

Text: Joel 2:1-32

Title: Call to Repent and Turn to God

Truth: Judgment is (still) coming; the Lord tells the people to get right with Him.

Date/Location: Wednesdays August 12 and 26, 2020 and Sunday August 23, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

Joel has detailed a locust plague and a drought which have devastated the nation of Israel. One more “plague” awaits them.

I. Third “Plague” — Destruction by an Army, 2:1-11

A. Does chapter 2 describe a human army or a locust army? There are some similarities between the descriptive language in chapter 1 and that in chapter 2. For example, terms like *devour* and *desolate wilderness* (v. 3). This leads some interpreters to understand this chapter to continue the locust theme of chapter 1. Locusts are a prominent tool of covenant chastisement against God’s people. Also, the simile language of “like” in verses 4, 5, and 7 support that this is not a human army, but “like” an army. But in favor of a literal human invading force are several arguments:

1. Foreign invading armies are also common tools that God used and promised to use in the case that Israel departed from righteousness. See Deut. 28:25, 32-33, 36, 49-51. These verses are near the locust section (Deut. 28:38) and also near verses that speak of drought (28:23-24). But they are distinct disasters.
2. Both locusts and foreign armies have in common that they eat up the fruit of the land. This commonality can cause confusion.
3. The army is called “people” (v. 2). They march in formation. Locusts are not so well organized as this.
4. They are called the “northern army” (v. 20). Locusts would normally come from south or southwest, but not the north.
5. The Old Testament uses locusts in likeness of an army (the reverse of the opposing viewpoint). See Nahum 3:15-17. Remember what I said before: chapter 1 speaks of locusts as an army, and chapter 2 speaks of a human army with some characteristics like locusts.
6. The drought disaster ends the locust section and marks a new section. It is not necessary to see a resumption of the locust plague, nor does

it seem to be clear that this is a return to the locust plague because of the different characteristics.

B. Characteristics of the army. These are found simply enough by a review of the text. Look at verses 2-10 and touch the highlights.

C. Note the fear that is brought by this army. All their devastating actions raise alarm (v. 2) and the day of the Lord is so terrible that no one can endure it (v. 11).

D. Question about the timing. Is this army going to come in the near-term, or in the far future, or both? This is inextricably intertwined with the issue of whether the Day of the Lord spoken of us near or far or both. It seems to this reader clear that the beginning of the book speaks of near-term events (locust plague, drought in chapter 1), while the end of the book speaks of final future restoration and judgment on the nations (chapter 3). Somewhere in the middle there must be a transition between near and far fulfillment.

1. Some interpreters like Walvoord understand Joel 2:1-11 to be fulfilled in the Assyrian captivity. This is a near-term fulfillment. Then after that the text transitions to the farther future. MacArthur locates the transition between near and far in the segment of text 2:1-17 and treats the invasion and present and future. Compton locates the transition at 2:1, with the transition being abrupt. He takes it from 2:1 forward is fulfilled exclusively in the future Tribulation.

I understand that the transition is abrupt at 2:18, with the call for repentance in 2:12-17 connected to what comes before, in the lifetimes of Joel's readers.

2. In favor of Compton's interpretation is 2:2b where it says that a people will come unlike any before, "nor will there ever be any such after them, even for many successive generations." This could be read to suggest never again at all in the future, in which case this would have to be an eschatological judgment. Or, it could be read as "not again for many generations" in which case there is expected another *even worse* incursion into Israel, which indeed has not happened for many generations up to our own day.

3. On the other hand, to this interpreter, it appears extremely difficult to take an exclusively "far" interpretation of this section for three reasons:

1. Joel says the day of the LORD is coming, and in fact is *at hand* (v. 1).¹ Granted, one such passage is Joel 3:14, which I take to sit in a far-future context. Therefore, it can be “at hand” yet far off to us.
2. This urgency led for the call to immediately blow the trumpet in Zion and call for a national meeting (2:1, 15). This DOL was so near that something had to be done *now*.
3. A far-off DOL would seem to be useless as a motivation to call the people to repentance in the present, as the following verses do (2:12ff).
4. These facts have caused some to suggest that there is a near *and* far fulfillment of these words—a dual fulfillment or double-reference. I cannot accept that sort of interpretation, as if the prophet mixed and matched two different events, one near and one far, under one set of words. This is why prophecy is sometimes very difficult to understand. It almost *seems* that there could be multiple fulfillments. If the prophecy seems to be general in nature, this could be the case. More likely it is the case that a prophecy of a near-term event can foreshadow or be used as an analogy for a later event. This is because the nature of divine judgment in one era is basically the same as divine judgment in any era. And this in turn is because God is unchanging, and though the extent or devastation of the judgment may be different, from a local viewpoint it looks basically the same when God brings calamity upon a people or city or region.
5. Most prophecies are more specific, by their nature as Biblical *prophecies* and not Nostradamus-like *vague predictions*. We can usually point to a particular time of fulfillment—near or far—though not necessarily the particular year, day, or hour.

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6. I earlier mentioned that I do not have a problem with the phrase “Day of the Lord” referring to more than one event in history. Any time period in which the Lord is active in judgment and blessing could be called by the prophets a day of the Lord. I hold, however, that in most passages in the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord refers to the eschaton. For instance, Zechariah 14:1 is one such passage. Just as an exclusively “far” interpretation is difficult in this context, an

¹ There are other passages that speak of the Day of the Lord as at hand, such as Joel 1:15, 3:14, Zeph. 1:7, 14, Isaiah 13:6, Ezekiel 30:3, Obad 1:15. The doctrine of imminency was important in those days, just as it is today with regard to the Rapture.

exclusively “near” interpretation of the phrase in every context is impossible.

7. In summary, I take it that Joel is talking about a soon-coming judgment under the heading “The Day of the Lord.” That day is not the eschatological day, though it is like it. He then moves to a far-fulfillment section (2:18ff) when he speaks about the Lord’s zeal to restore the people of Israel. That obviously has not happened in any thorough or permanent way in history, and it is not ongoing presently, but it shall occur in the future. The fact that Joel does not mention any further judgments on Israel after 2:18 makes it appear that this period of blessing is the final, un-ending blessing of the people of God in the kingdom and then eternal future.

E. **Practical relevance.** Now, as then, the world faces imminent judgment by the holy God, a consuming fire. God has told us of no other *impending* “Day of the Lord” but the one that comes after the Rapture. Of the date of that terrible event, no one knows. But it should cause fear and a sense of urgency to be right with God. Make an announcement, figure out what to do, etc. The next section answers that need—what to do?

II. Call for National Repentance, 2:12-17

A. **Turn.** This is done in the spirit and mind of the people. The results are seen outwardly in actions such as fasting, weeping, and mourning. James 4:9-10 speaks to people who need to repent using similar terms.

Turning, also known as repentance, is *not* a work. It is a change of mind/disposition just like faith is. It is concomitant with faith. It is not an “addition” to faith—it is an inherent aspect of faith itself. When we say “repent and believe,” that is the same thing as saying salvation comes by faith alone. The nature of faith is that it *includes* a type of commitment.² Note, for example, the Lord’s own expression of faith on the cross: “Father, into your hands I **commit** My spirit” (Luke 23:46). We “**commit** our souls to Him in doing good” (1 Peter 4:19). This sort of commitment is made *in principle* when we become believers, entrusting the keeping of our souls and entire lives to God. In other words, when we express

² To criticize this view by saying that it requires faith *plus* commitment of life shows a bad misunderstanding of the concept of faith as merely an intellectual operation. Rather, faith *includes* commitment. Without a volitional element, “faith” is merely head-knowledge that saves no one, including the demons (James 2:19). This view is not faith *plus*; it is *true* faith, faith *including* commitment, faith *that is characterized by* a sort of commitment.

genuine faith, even for the first time, there is a level of repentance and turning to God *as God* in it.

Obviously, commitment *in practice* is not a cause of obtaining salvation, for those who are not perfectly sanctified will not and cannot demonstrate perfect commitment in practice. But they have decided to become followers of Christ as opposed to whatever idols and sin and self-autonomy they were following before. Looking to Jesus entails a looking away from self and the like. This whole concept is not necessarily made explicit in one's personal testimony of salvation because your theological expression is not precise enough as a new-born Christian.

- B. Put away mere symbolism and genuinely repent, v. 13a. The rending should be of our hearts, and not merely our garments. This does not mean that a person in the OT who rent their clothes was sinning. But they were sinning if they just tore their garments in a symbolic gesture devoid of any genuine feelings of repentance in the heart. Again, Joel commands, **return** to the Lord your God.
- C. Joel tells the people to return to the Lord because the Lord is **merciful**, v. 13b-14a. He will turn and hold off on the devastation of coming judgment. Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11-16.
- D. The Lord is also **gracious**, 14b. He will not only withhold deserved punishment (mercy) but He will give what is undeserved (grace). In verse 14 he leaves a blessing behind Him. This blessing includes agricultural and economic factors (the two being inextricably tied together). The blessing can be used, in turn, to praise the Lord.
- E. Verses 15-17 are a call for corporate application of the above principles. Those hearing the prophecy must observe the call to repent; but also the nation as a whole needs to be called to carry it out. Thus, they are to announce with the trumpet that there will be a fast, sacred assembly, gathering of the people, and an assembly of the elders (leaders). This includes little ones, nursing babies, and young people focused on their impending marriage. *Everyone* is included.

The priests especially are called out in verse 17. They are to weep at the temple and pray in an intercessory manner for the people. They are to recognize that what they have done stains the reputation of their God among the Gentiles.

- F. Now is high time for our own world's leaders and citizens to repent of their sin. It is time for the world's peoples to turn from iniquity and rend their hearts, not with empty ritual but with true repentance. Fasting and

sackcloth would be appropriate. Cessation of wicked activities is the only appropriate course of action for people facing the coming divine doom. The time is here to turn from sin and believe in the coming King, Jesus Christ. People of the earth: do homage to the Son, lest he be angry with you.

III. Deliverance of Judah, 2:18-32

The opening verse is a great blessing. The Lord will be zealous for His land and His people. Thanks to God for this! See Isaiah 60:10. The zeal of the Lord will do this – an idea that occurs elsewhere. For example: 2 Kings 19:31, Isaiah 9:7, 37:32; Zech. 1:14, 8:2. This zeal will be combined with pity and power and extend to both land and people. The land will be restored and the people will be restored.

A. Material blessing will reverse earlier calamity, 2:18-27.

1. This will include agricultural prosperity (19, 22b, 23, 24, 26). Judah will no longer be a reproach (embarrassment) among the nations. The invading/occupying force will be removed (20). This force is called the northerner or northern army. While this could be the same army of 2:1-11, I believe, it refers to an eschatological enemy from the north (Daniel 11:40-45).
2. The land will be able to rejoice; the beasts of the field will not fear a lack of food because the pastures and trees will again bear bountiful fruit (21-22). Rain will come faithfully and crops will grow, wheat will be in abundance for bread, as well as grapes and olives (23-24). The effects of the locusts (literal and perhaps figurative!) will be reversed (25). The people will have plenty of food (26). This is a sign of prosperity. Do you have food in plenty? Then you are prospering!
3. There is a promise that the people will never again be put to shame, once each in 26b and 27b. This certainly tips my understanding that this must be a far-future fulfillment. It is the final blessing that will go on for eternity and never be interrupted by another hiccup in Israel's obedience. This promise has not yet seen its fulfillment.
4. This calls for a response. First is **trust**, the opposite of fear (21a). Then there is **joy** and **gladness** (21a, 23a). Third, there is **praise** (26b). Finally, there is a response of **confidence** that God is the only true and living God (27b). Israel should have all of these responses when God brings them the deliverance promised here. We can mirror their praise and joy today because of what the Lord has done for us. Psalm 126:3.

B. Spiritual blessing and supernatural phenomena, 2:28-32. Around the time that the restoration is set in order, God will send His Spirit upon all flesh. Because of the detail of the earlier promises and the time word “after,” we know immediately—without concern that any other text of Scripture will undermine this conclusion—that this fulfillment awaits the final restoration of Israel. The contents of chapter 3 further support this interpretation. Because of this, it will not be fulfilled before that happens, including in the church age.

1. 2:28-29 promises the Holy Spirit will come upon “all flesh.”

Consequently, there will be an explosion of prophetic and revelatory activity in those days. People will be filled with the Spirit of God. “All flesh” and God’s servants will be affected. It is hard to imagine how this could not include *at least* all of Israel.

“All flesh” normally would signify the world’s inhabitants or “all mankind” (Gen. 6:12, 13, 17, 19, ... 9:15-17, Num 16:22, 27:16, Ps 136:25, 145:21, Isaiah 40:5-6, 49:26, 66:16, 23-24; Jer. 25:31, 32:27, 45:5; Ezek. 20:48; 21:4-5, Dan. 4:12; Zec. 2:13; Luke 3:6; John 17:2; Acts 2:17, 1 Peter 1:24).

However, in this case, it could very well be limited to only Israel. This is because the recipients are specified: “your” occurs four times, tying these people to Israel. It seems the servants are similarly situated. Further supporting this conclusion is that the nations are gathered for judgment in chapter 3—not to receive the Holy Spirit.

2. 2:30-31 speaks of disturbances of the heavenly bodies, which we understand to be the same events as described in the Tribulation. Revelation 6-19 shares some of these signs. Matthew 24:29 also mentioned signs like this. There are blood (the color of the moon?), fire, pillars of smoke, darkened sun, and a blood moon just before the coming of the day of the LORD. The precise timing of this is perhaps somewhat confusing, but I am satisfied to leave it that all of these events are associated with the second advent of Christ.

3. Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord around that time (or today, for that matter) will be saved. In Jerusalem there will be deliverance for the remnant who is, at the time of the Tribulation, facing awful judgment.

C. Relationship of 2:28-32 with Acts 2.

1. What happened in Acts 2? The Lord’s promise of the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit appears as a

'lick' of fire on each disciple and they are given the instant ability to speak in foreign languages. They preach the works of God, obviously related to salvation. Some onlookers think that the disciples are drunk and are speaking gibberish. But others recognize that these are real human languages. Peter then expresses some kind of likeness of this event to what Joel prophesied.

2. But how does this compare with Joel 2? Acts 2 is not the right context for a complete fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32, because the latter is in the eschaton. Acts 2 was not. Furthermore, there are details that are clearly *not* fulfilled—heavenly disturbances among them. Spend some time comparing the passages to see for yourself. Also, the Spirit was *not* poured out on *all* the Jewish people. A few prophesied and had other revelatory experiences, but that is it. At the time of the second advent, this activity will be more widespread. So the two passages have “like” events” but not “the same” events.

About all that we can say that is fulfilled is that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved! But even then, the meaning of *saved* is somewhat different—the salvation in Joel has a major physical connotation to it because Israel will be in great distress because of the invading northern army and (from other passages) the Antichrist. If the Lord does not return in time, the nation will be wiped out. “No flesh would be saved” according to Matthew 24:22. For Peter, salvation refers to spiritual deliverance from sin and death.

Conclusion

Joel transitions in chapter 2 from near fulfillment to far. As with many of the prophets, he sees near and far off events from a perspective where he cannot easily tell the distance of time between events. And he does not have the benefit of hindsight and further revelation as we do.

But the point remains that there were disasters in Joel's day or soon to come; and there is a future destruction and restoration that awaits in the pre-written history book of the nation of Israel. (Biblical prophecy is nothing more than history written down in advance.) This special history book touches the events of the entire world as well. These events still are cause for a major call to repentance. For being unfaithful to the Lord, and having no legitimate excuse for it, the people are required to turn from sin and turn to God (2:12-17). Prophecy of the future has that intended outcome—the spiritual “righting of the ship” of people. God is not required to tell us what is coming, but He graciously does so in order to warn us away from a bad outcome.

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