

Lesson 11

When we ended last week, we had a question about verse 18: why do we see this concern for the beasts, the cattle, and the sheep?

We know that God cares for the welfare of all of his creatures, but I think there is another even more important reason why see those animals in verse 18 – but let's save that second reason until we meet these beasts again in verse 20.

Joel 1:19

Joel 1:19 – To you, O LORD, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field.

In verse 18 we saw animal life. Here in verse 19 we see plant life. And as with the animals, the plants are also suffering. The pastures have been devoured, and the trees have been burned.

But before we look at those plants in verse 19, let's look at the opening phrase of verse 19. **“To you, O LORD, I call.”** There is something very important just beneath the surface in that short phrase – **idolatry.**

We haven't said anything so far about idolatry in our study of Joel, and the reason for that is simple: Joel hasn't said anything about idolatry (at least, so far) in his book.

But why not?

As we saw, Hosea had a lot to say about idolatry, even mentioning Baal by name several times. But not Joel. Why the difference?

Perhaps Joel doesn't mention idolatry because idolatry was not a big problem when the book of Joel was written.

But if that is the explanation, then when must the book have been written? When was idolatry not a big problem for Judah?

We could rule out the pre-exile date for Joel immediately because we know that idolatry was a major reason why the exile occurred.

Jeremiah 16:13,18 – Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.' ... But first I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of **their detestable idols**, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations."

I think we could also rule out the early date for Joel. Why? Because it was during the reign of Joash that the princes of Judah "abandoned the house of the LORD, the

God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols" (2 Chronicles 24:18).

So, if it were true that Joel failed to mention idolatry because idolatry was not a big problem when Joel was written, then we could rule out the early date and the pre-exile date.

But what about the post-exile date? That date might work. Why? Because idolatry was never the problem after the Babylonian exile that it had almost always been prior to the exile.

Jeremiah 50:38 describes Babylon as "a land of images" and the Babylonians as "mad over idols." The people of Judah wanted idols – and so God gave them idols. As we have said, sometimes the worst punishment is when God gives us what we want! That happened with Judah, and it seems to have largely cured them of their idolatry.

So, does that mean the book of Joel has a post-exile date? No, not necessarily.

It would likely mean that **if** we could prove that Joel failed to mention idolatry because idolatry was no longer a big problem – but there are two problems with trying to prove that.

First, as we will soon see with verse 19, it is not clear at all that Joel did in fact fail to address idolatry.

And, second, there is another possible explanation (other than the explanation that idolatry was not a big problem) for why Joel either failed to mention

idolatry or perhaps just failed to say very much about idolatry.

Before we look at whether Joel did, in fact, say something about idolatry, let's look at that second issue – why else might Joel have failed to say much about idolatry?

We could expand that question a bit – why? Because idolatry is not the only sin that Joel fails to say very much about. In fact, when it comes to sin, Joel is pretty short on specifics.

Yes, the locusts came as a punishment, but a punishment for what? And, yes, the people needed to repent, but repent for having done what?

We today don't know for sure – but there was a group who did know for sure. The people who first heard this message from Joel certainly knew what they had done. They knew whether they had been idolatrous. They knew whether they had been complacent. They knew whether they had just been going through the motions in their worship of God.

And perhaps the reason why Joel doesn't list all of those sins is simply because his listeners already knew what they had done – and Joel did not feel the need to rub their faces in it given the terrible trauma they had just endured. Perhaps the mercy of God for suffering people is the reason why we do not find a list of sins in the book of Joel.

And if the people really wanted to see such a list, they could find one in Deuteronomy 28. That chapter de-

scribes exactly what was happening to them and explains the reason why it was happening to them.

But let's now get back to our first question: did Joel really fail to say anything at all about idolatry?

We still have most of the book ahead of us, but perhaps we can answer that question right now. Why? Because, I think verse 19 begins with a subtle reference to idolatry.

"To you, O LORD, I call."

In the original Hebrew, there is an important emphasis in that sentence.

If we want to emphasize something today in an English sentence, we would likely use vocal stress for a spoken sentence or punctuation for a written sentence.

- "I am **glad** you are here."
- "I am glad **you** are here."
- "I am glad you are **here**."

But we don't usually start moving words around the in our sentence. "Here, I am glad you are!"

Biblical Hebrew is different – it often denotes emphasis by the word order that it uses. Hebrew has a flexible syntax that allows words to more easily be moved around in a sentence.

In English, the usual order of a sentence is Subject-Verb-Object.

In Hebrew, the usual order of a sentence is Verb-Subject-Object.

But Hebrew can change that order to Object-Verb-Subject when needed to emphasize the object or to Subject-Verb-Object when needed to emphasize the subject.

We see that here in verse 19 with the opening phrase, which (as it turns out) has the same word ordering in Hebrew as in our English translation: to you, O Lord, I call. Not "I call to you, O Lord," but rather "**to you**, O Lord, I call."

If we were say that today with the same emphasis in mind, we could say, "I call **to you**, O Lord." And if I said that in that way, what question would immediately come to your mind? Who else would you call to? Who else were others calling to?

So why do we see the emphasis on the phrase "to you" in verse 19? I think the only answer is that some of the people were calling to someone else. And so Joel says, "**to you**, O Lord, I call."

And who was this other entity to which some of the people were calling?

The strongest candidate is Baal. Baal was considered the god of fertility. Baal was considered the god of rain. And so, now that both fertility and rain had been cut off, the natural inclination of some and perhaps many would be to call to Baal to send rain and restore fertility.

To Baal, they called. And so Joel says, "**To you**, O lord, I call!"

As we said earlier, if Joel says nothing about idolatry, then that third post-exile option looks better than the other two for when Joel was written.

But, if we are correct that Joel's word ordering here in verse 19 is an indirect attack against idolatry in general and against Baal in particular, then that third post-exile options does not look very good at all. Why not? Because, as we said, idolatry was not a big problem after the exile.

So where are we on the dating issue?

In my opinion, verse 19 does include an implied attack against Baal worship, and so, in my opinion, we have another reason (in addition to the word "near" in verse 15) to cast serious doubt on a post-exile date for the book of Joel.

But, again, for now let's keep all three options on the table.

Verse 19 continues: **"For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field."**

In verse 18, we saw animal life, but here in verse 19 we see plant life. And as with the animals, the plants are also suffering.

So far in chapter 1, we have seen locusts, and we have seen a drought. Are we also seeing a terrible fire here in verse 19?

Perhaps, but I don't think so. Instead, I think we are seeing the locusts again here in verse 19.

Let's think back to that 1915 *National Geographic* article that we looked at for Lesson 5 (and that is still available at www.studyjoel.com).

That article included a photo of an olive orchard that showed how it looked after the locust invasion, and here is what the caption for that photo said:

The natives all spoke of how the orchards looked as if they had been attacked by fire, calling to mind Joel's words, "The flame hath burned all the trees of the field." (Joel 1:19)

I think what destroyed the pastures and the trees in verse 19 was the locust invasion, and I think the devastation caused by those spreading locusts is described in verse 19 exactly as it appeared to those who witnessed its aftermath – like destruction caused by a spreading fire.

Before we leave verse 19, I think we should pause and note an important lesson for us today. When this terrible crisis came, Joel called out to God.

To whom do we call? Do we call out to God in times of trial and trouble, or do we blame God in times of trial and trouble?

Trials are a test of our faith.

James 1:12 – Blessed is the man who remains **steadfast under trial**, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

1 Peter 4:12 – Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you **to test you**, as though something strange were happening to you.

Trials test our faith. Trials can tell us whether our faith is fragile or firm. Trials can tell us whether we are unreliable or steadfast.

Am I a follower of Christ **when** the going gets rough – or am I a follower of Christ **until** the going gets rough? We know what Jesus demands.

Luke 9:23 – And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Revelation 2:10 – Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. **Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

Am I doing that – not just being faithful, but being faithful unto death. Is that the road I’m on?

We find out the answer to that question when we face trials and tribulations. We learn about our faith when our faith is tested. And God also sees what our faith is like.

Genesis 22:10–12 – Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, **for now I know** that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

For now I know! Abraham was tested, and Abraham passed the test. And here, Joel was tested, and Joel passed the test.

And what about me? What about us? Will we pass the test when the trials and trouble come? Will our faith grow, or will our faith shrink?

Hebrews 10:38-39 – But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

We have a song about such a faith:

Oh, for a faith that will not shrink,
Though pressed by every foe,
That will not tremble on the brink
Of any earthly woe!
That will not murmur nor complain
Beneath the chast'ning rod,
But, in the hour of grief or pain,
Will lean upon its God.
A faith that shines more bright and clear
When tempests rage without;
That when in danger knows no fear,
In darkness feels no doubt.
Lord, give me such a faith as this,
And then, whate'er may come,
I'll taste, e'en here, the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.

Am I the only one who misses singing songs like that!

Joel 1:20

Joel 1:20 – Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.

In verse 18 we saw animals suffering, and in verse 19 we saw plants suffering. Now in verse 20 we again see both animals and plants suffering.

The beasts of the field are panting because the springs have dried up, and the pastures are devoured by the fire, which, as we said, is likely a description of the devastation left behind by the locusts.

What is going on in these closing verses of chapter 1? Where are the people? Why do we see this focus on plants and animals?

As we said before, we know that God is concerned about the animals that he created, and I think the same could be said for the plants. God created them, and so God does not want to see them suffering or being destroyed for no reason.

But I think there is something deeper than that going on here. I think there is a reason why we see in these three verses a focus on the animals and the natural world instead of the focus we might have expected – a focus on the suffering of the people and on the cessation of the temple offerings.

And what is that reason? I think that these closing verses of chapter 1 are showing us a breakdown of the created order. The animals are dying, and the plants

are dying. The good order of seed time and harvest has been disrupted. It is as if creation itself is being reversed.

The animals were created on the sixth day – but now the animals are suffering and dying.

The plants were created on the third day – but now the plants are suffering and dying.

God created order out of chaos on the first day, but now chaos is returning.

We are seeing an undoing of what God had done.

But why? Why do I think that what we are seeing here is an undoing of God's creation? Because we will see that same theme again later in Joel.

Joel 2:10 – The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

Joel 3:15 – The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

And we see that same theme with other days of the Lord in the Bible (as shown on the handout for Lesson 9).

Amos 5:18 – Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light.

Zephaniah 1:3 – “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

Those verses are all describing an undoing of what God did when he created this world. Is it literal? No, it is not.

Yes, God once literally undid his creation with a great flood so that he could start over. And, yes, God will one day destroy his creation on that last great day of 2 Peter 3:12. But this destruction of the creation in Joel is not a literal dismantling of the world.

Instead, what we are seeing here is something we see elsewhere with the day of the Lord in the Bible – we are seeing the great upheaval of that day described with cosmic, universal language.

Isaiah 13 is a good example of that. That chapter is describing the judgment of Babylon at the hands of the Medes (Isaiah 13:17), an event that occurred in Daniel 5.

And how did God view that judgment of Babylon?

Isaiah 13:9–10,13 – Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. ... Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

What did God do with Babylon? He dismantled their world, and he started over with the Medes and the Persians. God had created their world, and God destroyed what he had

created. That is how God saw it. And how do we know that? We know that because Isaiah 13 tells us that.

Likewise in Joel, I think we see God figuratively dismantling and destroying what he had created. The people, the animals, the plants, the sun, the moon, and the stars – we have seen or we will see all of them destroyed or hidden by God in this short book of Joel.

And what does that show us? It shows those things no longer performing their intended function.

- The people were here to worship God, but the temple offerings have been cut off.
- The animals were here to serve and feed the people and to be offered to God, but the animals are groaning and panting and dying.
- The plants were here to feed the people and be offered to God, but the plants have been devoured by the locusts and have dried up in the drought.
- The sun and the moon and the stars were here to light man's world, to keep the days and the seasons, and to show us the power and divinity of God, but now those lights are darkened.

And what is the message of all that?

I think it is the same message we saw with Babylon. When God's creation is no longer serving its intended function, God will dismantle that creation and start over.

We see that all throughout the Bible.

- God literally did that with the great flood.
- God will someday literally do that again when Jesus comes to claim his own and to judge and destroy the world of the ungodly.
- But we also saw God do that figuratively to Babylon in Isaiah 13.
- And I think we see that happening again in Acts 2 when God replaces the kingdoms of men with the eternal kingdom of Christ (Daniel 2:44).
- And we certainly see that in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 that Jesus described in Matthew 24.

Listen to the language Jesus used:

Matthew 24:29 – Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

But isn't that the end of the world? No, it is not. We know it is not. How do we know that? We know that because when we read Matthew 24 we didn't stop at verse 29. We also read verse 34 of that same chapter.

Matthew 24:34 – Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Matthew 24 is another example of what we are seeing here in Joel and of what we see in Isaiah 13 and elsewhere in the Bible. When something is no longer serving its intended purpose, God dismantles its world and starts

over. In Isaiah 13, it was Babylon. In Matthew 24, it was Jerusalem.

But if we start applying each example of that in the Bible to the end of the world, then we will quickly make a mess of the entire Bible! Just ask any premillennialist!

They like to tell us that they take everything in the Bible literally. Isaiah 13 told us that the earth would be shaken out of its place and the stars would not give their light when Babylon was conquered by the Medes. Did that literally happen? We have studied all about that event in Daniel 5 – does anyone remember the world ending in Daniel 5? I don't. As I have said, a little common sense goes a long way in the study of the Bible.

One more point about verse 20 before we move on to chapter 2.

There is an incredibly beautiful phrase here that we must not overlook: “Even the beasts of the field pant **for you.**”

These beasts of the field are not panting for water – they are panting for God! Yes, we can be certain that they were thirsty for water, but verse 20 tells us they were thirsty for God!

These animals knew something that many of the people did not. They knew that they had been created by God and that their deliverance could come only from God. We are reminded of some equally beautiful verses from the Psalms.

Psalms 104:21 – The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.

Psalms 84:3 – Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

Psalms 148:7 – Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!

Yes, we are seeing some poetry here, but isn't it a beautiful picture? All of God's creation looking to God for food and for rest? All of God's creation thirsting for God?

It is a beautiful poetic picture, but it is more than just poetry. It is a prophecy of the new creation; it is a prophecy of the church.

Revelation 7:15-17 – Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

But that is just talking about blessings for the church in heaven after the end of the world, right? No. I don't think so. I think it certainly includes those blessings that we will experience after the world ends,

but I don't think it is limited to those blessings. I think it also includes blessings for God's people right here and right now.

What did Isaiah prophecy?

Isaiah 49:8-10 – Thus says the LORD: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; **they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them**, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

That sounds a lot like Revelation 7:16, doesn't it? In fact, it is almost a word for word quote. And when was that promise from Isaiah 49 fulfilled? Paul tells us.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2 – Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

What Paul is telling us there is that the prophecy from Isaiah 49 (which he quotes) was pointing to the salvation that came through Jesus Christ. **Now is the time! Now is the day!**

And didn't Jesus tell us the same thing?

John 6:35 – I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

If we are hungering and thirsting today, God can remove that hunger and God can quench that thirst. “Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

And when can we receive that great blessing? “Behold, now is the day of salvation!” Yes, we will enjoy these blessings in heaven, but we can also enjoy them now in Christ Jesus! Now is the day!

Do we know where to go when we are hungering and thirsting? In verse 20 even the animals know the answer to that question. Do we?

Matthew 5:6 – Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Introduction to Joel 2

What is the greatest day in the history of the world?

While there are multiple candidates for that honor, there is one thing we can say with absolute certainty about each of those candidates – they each involve Jesus! Whether we are looking for the greatest day or the greatest days in the world’s history, we know that day or those days will all be a day of the Lord!

- Perhaps it is the day when Jesus was born.

- Or perhaps it is the day of the transfiguration.
- Or perhaps it is the day when Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross.
- Or perhaps it is the day when Jesus arose from the grave.
- Or perhaps it is the day when Jesus ascended back to the Father.
- Or perhaps it is the day yet to come when Jesus will return to claim his own and judge this world.

Those are all certainly among the greatest days in the history of the world, and they all involve something Jesus did or will do, but there is one more great day in the history of this world that we must not forget: the day described in Acts 2 on which the eternal kingdom of Christ was established.

What can we say about that great day?

That great day is described all throughout the Bible, and so we can say many things – but one thing we can say about that great day is the same thing that Peter stood up and proclaimed when that great day occurred.

Acts 2:14–24 – But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. **But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:** *‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters*

shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

“But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel.”

Peter quoted Joel on that great day and told his listeners that **this** is **that**. But what is this? And what is that?

We will save those and other questions until we get to that great prophecy at the end of Joel 2, but, for our purposes now, we can say that Peter's statement in Acts 2 tells us something very important about Joel 2 – Joel 2 is one of the great “church chapter 2's” of the Bible!

The handout for Lesson 11 lists twelve such chapters. Acts 2 describes the day on which the church was es-

tablished. And each of the other chapter 2's contains either a prophecy about the establishment of the church (such as Joel 2) or contains a beautiful description of the church after its establishment.

Can we conclude anything from the fact that these great descriptions of the church are all in a **second** chapter in the Bible? Is there some figurative meaning of the number two?

Yes, the number 2 is sometimes used figuratively in the Bible, but no, that is not what is going on here. We know that because, except for the Psalms, the other books the Bible were not divided into numbered chapters until long after they were written. (And, technically, the Psalms are not chapters.)

But I do think there is something we can conclude from the fact that so many books in the Bible discuss the church in their second chapter – I think we can conclude that the church must be extremely important in God's plan of redemption.

God has many things to tell us in the books of the Bible shown on the handout – but, in each case, one of the very first things God tells us is something wonderful about the church! It is as if God can't wait to tell us about it!

- There are 150 Psalms, but we don't get past the second Psalm before we read about God's holy hill, which is the church.

- There are 66 chapters in Isaiah, but we don't get past the second chapter of Isaiah before we read about the mountain of the LORD, which is the church.
- There are 12 chapters in Daniel, but we don't get past the second chapter of Daniel before we read about the stone that was cut from a mountain by no human hand, which is the church.
- We just studied the 14 chapters of Hosea, but we didn't get past the second chapter of Hosea before we read about God's promise that "I will betroth you to me forever," which is a prophecy about the church.

It seems that God never misses an opportunity to talk about the church.

Do we? Do we emphasize the church as much as God does in the Bible? Is the church at the top of things for us to talk about, or is the church at the bottom of our list?

Are we embarrassed by the church? Are we afraid that we might offend a member of some man-made church if we were to talk about the one church made without human hands?

If that is our view of the church, then we need to understand that it is most certainly not God's view of the church.

God tells us something about the church in every book of the Bible – and God very often does that near the very beginning of those books.

The denominations around us downplay the significance of the church. Do we? Are we following their example, or are we following God's example?

- The church is the blood-bought body of Christ.
- The church is the eternal kingdom of Christ.
- The church is the household and dwelling place of God.
- The church is the beautiful bride of Christ.

That is how God sees the church. Is that how we see the church? If not, then we need to open our Bibles – and Joel 2 is a good place to start!

We need to be distinctive in a world of religious confusion, and if we want the Lord's church to be seen as different from the man-made churches that surround us, then the first thing we need to do is proclaim to the world what the Bible teaches about the one church that Christ established.

If we see ourselves as just another church on the block, then that is all we will ever be. But that is not God's plan for the kingdom of his beloved Son.