

## *Lessons from the Book of Joel*

### Opening Hymn: #289 — The Glorious Day

In every car and tractor, in every tank and plane--oil. Behind almost every lighted glass tower, giant industrial plant or little workshop—oil. Behind fertilizers, drugs, chemicals, synthetic textiles and thousands of other products--oil. Few noted that the world's most advanced civilizations depended for this treasure on countries generally considered weak and disunited. Now all that has changed.

--*TIME* (Jan. 6, 1975, on King Faisal)

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a warrior."

—Joel 3:9,10 (RSV)

The words of Joel seem quite contemporary. The countries once considered weak are now the main buyers of implements of war. France, the Soviet Union, the United States—all vie for the favors of the oil-rich nations using the latest armaments as an attraction. And then there's India: they of all nations need plowshares and pruning hooks to provide food for their countless millions. But instead they explode a nuclear device in the misguided notion that defense against their enemies is their first priority. It is the day of the Lord and His great army. And that is the message of the prophet Joel!

### **Locusts**

The first chapter and into the second of Joel's prophecy concerns a plague of locusts.

Joel 1:2-4; 2:3-9 (RSV) Hear this, you aged men, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children and their children another generation. What the cutting locust 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. (2:3) Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but after them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run. As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle. Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale. Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall. They march each on his way, they do not swerve from their paths. They do not jostle one another, each marches in his path; they burst through the weapons and are not halted. They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls; they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief.

Now the question: Are these literal locusts or is it symbolic of something else? Commentators on Joel disagree among themselves. Some think it refers to a plague that came upon Israel at the time Joel

wrote. Others think Joel is using locusts as an allegory for an enemy that would descend upon the people. I suspect both viewpoints are correct.

Joel starts out by saying, in effect, "You've seen this with your own eyes. It is so significant, it should be passed on from one generation to another." This tends to support the idea that the plague was literal, one of many punishments God permitted upon his disobedient people. But Joel uses this plague as symbolic of the great destruction that will be visited upon the earth in the great time of trouble:

Joel 2:11 The Lord utters his voice before his army, for 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?

John the Revelator uses the pictorial language of Joel when he describes what happens when the fifth angel sounds his trumpet:

Rev. 9:3,7,9 And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth and unto them was given power as the scorpions of the earth have power. And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold. ... And they had breastplates as it were breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle.

Now whether you believe the fifth angel sounded sometime in the past or is going to sound sometime in the future, I doubt very much whether you believe literal locusts are going to afflict the earth. No, locusts here properly symbolize a great destructive force. This is especially the case when we see that verse 4 says they were not to hurt grass, trees, or green things -- the very object of a literal locusts attentions. As we examine the message of Joel, we will see that he too is using locusts symbolically. Consider:

Joel 2:20 I will remove the northerner far from you and drive him into a parched and desolate land...

Locusts don't come from the north in middle eastern lands. They come from the south and southeast. But there are many places where the destructive force that comes against Israel in the great time of trouble is said to come from the "north":

Jer. 1:14,15 Then the Lord said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land. For lo I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north saith the Lord; and they shall come and they shall set everyone his throne at the entering of the gates of Jerusalem and against all the walls thereof round about and against all the cities of Judah.

Ezek. 38:14-16 Therefore son of man, prophesy and say unto Gog, Thus saith the Lord God: In that day when my people of Israel dwelleth safely, shalt thou not know it? And thou shalt come from thy place out of the north parts, thou, and many people with thee, all of them riding upon horses, a great company, and a mighty army: and thou shalt come up against my people Israel as a cloud to cover the land; it shall be in the latter days, and I will bring thee against my land...

Just to be certain that we get the point, Joel repeats his message using plain language, and not the symbolism of locusts:

Joel 3:1,2 For 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 on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land.

The word "Jehoshaphat" means "Jehovah judged." There is no other reference to the valley except in the book of Joel. But there are many other references to the great "Day of the Lord" and the battle of that time.

### **Day of the Lord**

Rev. 16:16-18 And he gather them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon. And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air ... and there were voices and thunders and lightnings and there was a great earthquake such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake and so great.

Zech. 12:9,11 And it shall come to pass in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. In that day shall there be a great mourning in Jerusalem in the valley of Megiddon.

This is where we get the expression "the battle of Armageddon." It is the great time of trouble that ends the Gospel age. Joel calls it the "Day of the Lord" and he uses that expression five times in the 73 verses of his book. John uses a similar expression in verse 14 (of Rev. 16) when he says "to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty."

This was a common theme in the Old Testament prophets. Nearly all of them talk about this period of time:

Amos 5:18 Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is darkness and not light.

Zeph. 1:14,5 The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

When the disciples asked Jesus what sign to expect that the promised kingdom would be established, they got a rather long answer. A part of that answer included the sign of darkness and clouds of trouble:

Mark 13:24-26 But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.

The Lord certainly must be present for it to be "The Day of the Lord." And that is exactly what Jesus is saying in these verses. Similar language is used by John in Revelation when the sixth seal is opened on the scroll:

Rev. 6:12,13,17 And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal and lo, there was a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. For the great day of his wrath is come and who shall be able to stand?

Just before these verses, we read that the souls of them who were slain for the word of God received white robes and were told to rest for a season. This marks a time similar to that in the 14th chapter of Revelation:

Rev. 14:13,15,18,19 And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours and their works do follow them. ... Thrust in thy sickle and reap, for the time is come for thee to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe. ... Thrust in thy sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe. And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.

John is again using the same pictorial language as Joel to describe the events that close our age:

Joel 3:12-14 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. Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision!

And it is these multitudes that constitute the Lord's great army.

Joel 2:25 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.

Although Joel here says the locusts are the Lord's great army, we realize he is using this plague as an allegory for the multitudes caught up in the battle of Armeggedon. This is made clear in...

Joel 2:2,11 Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been from of old nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his host is exceedingly great...

It reminds us of the words of Jesus, again in referring to the end of this age:

Matt. 24:21 For then shall be great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.

When these multitudes come up against Jerusalem, it is not with the idea of serving God. But it accomplishes His purposes, another illustration of how the wrath of man is used in the outworking of God's plan (Psa. 76:10).

## Blessings of the Kingdom

God's plan doesn't end with the destruction of that great day. In fact, it is just beginning. The united testimony of the prophets is that Israel will be restored to a condition of prosperity and blessings will flow to all the world of mankind in the kingdom arrangement. The Battle of Armeggedon humbles the world and does away with human institutions.

Jer. 33:7-9 (RSV) I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them; they shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.

Joel also speaks of the blessings of the kingdom.

Joel 3:18 And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord.

This pictorial language is picked up again by John in the last chapter of the Bible:

Rev. 22:1,2 And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river was there the tree of life which bare twelve manner of fruits and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

"To the Jew first, and also to the Gentile." (Rom. 1:16) This was the principle at the time of Jesus, a time when special blessings were available. We believe it will be the same principle in the kingdom: "To the Jew first, and also to all other nations."

Joel talks about the terrible punishments from the hand of the Lord. But he holds out the hope of escape:

Joel 2:32 And it shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered...

It is similar to the words of the prophet Zephaniah:

Zeph. 2:3 Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.

But these scriptures imply more than just a "last resort" call for help. The Pharisees were good at outward appearances when their hearts were far from God. Joel saw the same things in his time, and so he wrote:

Joel 2:12 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.

As always, it is the true heart attitude that counts with God.

## Peter at Pentecost

When the holy spirit came upon the assembled disciples on the day of Pentecost, the people wondered at what was happening. But Peter explained that they were seeing the fulfillment of one of their scriptures. And he quotes five verses from Joel:

Acts 2:1,2,16-18 and when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. (vs. 16) But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my spirit and they shall prophesy.

Many scriptures in the Old Testament have a two-fold fulfillment ... a partial fulfillment at the first advent of Jesus, and a larger fulfillment at our Lord's second advent. This prophecy from Joel is like that.

At Pentecost did God pour out His spirit on all flesh? Of course not. He did pour out His spirit on his servants and handmaidens, however. This was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy and Peter rightly quoted it in support of the miracle they had just received. He goes on to urge repentance, setting the foundation in scripture:

Acts 2:21 And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (vs. 39) For the promise is unto you and to your children and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Here Peter gives the first hint that the promise might not be exclusively applied to Jews. Joel and other prophets might not have completely understood that. They had a tendency to look at things strictly from the viewpoint of punishing Israel's enemies while Israel enjoyed God's blessings. And although this is true, God's love is wider than that.

Jesus, when he read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth, also took a prophecy and showed how it applied to his time, while we understand there is a grander fulfillment in the future:

Luke 4:18,19 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach an acceptable year of the Lord.

In a small way, one here and there, our Lord did heal and preach. But the grander fulfillment we know takes place in the kingdom when mankind is brought back from the prisonhouse of death, when their eyes will be opened to the truth, and the bruise of sin will be removed. The Isaiah quotation contains more than Jesus quoted:

Isa. 61:2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God...

The "day of vengeance of our God" is the same as the "day of the Lord" we've been talking about in Joel. It wasn't the time to proclaim that in Jesus' day, so he didn't read it. But he did give a foretaste of the coming blessings of the kingdom. And the outpouring of the spirit on the disciples at Pentecost was the same thing.

It will be in the Millennial Age that God will pour out His spirit on all flesh. It will be the same spirit, received in the same way as the disciples, and coming from the same source. Dreams and visions were the channel of communication between God and His prophets of old. This symbolizes communication with all mankind in the kingdom, something they've never had before. Then will be fulfilled the "wish" of Moses:

Num. 11:29 And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!

### **Key Review Verses**

Joel 1:1 The word of the Lord that came to Joel... *Joel's pen but God's words.*

Joel 2:1 Blow the trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near.

Joel 2:12 Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me ... and rend your hearts and not your garments.

Joel 3:10 Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a warrior."

Joel 3:14 Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision!

Joel 2:26 You shall ... praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Joel 2:28 And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...

The Day of the Lord and His great army: Punishment, then blessing. This is the theme of the book of Joel. And we see the preparations on every side for this coming great battle. But afterwards, the prophesy of Isaiah will apply:

Isa. 2:4 And he shall judge among the nations and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more.

Closing Hymn: #282 -- Let The King of Glory In

*[First given in Los Angeles, January, 1975]*