

THE BOOK OF JOEL - PART II

THE CRISIS AND CALL TO REPENTANCE

I. The Book of Joel begins with a dramatic description of a catastrophe, an historic plague of locusts and likely another natural disaster; and he calls upon all the people to mourn and repent.

A. The book describes the call of the prophet in very brief terms.

1. Prophecy consistently begins with the word of the Lord or visions from God coming to a prophet, an event that the prophet usually describes, albeit generally in summary form. Is. 6; Jer. 1:4; Ez. 1:1-3; Hos. 1:2; Amos 7:14-17; Jonah 1:1

- The prophet does not seek out the word of God. Rather, he is selected by God for this purpose. See 2 Peter 1:20-21. The prophet is in fact compelled to speak God's words. See Jer. 20:7-18; Jonah.

2. The word of God has a power in itself. It does not merely declare facts, but makes the power of God present. See, e.g., Is. 55:10-11; Wis. 18:15-16; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12-13.

3. Here, the author feels no compulsion to describe the details behind the calling by God, but simply states that the word of God came to Joel, and thus that the words he speaks are not his own.

4. Identifying Joel as the son of Pethuel emphasizes the point that this is no merely symbolic figure, but rather a member of a real family at a definite time and place, albeit one that is now unknown. One can contrast this point with the parables of Jesus and some of the prophets who identify a general person. See, e.g., Is. 5:1-7; Luke 16:19-31.

B. Joel then launches into a description of the disaster, indicating that it is no ordinary event, but rather is of a magnitude that has not occurred in generations and will not happen again for generations to come. Chapter 2 will pick up on this theme and indicate that there never was or ever will be a plague of locusts as bad as this. See Joel 2:2.

1. There may be some hyperbole here, but the point is clear, that the catastrophe is of historic proportions and there is no point in minimizing it. Compare Ex. 10:2. There is also a poetic reversal of other Biblical descriptions of God's favor, to be

described to future generations. See, e.g., Judges 6:13, Ps. 44:2, 78:3-6.

2. There is, however, even here, a slight note of comfort, for the implication is that this disaster will not come again to future generations.

3. This disaster, which in the end will lead to a glorious renewal, is a foreshadowing of the catastrophes prophesied by Jesus during His last week in Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the persecutions of the Romans, and eventually the end of the world. See Mark 13:19.

C. Joel then launches into a dramatic description of what seems to be successive waves of locusts.

- Some translations use the term locust over and over again, but the literal meaning language uses different terms (cutter, locust, devourer). Thus, they may not all have been the same type of plague. In fact one or another may have been hail, a sandstorm or something else.

- In any case, the implication seems to be several disasters have taken place, possibly in successive years. Verses 19 and 20 seem to indicate that there is also either a scouring heat or a sandstorm in addition to the locusts.

- This description continues later in verses 6 and 7, describing the locusts as a countless, invincible army. In a way they are worse than human enemies because there is no ordinary way of dealing with them, either by combat or negotiation. The plague seems like the eighth plague of Egypt, but in a way is worse because of the successive waves. Ex. 10:12-15. The Book of Revelation will take up this image in the description of the plague of locusts (possibly symbolic of an invading army or of chaos in general) that comes at the blowing of the fifth trumpet. See Rev. 9:8.

D. Joel then calls for a general lamentation in verses 5 and 8 to 12.

1. Curiously, the first lament is that there is no more wine, which would not seem to be the greatest problem. Wine, however, is a symbol of God's favor and of joy and prosperity generally. See, e.g., Gen. 9:20; Duet. 7:13; Ps. 16:5; 23:5; 104:15; Is. 65:21; Hos. 2:10; Amos 9:13. When the Book of Revelation describes the plague of famine that will come with the four horsemen, it also says that the olive oil and the wine (symbolic of both the sacraments and of God's providence for His faithful generally) will not be damaged. See Rev. 6:6. Here, however, the wine that is a part of

celebrations of God's favor is gone.

- In addition, there is a likely reference back to the plagues Moses prophesied would occur if the people became unfaithful. See Duet. 28:15-68. The second list of those plagues begins with a description of the crops failing because of locusts, with the failure of the vineyards prominent in disastrous results. See Duet 28:38-48. The implication is that the disasters Joel is describing are a fulfillment of that prophecy. There is a positive note at the end, saying that God will call the repentant back to Him after the disasters. See Ex. 30:1-10.

- Calling at least some of the people drunkards may indicate that the people have abused God's gifts in general by treating them as their main concern, rather than honoring God. See Sir. 39:26-27.

2. Joel then describes the sorrow of the people like that of a virgin whose betrothed spouse has died. The bride here has been married, but not yet come to live with her husband, for a period of waiting was common among the ancient Jews.

- Assuming that Joel was speaking after the return from Exile, there could be an implication that the people were anticipating a glorious new era in union with their Lord, for the Bible describes the people of God as His bride. See Jer. 3:1-5; Hos. 2; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32-33; Rev. 19:7-9, 21:2. But now that union seems as distant as the marriage that has ended with the husband's death.

3. The next aspect of the disaster is that there can be no cereal or drink offerings. Leviticus 1-7 describes five types of offerings, the most sacred of which was the cereal offering, i.e. an offering of broken bread made from wheat, olive oil, and salt. The offeror would bring this bread offering to the priest, who would burn some of it with incense, and eat the rest. See Lev. 2. It was often combined with a wine libation, which is apparently what Joel is also referring to. There was a delight at being able to make these and other offerings to the Almighty God, for doing so would in some way allow the Israelites to participate in the never-ending priestly and in fact angelic worship of God, and that delight was now taken from them by the plague. See also Dan. 3:38-41.

- Jesus fulfilled this idea of a sacred bread and wine offering in the Eucharist. Cf. Heb. 10:11-18.

4. Joel then describes in dramatic terms the destruction of the plants, calling upon the farmers who care to them to lament.

- It should hardly be necessary to call for a lamentation, for that would be the natural response. However, there can be a sense by the prophet that this response is not only natural, but right. Part of the idea is that sorrow is a rightful human emotion in such contexts, not contrary to confidence in God. See, e.g., Matt. 5:4; Luke 19:41, 23:28; John 11:35. This view is in contrast to the Stoic ideal of being unaffected by earthly events, and also in contrast to those who would simply leave this land to go elsewhere. There is a rightful loyalty to the land, and thus a lament when it is suffering.

II. Joel then turns to the priests and tells them to join in the lamenting and to respond with a call to national mourning and repentance.

A. Joel turns to the priests in particular to join in the mourning, especially because the house of God is without the cereal offerings and related libations of wine.

- This call seems to indicate that the prophet is prophesying near Jerusalem, for the "house of God" would be the Temple.
- Although repentance is not directly mentioned, the wearing of sackcloth and the calling for a fast is a sign of repentance. See, e.g., Jonah 3:7-8. The Jewish law required fasting only on the Day of Atonement, see Lev. 16:29, 23:29. However, it gradually became a general sign of repentance, in addition to a way of making one's prayers all the more powerful. See, e.g., Judges 20:26, 1 Sam. 7:6; Jer. 14:12, 36:6-9; Esther 4:15; Jonah 3:5-8. Likewise, the wearing of sackcloth was also a sign of repentance. See, e.g., 1 Kings 21:27, Jonah 3:5-8. The Gospels also reflect fasting and on occasion, the wearing of sackcloth. See Matt. 4:2, 6:16, 9:14; Acts 13:2, 14:23 (all recommending fasting for repentance and/or prayer); Matt. 11:21; Luke 10:13 (referring to pagan nations wearing sackcloth as a sign of repentance); see also Matt. 3:4 (describing John the Baptist.)
- Joel calls upon them to spend the whole night praying with fasting and sackcloth. There may be a reference to the way in which Kings David and Ahab repented because of the murders they committed or tolerated. See 2 Sam. 12:16; 1 Kings 21:27. Those crimes likewise led to catastrophes for them and for the people.

B. Joel then specifically calls this disaster "the coming of the day of the Lord." In this context, it probably means the day spoken of by the Lord, when His holiness clashes with the people's infidelity. Moses long ago prophesied that disaster would come in the form of locusts if this happened and now it has. See Duet. 28:38-48. The day of the Lord was a day of judgment, although also

one that would lead to purification and restoration for those who were faithful. See Is. 13:6-22 (judgment against Babylon and then the nations in general); Jer. 46:10 (prophesy against Egypt and then the nations); Ezek. 30:2-3; Amos 5:18-20 (judgment against Israel); Mal. 3:2, 23-24.

C. Joel then calls upon even the land and the beasts to join in the mourning. As all of creation is called upon to praise God, so all of creation mourns at His punishments. Contrast Dan. 3:52-90; Ps. 148; Rev. 5:13 with Rom. 8:22.

D. Joel himself then leads the prayer and it appears that even creation joins in, as all of Nineveh joined in the fasting, prayer and repentance upon the preaching of Jonah.

III. Chapter 2 then builds upon the themes of chapter 1, but in even more dramatic terms, emphasizing especially the theme of the day of the Lord.

A. Joel calls for the blowing of a trumpet (shofar) that was used to summon people to preparation for calamity, often an invading army. See Jer. 4:5, 6:1, 51:27, Hos. 5:8.

B. The text then says that the day of the Lord will come as a day of darkness and gloom. All of creation will reflect the judgment of God. See also Is. 13:9-13; Amos 5:17-20; Zeph. 1:14-16. Jesus would take up this image in prophesying about the days of suffering to come before the plan of salvation is fulfilled. See Matt. 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27.

- At one level, the darkness reflects the swarms that block the sun. At another level, the darkness reflects despair, the lack of the light of hope.

C. The prophet then speaks again of a devouring fire. This image could be an analogy for the locusts, or a description of another plague, in particular, a devastating heat or a sandstorm.

D. Joel then goes onto another analogy that of an invading army that systematically destroys everything in its path, or a consuming fire that no one can extinguish.

E. The vast disaster, or disasters, make it seem like the whole of the earth is falling apart, and even the lights of heaven no longer shine. The fact that the inspired word of God describes this terrified reaction indicates that the Holy Spirit is, through the prophet,

at work even in the most dreadful of circumstances.

F. Like Malachi will later do, Joel asks who can endure this day. See Mal. 3:1-2; see also Nahum 1:6 (describing the judgment on the Assyrian Empire.) Jesus later will prophesy of a time when, if it were not for the mercy of God, no one would survive. See Mark 13:20.

IV. But then there is, from God Himself, a dramatic call to conversion.

A. God tells the people that, in the midst of their suffering, if they turn to God, He will receive them back. The implication is that some grievous sin has caused these disasters and that sincere repentance will bring them to an end.

B. The prophet calls for a complete conversion, with one's whole heart, not merely an emotional display, such as rending one's garments.

- The idea is that the torn heart will be open to God's grace, as a self-satisfied whole heart will not be. Ezekiel also prophesies of God breaking the stone heart and replacing it with a natural heart. See Ez. 36:26; see also Ps. 51:12; Jer. 31:33, 32:39. Here, the prophet also emphasizes that the individual and the nation have their voluntary part to play. St. Paul will later speak of the love of God poured into the heart of those who trust in Him. See Rom. 5:5; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:16-17.

- Jesus will reiterate this notion of deep sincere repentance, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. See Matt. 6:1-18.

C. As Moses did of old, as the prophets constantly do, Joel also reminds the people that God is gracious and merciful, and will accept their sacrifice. See, e.g., Ex. 34:6-7; Duet. 30:1-11, Is. 1:18-19; Amos 5:15; Micah 7:18-20; Mal. 3:6-11. The words of Joel are similar to those of the king of Nineveh when Jonah preached of God's judgment there. See Jonah 3:9. There seems to be some doubt about what God will do, but the idea is likely to express that the forgiveness God promises is still His free choice. The prayers and repentance do not force His hand, but rather open the human heart to the favor He wishes to restore.

D. Once again, Joel calls for the trumpet to be blown, but this time for the successful effort of repentance and prayer. See also Lev. 25:9 (trumpet blasts on the Day of Atonement); Ps. 81:5 (a trumpet calling forth praise and repentance.)

E. All people without exception, even the infants and newlyweds, are to join in this repentance, with fasting and prayer. The joining of the whole people united in prayer will make their prayer powerful and open the way for God's favor. Cf. Esther 4:16. Likewise, the unity of Christians will be important for our prayers to be effective. See, e.g., John 17:20-23; Acts 4:32-35; 1 Cor. 1:1–17.

- The priests are summoned to lead this united worship, asking God to save His people that His covenant may not fail as a witness to the nations. It is a constant theme of the Bible that God would not allow His covenant to fail because to do so would diminish His glory before the world. See, e.g., Ex. 32:11-13, Num. 14:13-19; Ps. 79:10; 115:2; Esther C:22-23; Ez.36:22-23. This idea sounds somewhat impersonal, but the idea is that it is in God's plan of salvation that the Chosen People are to be His witnesses so that whole world will glorify Him, and that God will not let this plan fail. This appeal to the success of the covenant reflects more the objective notion of God's love, the insistence that the covenant will succeed. Elsewhere, the personal love of God for each unique person. See John Paul II, Dives in Misericordia (1980) f.n. 52.