And so there is a world of difference between experiencing God as a distant object of knowledge out there and being saturated by the presence of God, being immersed in his coming. I think the picture of a worldwide pouring, the idea of a waterfall or a huge vessel being poured, compels us to think of the fulfillment of this prophecy as being soaked, saturated, swept along in the flood of the Holy Spirit of God.

Joel wanted his hearers and his readers to anticipate a flood tide of God's presence that would be unmistakable in its experience. Now, when God draws near to a person like this, he wants to be known as God, not as some psychic phenomenon or some indescribable fantasy. He wants to be known as God.

And therefore, I think when God pours himself on us by his Holy Spirit, he does two things. He creates true images and clear conceptions of his beauty and his power and his trustworthiness and his holiness and his majesty. And secondly, he quickens our hearts to respond in appropriate degrees of intensity to each of those attributes that he has allowed us to see.

It is unthinkable that the infinite and holy God could come close to a person like this and that person not be deeply moved. If you are not often deeply moved by the presence and the experience of the living God, then you need to pray that Joel 2.28 will be fulfilled in your experience. And you need to fix your gaze intently on the beauty of God in the scriptures.

Joel goes on to say that there are three ways in which this experience of God manifests itself. Probably not the only three, but these are three that he focuses on. People who are filled with God to overflowing are going to dream dreams, see visions, and prophesy.

What a person dreams about is a sign of what his mind is saturated with. Take heed. What looms up in your minds as you stroll along alone in the daytime is a signal to whether or not you have been soaked by the Holy Spirit.

And you can usually tell whether a person has been drenched by the Spirit of God by whether their mouths are speaking the excellencies of the Lord or whether their mouths are full of something else. When God Almighty pours Himself into an individual, the inner life is changed. If Christianity doesn't mean that,

we are playing games and we may as well take up our rules somewhere else.

When Almighty God pours Himself out on an individual, the inner life is changed. And since the mouth is just the pressure valve, as Jesus taught, of the heart, it is inevitable that when the heart is full of the Holy God and His Spirit, that mouth is going to speak prophecies. Now, we must change some of our misconceptions about what prophecy is.

The word prophecy has broad meaning in Scripture, not narrow meaning. We must not restrict the meaning of prophecy to, for example, predictions. Though, the person whose mind is most saturated and soaked with God will be very likely the person who knows what's coming next.

But that's not even the main thing that prophets did in the Old Testament. Nor is it the main thing meant, I think, by prophecy here. I don't think we should either think that prophecy is the fulfillment or the exercise of a specific calling or office.

That it is sometimes. It surely was in the Old Testament. There was an office of prophet.

But it had a broader, more flexible meaning than that. I think as it's used here in Joel, and as it's taken over in some of our New Testament passages, like 1 Corinthians 12-14, prophecy means fundamentally verbalizing the great things that we have seen and felt of God in our own experience. Putting into words for edification, consolation, and the building up of other people, things, great things, that we have seen of God.

Joel is not trying to tell us, to get excited about a day that's coming when everybody will be able to know what's happening tomorrow. There is nothing especially holy about being a seer of the future. There is something very holy about being so saturated with God that your mouth is filled with edifying, prophetic praises of the Lord.

That's what I think he's after. And the best evidence for that understanding of prophecy in Acts 2, for example, is that in those first verses of the chapter, when in fact this prophecy was fulfilled, what did the people do? Well, it says that they spoke in tongues, but the point is, all the people around them heard them, and verse 11 says, they heard them what? Speaking the, in the Greek, the great things of the Lord. Not just works.

The great things about the Lord. The tongues were necessary, otherwise all these people from all over the world wouldn't have been able to hear and understand the great things of the Lord. But the main thing is, they prophesied.

Tongues is a specific variety of prophetic speech. It is not the main thing in this text. Joel wasn't the only Old Testament prophet who was excited about this coming day.

There's a story told in Numbers chapter 11. Moses was a man who was a prophet. The Spirit of God rested on him.

And one day it says that God came down in a cloud. Moses was out at the tent of meeting. The 70 elders were gathered around him.

And it says God took some of the Spirit from Moses, put it on the 70, and they began to prophesy. There were two of these rascals who stayed back in the camp and didn't come out. Yet the Spirit of God fell on

them, and they started prophesying.

Joshua found out about this. He comes to Moses and says, Moses, rebuke those two, for they're not with us and they're prophesying. And Moses responds like this.

Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all. That's the day that Joel is prophesying. Would that all the Lord's people were prophets.

Would that everybody at Bethlehem Baptist Church were a prophet in this sense. So saturated, so soaked with God, so filled in the inner life, that we could not help but speak prophetic words of praise about the excellencies of God for each other's edification and encouragement. I don't think this is beyond your reach.

Don't ever say, this is for the religious professionals, this is for the spiritual elite. The point of the prophecy is, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, man and woman, slave and master, old and young. You are all in it.

You can't get out of that category. You are there somewhere, and it is being poured out on you. Baptists have a long history of appreciating, rightly, the priesthood of all believers.

We all have access to the Father through Jesus Christ with no necessary human mediator. We all are responsible to minister to each other in confession and forgiveness. We better add to that emphasis the prophethood of all believers since the day of Pentecost.

The Lord wills that all his people be prophets, be so filled with God that our love and our admiration for him spill over into words. Would that every Wednesday night when we came together and every Sunday night we might come so deeply moved by our experiences of God during the week, welling up within us like streams of water, that we fall over each other to speak prophetic words of praise and encouragement and edification. Why is it, do you think, that we are so reticent? What is it in our Baptist tradition that seals us up in our little boxes and makes us think that our experience with God the Almighty is somehow a private affair that we should keep to ourselves so that it's like pulling teeth sometimes to get you to say anything about the living God in your life? What's the reason for that? I have no idea what the reason is.

But this I know. It is not the Spirit of God that seals your lips. The Spirit of God says, I am going to be poured out on this people and they shall prophesy.

And when the Spirit comes, you speak. And when he doesn't come, we are silent. But someone may say, oh, that just doesn't apply to us.

That does not apply to us. That must be something else, somebody else, some other church, some other time. We're not all to be prophets.

So we need to look very briefly at what Peter says in Acts chapter 2 about the fulfillment of this prophecy. First, we learn three things. First, it began to be fulfilled at Pentecost.

At least began to be fulfilled when the Spirit came on those 120 and they spoke prophetically words of great things. Then in verse 17, Peter says, in the last days, the Spirit God declares. In other words, we are living in a period which may be called the last days.

This is a graciously extended period before judgment comes. Who knows when? And in these last days, we may expect anything to be fulfilled in the church, which was promised for the last days. Secondly, the great and terrible day of the Lord that is coming with portents in the heavens and signs on the earth, we now see to be separated in time from the outpouring of God's Spirit.

In Joel, you could not tell whether they would come back to back or be separated. It was all pushed together. Now we see the prophecy began to be fulfilled at Pentecost, is being fulfilled in this age, and at the end, the rest of it will be consummated with the judgment day.

We live in an era which may be called appropriately a Pentecostal era, an age in which the exalted Christ is now pouring out His Spirit on all flesh to the end that we might prophesy, dream, and have visions of Him. And then third and finally, we learn that all flesh does not mean every individual. Now that was already clear in the prophet Joel.

He said, whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Not everybody calls upon the name of the Lord. Not everybody, probably even in this room, feels the need to call upon the name of the Lord, though I pray that won't be the case when we're done.

But it is the case. There are people who do not call upon the name of the Lord, and it is unthinkable, isn't it, that those people who are not saved would be the recipients of the outpouring of God's Spirit. And therefore, all flesh does not mean every individual.

What we learn from the New Testament, however, is what it does mean more specifically. Because Peter said in Acts 2.38, Repent, this is at the end of his sermon, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Peter interprets calling on the name of the Lord from Joel in terms of coming to Jesus and calling upon Him in the symbolic act of baptism.

Therefore, I conclude that prophecy does apply to us. That, in terms of our original application, would that all God's people were prophets. A friend of mine, Mark Noel, who teaches history at Wheaton College, wrote this past week in a journal a review of the recent publication of Jonathan Edwards' book on the scientific writings.

And he said a sentence about Jonathan Edwards, that old Puritan preacher from the 18th century. Something that I want so bad to be true of me, and I pray is true of you and will be increasingly true of all of us. He said, Jonathan Edwards was a thoroughly God-besotted individual.

I love that phrase. A God-besotted individual. Maybe, after all, the 120 were drunk.

Paul said, don't be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Holy Spirit. Drunk with the Holy Spirit.

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