

Joel

Introduction

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Why read this book?

If you long to personally experience God's work and power, you'll find Joel's prophecies right on target. His predictions, though frightening at times, will also inspire you. In fact, Joel prophesies the coming of the Holy Spirit, linking God's work in the Old Testament with the birth of the church in the New Testament (compare 2:28; Acts 2:17–21). Reading Joel will show you God's intense desire for intimacy with all his people.

Who wrote this book?

Joel, a prophet of God.

When was it written?

Some think Joel wrote during Jeremiah's lifetime, around 609 B.C. Others say he could have written later, after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon (538 B.C.). But because Joel mentions no king and speaks of elders as leaders (1:2), still others suggest a much earlier date—perhaps around 835 B.C., when Judah's king was a child (2 Kings 11:21).

What was happening at this time?

Assuming the earlier date, seven-year-old Joash had just been crowned king over Judah, though Jehoiada, the high priest, was the power behind the throne. Under Joash's wicked father and grandmother, pagan idol worship had flourished in Judah (see 2 Kings 8:25–11:21).

To whom was it written and why?

The prophet Joel urged the people of Judah to turn again to God. With Joash's wicked father and grandmother out of the way, Joel saw tremendous opportunity for renewal in the land. But he also warned Judah that judgment—in the form of an agricultural disaster of major consequence—would come if they did not repent.

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What to look for in Joel:

Watch for God's double-barreled plan for his people: a specific plan of punishment for sin, but also a promise to defend his people zealously (2:1,18). In both modes, look for God's passionate concern for his people.

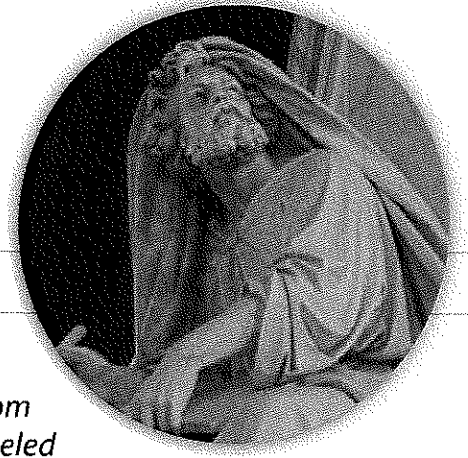
—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*

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A wake up call

We know very little about Joel as a person, but he was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom in the days of King Uzziah—days of unparalleled prosperity for Israel and Judah. The Book of Joel also speaks of a natural disaster that would foreshadow the ultimate Day of the Lord.

Scripture: Joel

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan

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Part 1 Identify the Issue

The May 1984 *National Geographic* showed in color photos and drawings the swift and terrible destruction that wiped out the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in A.D. 79. The explosion of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden that the residents were killed in the midst of their routines: men and women were at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, slaves at toil. They died amid volcanic ash and superheated gasses. Even family pets suffered the same quick and final fate. It takes little imagination to picture the panic of that terrible day.

The saddest part is that these people did not have to die. Scientists confirm what ancient Roman writers recorded—weeks of rumblings and shakings preceded the actual explosion. An ominous plume of smoke from the mountain was clearly visible days before the eruption. If only they had been able to read and respond to Vesuvius's warning!

There are similar “rumblings” in our world: warfare, earthquakes, economic woes, breakdown of the family and moral standards. While not exactly new, these things do point to a coming day of judgment. People need not be caught unprepared. God warns and provides an escape to those who will heed the rumblings.

In Joel's day, a plague of locusts had descended upon the land, disrupting the basic economy of the country and affecting every level of society. In this event, Joel saw the judgment of God upon the nation, and the people's need for a repentant heart. Then God would come and move in a fresh way.

[Q] What's the closest you've come to a natural disaster? How did that event affect you?

[Q] When you hear the phrase “Day of the Lord,” what comes to mind?

[Q] How does the biblical promise of God's imminent judgment affect your day-to-day life?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: The Day of the Lord is foreshadowed by natural disaster.

Swarms, and swarms, and swarms of locusts. Like an invading nation. Like a lion attack. Disaster befalls Judah and all of its crops are wiped out. The prophet Joel takes the opportunity to tell of God's judgment on sin, and to point to the far more terrible judgment coming on the “Day of the Lord.”

Read Joel 1:1–20.

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[Q] What is Joel saying to the people in verses 1–3?

[Q] Describe the scene he writes about in verses 4–12. What would this do to the economy of the land?

[Q] Why does he address the priests and spiritual leaders in verse 13? What role and responsibility does he call on them to take?

[Q] How is the coming Day of the Lord (v. 15) like the natural disaster that befell Judah?

[Q] What “disasters” has God used to get your attention?

[Q] What valid spiritual lessons can we draw from a natural disaster? What lessons should we not draw?

[Q] Are disasters always the judgment of God?

[Q] People today are not very interested in a message of judgment. Why do you think this is? What kind of God do they want to believe in?

Teaching Point Two: The Day of the Lord is imminent.

Joel 2:1 repeats an important phrase for us: “the Day of the Lord.” Instead of arguing that things will get better, Joel argues that they will actually get worse. While the destruction caused by the locusts will be total, it will be nothing compared to the final judgment of God. God will destroy his enemies, but bring great blessings on the faithful. Read Joel 2:1–3:21.

[Q] Summarize the picture of the advancing army in 2:1–11.

[Q] In the face of this impending destruction, what does God call the people to do in verses 12–17?

[Q] Verse 18 begins “then the LORD . . .” What three promises from God to the people do you see in verses 18–20?

[Q] In what ways do verses 25–27 reverse the devastation that Israel was experiencing?

[Q] Read 2:28–32, then go forward to Acts 2:14–21. What is the connection between these verses?

[Q] Joel 3:1–8 gives God’s charge against the heathen nations. The point of concern is that they have attacked God’s people and divided the land. God is inviting the nations to come and do battle with him. Why does verse 10 tell us the opposite of what we read in Isaiah 2:4?

[Q] Reread Joel 2:25. How has God restored something to you that you thought was lost?

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Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To remember God's gift of his Spirit.*

Activity: *As a group, read Joel 2:28–29 and Acts 2:1–4. Thank God for his Holy Spirit poured out upon us! Give everyone an index card to write out Ephesians 5:15–21. Plan on memorizing these verses over the next few weeks.*

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Joel draws a very clear parallel between the natural disaster of the locust plague and the judgment of God coming upon the people. Of course, he had a direct word from the Lord that this was so. We cannot make such claims about recent natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in the USA or the earthquake in Haiti, because God has not told us so.

[Q] How should we respond to those who claim that every natural disaster is punishment from God?

[Q] What aspects of the character and working of God do you see in a new light after studying the Book of Joel?

[Q] What lesson from Joel do we need to grasp and apply to the church today?

Action Point: *On your own this week, read Joel 2:12–13 again. It's a basic component of our faith, but we need to be reminded: Is there anything of which you need to repent after hearing about the discipline and judgment of God? Do you need to take a time of fasting and mourning over sin? If you do, follow it with a time of rejoicing before the God who restores us!*

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White