

Lesson 1

Why study Joel?

Why should we study the book of Joel?

That's a good question to ask any time we embark on a detailed study of a book in the Bible, but our initial answer is always the same. We should study the book of Joel because it is part of the word of God!

There is no book in the Bible that does not merit our deep and intense study. Every book is vital to us. We can't skip over any of them and be pleasing to God! Why not?

One reason is provided by Paul.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 – All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

That phrase "all scripture" refers to the entire word of God, and so Paul tells us that the entire word of God makes us "complete."

With the Bible – the entire Bible – we have what we need to do the work that God has given us to do. With the

Bible – the entire Bible – we have what we need to be profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. That is what we have when we have “all scripture.”

But what if we don't have all scripture? What if we have only the Old Testament? Or what if we have only the New Testament? Or what if we have only the red letters? Or what if we have only our favorite books? Or what if we have only what we consider to be the easy books? Or what if we have only those verses from those books that prop up our pet theories about the Bible? Or what if we have only those verses that look good on a magnet stuck to our refrigerator door? Or perhaps only those verses that help us in “our day to day lives,” whatever that means!

If we do not have the entire Bible, then we are incomplete! That is what Paul tells us. That is an important reason for why we must study Joel and every other book in the Bible.

But there is still another reason why we must study Joel. We neglect any book of the Bible at our peril! Failing to consider the entire Bible is like walking through a minefield with a blindfold on! Why do I say that?

The entire Bible – “all scripture” – is breathed out by God, inspired by God. And we know that God's word is truth (John 17:17). We know that the sum of God's word is truth (Psalm 119:160).

And we know something very important about truth – truth cannot contradict itself.

That truth about truth is the basis of all logical thought. In fact, that law of contradiction is the foundation of all reasoning.

But what does it mean for our question? What does the law of contradiction have to say about the peril we face if we neglect any book in the Bible? Why does that logical law mean that I am walking blindfolded through a minefield if I neglect any book in the Bible?

It is this: my entire view about any subject in the Bible can be changed by any single verse in the Bible.

I may have the most elaborate theory about the Bible that anyone has every developed, and my elaborate theory may be based on hundreds of verses scattered all throughout the Bible – but if my elaborate theory is contradicted by a single verse somewhere in the Bible, then my elaborate theory is wrong.

It is God's word that is truth, not my theory. So if my theory contradicts God's word – the truth – then my theory is false.

Now, I should add a warning at this point. Yes, any single verse can change by view, but if my view is supported by many other verses in the Bible, then I need to be extremely careful when I interpret that single verse.

Premillennialism is a good example. That false doctrine views the entire Bible through the lens of a single verse in Revelation – but they have badly misinterpreted that verse!

Yes, God only has to say it once in a single verse for it to be truth, but we need to make sure that we are properly interpreting that single verse.

And after we have done that, what can I say? I can say that if my theory contradicts that one verse or any other verse in God's word – the truth – then my theory is false.

And what does that mean? What it means is that any ideas I have about the Bible must be in complete agreement with every single verse in the Bible – all 31,102 of them! If I ignore some of those verses, then those verses become mines in a minefield through which my theory about the Bible is walking!

Let me give you an example. Back in the 1990's, there was a movement in the church known as the "core gospel" movement. The thought was that we had been neglecting the four gospel books, and that we had instead been spending too much on other books (such as the epistles or the Old Testament).

First, the obvious point – warning bells need to start sounding very loudly any time someone tells us that our problem is that we have been studying the Bible too much!

And, second, as with most movements, this one quickly went to an extreme, and suddenly the "core gospel" movement became the "only gospel" movement in which, absent an opposing verse in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, anything and everything was permissible.

And what led to that movement? It came largely from a desire by some for women to assume leadership roles in the church.

Yes, Paul had some things to say about that topic in his epistles – but we don't find as much about that topic in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And so the thought was that we should just focus on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – and then we can do whatever we want without any interference from the Apostle Paul!

As I said, if we neglect any book in the Bible then we are walking through a minefield with a blindfold!

There are no books in the Bible that are so important that I can focus only on those books while neglecting the other books in the Bible. The entire Bible (“all scripture”) is the word of God – not just the red letters.

That's one example – but we have another example from the book we are about to study, Joel.

One of the most important days in the history of the world is described in Acts 2. That was the day when the Lord's church, his eternal kingdom, was established. That great event had been prophesied in Isaiah 2 and in Daniel 2, and it came to pass in Acts 2.

And that great day had also been prophesied in Joel 2. How do we know that? Because Peter told us.

In Acts 2:16, Peter told his listeners that “this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel.” And Peter then quoted Joel 2:28–32a. And what was a primary topic

in that prophecy? The Holy Spirit. "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."

Now, if ever there was an opportunity to walk off into the deep end of a pool, that is it! And let me say at the outset, I do not plan to walk off into that deep end. This is a class on Joel, not a class on the Holy Spirit. My plan is to consider only as much about the Holy Spirit as we need to understand the prophecy in Joel 2 and what it meant in Acts 2.

But, and here is the reason I bring this subject up now, we will need to keep in mind **everything** the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit if we want to correctly understand what Joel is saying about the Holy Spirit.

Yes, I plan to focus only on that one question – what did Joel tell us about the Holy Spirit – but I also plan to make sure that whatever we conclude about Joel does not contradict anything else we read in the Bible about the Holy Spirit. And we need to do that same thing with every other subject in the book of Joel.

And has anyone ever been guilty of doing otherwise when it comes to the Holy Spirit in the book of Joel? Yes, the charismatics have done that.

The charismatics often use Joel 2 as a proof text for their false views about spiritual gifts. They have even given themselves a name that comes from Peter's use of Joel 2 on the Day of *Pentecost* in Acts 2 – *Pentecostalism*.

But that's not a problem in the church, right? Wrong.

I once personally heard a preacher in the church claim from the pulpit that his words were coming to him straight from the Holy Spirit and that sometimes he felt like taking notes during his own sermons! I remember thinking at the time how odd it was that no one else felt like taking any notes.

So what am I saying? I am saying this: if we want to know the truth about the Holy Spirit, we cannot **neglect** Joel in favor of other books in the Bible, but neither can we **promote** Joel at the expense of other books in the Bible. And that is true of every subject in the Bible and of every book in the Bible.

And, so, to answer our question – why study the book of Joel – we have three answers so far.

First, it is the word of God.

Second, the entire Bible makes us complete, and so we are incomplete if we have only a part of the Bible.

And third, the law of contradiction tells us that we neglect any book in the Bible at our peril. Any single verse found anywhere in the Bible is enough to send our elaborate theories crashing to the ground if those theories are contradicted by that single verse.

And there is a fourth reason to study Joel – it is fascinating!

How many other books of the Bible can we name in which the main character seems to be an insect?

And how many other books of the Bible can we name that describe a single momentous memorable event in

the history of Judah that is so hard to date that the various theories about when it happened are up to 700 years apart!

Yes, it is a short book, but we have some work to do in figuring it out!

And there are many good reasons why we should spend the time required to do that right. There are many good reasons why we should all study the book of Joel and why we should all **want** to study the book of Joel!

What are the themes of Joel?

As we did with Hosea, our plan for understanding Joel is to dissect the book, skipping over nothing, but looking at every verse and every word.

But there is a danger with dissection – death. We kill what we dissect.

And if all we did was march word by word through Joel like locusts, then that deadly danger could easily become a reality. We could study every word of Joel in isolation, but end up missing the message of Joel.

The solution to that problem is to step back and look at the big picture.

Yes, we need to look at each word, but we also need to look at the book as a whole, and we need to look at how Joel fits into the entire Bible as a whole. We need to consider the big picture, without neglecting the details.

Historically, the big picture is shown on the handout for Lesson 1, but how and where does Joel fit into that big picture? Stay tuned...

As we did with Hosea, the best way to keep ourselves on the right track is to identify the themes of the book. Why was the book written? What was the message for the people who first read it? What is the message for us?

What are themes of Joel?

When we studied Hosea, we identified some themes before we studied the book in detail, and then we identified more themes as we slowly worked our way through each verse in the book.

Our plan is to do the same thing with Joel.

So, what then are the themes that we can easily identify just from a quick reading of the three chapters of Joel?

The Day of the Lord

One theme that jumps out immediately is **the Day of the Lord**.

Joel 1:15 – Alas for the day! For **the day of the LORD** is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Joel 2:1 – Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an 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 2:11 – The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For **the day of the LORD** is great and very awesome; who can endure it?

Joel 2:31 – The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome **day of the LORD** comes.

Joel 3:14 – Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For **the day of the LORD** is near in the valley of decision.

That phrase is found 25 times in the Bible. Of those 25 occurrences, five of them are found in Joel. That's 20% found in one very short book of the Bible.

And some of the other references to the Day of the Lord elsewhere in the Bible are pointing to Joel. Peter, for example, uses that phrase when he quotes Joel in Acts 2:20, and Malachi 4:5 also seems to be quoting Joel.

If we add in those references to Joel, then the short book of Joel is the source of nearly a third of all occurrences of the phrase "Day of the Lord" in the Bible.

That is what we call a theme!

Here is a Bible study tip. Whatever version of the Bible you use in your daily study (and I recommend either the KJV or the ESV), you should also have a copy of the ASV translation of 1901. It is a little hard to find in print, but Amazon is still selling copies. And if you can't find a paper copy, electronic copies are easy to find because the copyright has expired.

(You can find copies of Hosea and Joel from the ASV at www.StudyJoel.com.)

Why is the ASV helpful in Bible study? Because you will not find a translation that is better at using the same English word for the same Greek or Hebrew word. The language of the KJV is more beautiful, and the language of the ESV is more readable, but the ASV is more faithful to the original languages.

Why do I bring that up now? Well, let's read about the Day of the Lord from the ASV and see what we find.

Joel 1:15 – Alas for the day! for **the day of Jehovah** is at hand, and as destruction from the Almighty shall it come.

Joel 2:1 – Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain; let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for **the day of Jehovah** cometh, for it is nigh at hand.

Joel 2:11 – And Jehovah uttereth his voice before his army; for his camp is very great; for he is strong that executeth his word; for **the day of Jehovah** is great and very terrible; and who can abide it?

Joel 2:31 – The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible **day of Jehovah** cometh.

Joel 3:14 – Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! for **the day of Jehovah** is near in the valley of decision.

In the ESV, God is being referred to by a **title**, but in the original Hebrew, God is being referred to by his **name**.

The ESV changes the name of a God to a title for God, but we can't be critical of that change. Why not? Because Jesus did the same thing!

Deuteronomy 6:16 – [ASV] Ye shall not tempt **Jehovah** your God...

Matthew 4:7 – Jesus said unto him, Again it is written, Thou shalt not make trial of the **Lord** thy God.

One of the commentaries I read complained that by using "the Lord" in English, "*we depersonalize the name into a title,*" but that commentator had apparently failed to notice that when he wrote that he was also criticizing Jesus! We know from Matthew 4:7 that both the name of God (Jehovah in the ASV) and the title of God (Lord) are correct understandings of the Hebrew word.

But what is going on? Why did Jesus make that change in the New Testament? Why do modern versions make the same change in the Old Testament?

The original Hebrew word consists of four Hebrew consonants, which in English correspond to YHWH. Those four letters are called the Tetragrammaton or the Sacred Tetragrammaton.

Exodus 6:2-3 – And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am **Jehovah**: and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, as God Almighty; but by my **name Jehovah** I was not known to them.

The ESV changes both of those names to "Lord," and the KJV changes one of them to "Lord." As the ASV correctly shows us, both occurrences are the Tetragrammaton.

So, why the change from the name to the title?

Traditionally, the Jews did not pronounce the name of God. Why not? There are various possible reasons, but most likely it was to prevent the name from being used in vain or because they believed the name was imbued with a special spiritual force.

It is unclear whether the Tetragrammaton was spoken in antiquity but if it was, then it was probably pronounced "Yahweh."

Originally, the Hebrew text consisted of consonants, but later vowel marks were added by scribes to help people pronounce the Hebrew words.

So what did those scribes do with a word that was not to be pronounced? What they did was they added the vowel marks for another word – the Hebrew word *adonai*, meaning Lord. That word "Lord" was the word you were supposed to say when you pronounced the name of God, and so, to remind you, the scribes added the vowel marks for "Lord" to the Hebrew name for God.

Later, the KJV translators combined the Hebrew consonants for the name of God and the Hebrew vowel marks for the Hebrew word "Lord" to come up with the English word "Jehovah."

Here is how one source described what happened:

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, some Christian readers of printed Hebrew Bibles thought the vowels under the Tetragrammaton were the vowels for pronouncing the divine name and concluded, incorrectly, that it should be pronounced "Jehovah." This became

the standard rendering of YHWH in English literature. Most modern English translations, however, have followed the Jewish practice, rendering the name as “the LORD.”

The KJV uses the word “Jehovah” only four times, but the ASV uses that word 6889 times! That let’s us know just how often the name of God is found in the Old Testament. It is found 33 times just in the three chapters of Joel.

Why is that important? Because the **Day of the Lord** or the **Day of Jehovah** is a central theme – and perhaps **the** central theme – in the book of Joel.

But what does that theme mean? Is the Day of the Lord a single day or can it refer to multiple days? Either way, which day or days is it?

Let’s save those questions for later along with a more detailed study of the name of God, but for now let’s just be on the lookout for that important phrase as we study the book.

Restoration and Salvation

A second theme that jumps out from a quick read of Joel is the combined theme of repentance and restoration and salvation.

Joel 2:12-13 – “Yet even now,” declares 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**, for he is gracious

and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

Joel 2:25 – I will **restore** to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.

Joel 2:32 – And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be **saved**.

Joel 3:1 – For behold, in those days and at that time, when I **restore** the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem.

But who or what is being saved? And who or what is being restored? And when? Let's save those questions for later.

Calamity and Loss

And if repentance, restoration, and salvation is a theme, then we should not be surprised to find the opposite theme of calamity, loss, and death, and we do find that theme.

Joel 1:15 – Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Joel 2:1-2 – Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like

has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.

But what is the great calamity? And who is suffering this calamity and loss, and when? Let's save those questions for later.

Judgment

And we also see the closely related theme of judgment.

Joel 3:2 – 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 behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land.

But who is being judged? And when? Let's save those questions for later.

The Church

Another theme that we will find in the book of Joel is the church of Christ.

And how do we know that the church is a theme in Joel? Because Peter told us that it is when he quoted Joel 2 on the day that the church was established in Acts 2.

There is something in Joel that is crucial for us to understand what was happening centuries later on that great day of Pentecost when the eternal kingdom of Christ was established and the first gospel sermon went out from Jerusalem.

But what is it? Let's save that question for later.

The Covenant

When we studied Hosea, we found that his book was based largely on the covenant that existed between God and his people. The people had broken that covenant, and so now they were experiencing the curses of Deuteronomy 28 that God had told them would come to pass if they broke the covenant.

I think we will discover that the covenant is also a key theme in Joel, and I think we will also find that the book of Deuteronomy is as important to understanding Joel as it was to understanding Hosea.

So what themes have we seen so far?

- The Day of the Lord
- Restoration and Salvation
- Calamity and Loss
- Judgment
- The Church
- The Covenant

Those six themes are easy to spot, but there may be some others that are a little harder to see. Let's start with those themes and keep our eyes open for others.

Is Joel one book or multiple books?

That's a good question, but let's come back to it. Instead, let me ask a different question: how can I choose a good commentary on the book of Joel?

I have about 25 commentaries on Joel that I am using for these lessons, and some of them are good and some of them are bad.

But let me clarify what I mean by good and bad. I do not mean useful or useless. A bad commentary can be very useful by sometimes providing good thoughts or useful information about a particular verse or word.

So how then do I sort my commentaries into the good stack and the bad stack? I can usually do that by looking at the preface and the index.

The preface tells me the philosophy of the commentator. Does he or she believe in God? Does he or she believe that the Bible is the word of God? Does he or she believe the Bible is inspired and inerrant? If so, then that commentary goes in my good stack. Yes, I might end up disagreeing with most of their conclusions about the book, but I like how they approach it.

We can certainly reach a wrong conclusion even though we start from the right spot – but we are almost guaranteed to reach the wrong conclusion if we start from the wrong spot – and bad commentaries are bad because they start from the wrong spot. They reject the very first thing we read in Joel – that his book is “the word of the

Lord.” And we can often see that in the preface of their commentary.

And the index? The index will tell me the other verses in the Bible that the author cited in the commentary. For an Old Testament book, you should also ask how many of those citations are from the New Testament? If there are very few, then that commentary goes in the bad pile.

Believe it or not, but there are commentaries out there than have absolutely nothing to say about Acts 2 in their commentary on Joel 2. That is bad, bad, bad!

So, let’s get back to the question that started us off on this tangent: Is Joel one book or multiple books?

The book of Joel (in the very first verse) identifies Joel and tells us that this book is the word of the Lord that came to Joel.

So, is this book one book or many books? Did Joel or someone else perhaps receive and write the first two chapters, and then did someone else come along much later and write the third chapter?

If I believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, then my answer is no. My answer is that the book of Joel is what it tells me it is – the word of the Lord that came to a prophet named Joel.

So, if you pick up a commentary and it splinters the text into multiple parts all said to be written by a different person or if it somehow tries to explain Joel 2 without ever referring to Acts 2, then that commentary should go in your bad pile. You can still read it, and

likely get some useful information from it, but you shouldn't be surprised when it very often gets things completely wrong.