

Lesson 3

Is there a lesson for us in the book of Joel?

We know that there are lessons for us in Joel. Why? Because there are lessons for us in every book of the Old Testament, and that includes the book of Joel.

The Apostle Paul tells us that.

Romans 15:4 – For **whatever** was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

And Peter also tells us that, especially with regard to the books of prophecy such as Joel.

2 Peter 1:19 – And we have **the prophetic word** more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

What do those verses from Peter and Paul tell us about Joel?

- They tell us that Joel was written for our instruction.

- They tell us that Joel was written for our encouragement.
- They tell us that Joel was written so that we might have hope.
- They tell us that Joel should be to us like a lamp shining in a dark place.

So, yes, there are most certainly lessons for us in the book of Joel! But what are they? What lessons can we learn from Joel?

We can learn lessons from Joel about times of trouble for the people of God.

When the book of Joel opens, the people of Judah and Jerusalem are reeling from a terrible disaster that was worse than anything they had experienced in their collective memory (Joel 1:2). In fact, the disaster was so bad that it prevented the daily offerings in the temple (Joel 1:13).

And what was that terrible disaster? It was an invasion of locusts. And when we get to chapter 1 we will look at just how devastating such an invasion can be.

But, as bad as that way, it was not the only trouble the people faced. Depending on when we date the book, other troubles would come later or had already come in the form of invasions from Assyria and Babylon.

Those were the troubles for God's people in Joel's day, and they were terrible troubles.

And today? What are the troubles today? Pandemics, hurricanes, wildfires, economic turmoil, terrorism, crime, violence, war, and on and on.

In fact, as we study Joel in 2024, we are aware of a very recent modern-day parallel. As with the locusts in Joel's day, the Covid crisis in our own day was unlike anything we could remember and interfered with our worship services. Both of those things were also true about the troubles we will see in Joel.

There are two constants when it comes to troubles in this life. First, we will always face them, and second, we can always turn to God for help when those troubles come – and I think that both of those important lessons from Joel are also important lessons for us today.

And, of course, we see that all throughout the Bible.

Psalms 37:39 – The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble.

Isaiah 33:2 – O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble.

And we will see that in Joel.

Joel 2:12 – “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.

When troubles come we should turn to God, and, when we do, we will find hope and comfort in God's great love and in God's great promises.

God has a plan for us that goes far beyond whatever troubles we may face in this life. That was a message in Joel for the people of Joel's day – and this is a message in Joel for the people of our own day.

Another lesson we can learn from the Joel is the importance and possibility of restoration.

One of the most beautiful promises in the Bible is found in the second chapter of Joel.

Joel 2:25 – I will restore to you **the years** that the swarming locust has eaten...

Yes, God can restore time! That wonderful promise reminds us of what Jesus said in Luke 18.

Luke 18:27 – And he said, The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.

We cannot restore time, but God can!

And we also find restoration in the opening chapters of the book of Acts, which we know are very closely related to the book of Joel.

Acts 1:6 – So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time **restore** the kingdom to Israel?"

Yes, that question is often described as a display of ignorance by the apostles, but that is not correct at all. There is nothing wrong with that question, and Jesus never says otherwise (beyond his comment about the timing of its fulfillment). In fact, Peter in the very next chapter explains how it was fulfilled – the kingdom was restored to Israel when Jesus sat down to rule the world from the throne of King David (Acts 2:30). That throne had been unoccupied for centuries, but that throne was restored by Christ.

We also see a restoration in the next chapter of Acts.

Acts 3:21 – Whom heaven must receive until the time for **restoring** all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.

Joel teaches us about both the *importance* of restoration and the *possibility* of restoration.

Yes, the troubles will come, but yes, we can be made new! God can restore what we have lost – even if what we have lost is time! “I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten.”

Another lesson we can learn from the Joel is the certainty of judgment.

Whatever troubles we face in this life, there is one thing we should always remember – the Day of the Lord is coming! God will have the final word.

The Day of the Lord is perhaps the central theme of Joel, and it is certainly a timeless lesson from the book of Joel.

The world does not like to think about God. The world believes that it is in charge of things, and the world does not ever like to be reminded that it is not.

Peter described the attitude of such people.

2 Peter 3:3-4 – Knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

And Peter also told us about what was coming for such scoffers – complete destruction of their world and of their works.

2 Peter 3:9-10 – The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But **the day of the Lord** will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

And did you catch it? Did you notice how Peter described that event? He called it **the day of the Lord**! No Jew could ever use that phrase or hear that phrase without thinking of the prophet Joel!

What is the day of the Lord? Is it a one-time event or can multiple events be called the day of the Lord? And what does it mean for a day to be the day of the Lord?

Let's save those questions for later, but for now the lesson for us is this – whether or not there have been days of the Lord in the past, one thing is certain: the day of the Lord is coming! That is what Joel told us and that is also what Peter told us. Judgment is coming! God will have the final word!

And what must we do in response to that great truth? Peter also told us that.

2 Peter 3:11–12 – Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of **the day of God**, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!

We know that Peter was thinking about Joel in Acts 2. I think Peter was also thinking about Joel in 2 Peter 3, and I think we will see these same lessons in the book of Joel.

Another lesson we can learn from Joel is the need for us to always have a Biblical worldview.

What do I mean by that? Here is how one commentary explains it:

“The Bible calls upon readers to accept its world as their world. It is not content simply to speak to us or allow us to pick and choose

from among its ideas in an eclectic fashion. Rather, it demands that we see the world as it sees it and interpret events accordingly. Joel, in his treatment of a locust plague in the context of biblical theology, has modeled this kind of thinking.”

Whatever happens in this world, we must see it through a Biblical lens. Joel provides a good lesson for us about how that is done.

Yes, the locusts came, and yes, it was a very horrible event that must have been terribly frightening to all who saw those insects darken the sky.

But when viewed through a Biblical lens, those terrible locusts looked very different. And I think Joel was calling upon the people to see them differently.

Those locusts were a warning of coming judgments, and those those locusts were also a reminder of the people’s need for God and of the promises of God.

Likewise, today, when our own locusts come we need to see them through a Biblical lens. We need to see them in light of the big picture, and the only way we can know the big picture is by studying the word of God.

We cannot close our ears to the word of God and expect to have a Biblical worldview. That was a lesson for God’s people in Joel’s day, and that is a lesson for God’s people in any day.

Another lesson we can learn from Joel is the role of the church in world history.

We know that the book of Joel includes a prophecy about the church because Peter told us that in Acts 2:16 on the day the church was established.

And we also know that Joel speaks of a day when God would gather all nations for 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...

Joel 3:11-12 – Hasten and come, **all you surrounding nations**, and gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD. Let **the nations** stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge **all the surrounding nations**.

Joel 3:20-21 – But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the LORD dwells in Zion.

Now that's interesting. Why? Because there is another verse in the Bible that talks about both of those same things – the establishment of the church and the judgment of the nations.

Daniel 2:44 – And in the days of those kings the God of heaven **will set up a kingdom** that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall **break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end**, and it shall stand forever.

We will have much more to say about Joel 3 when get there, but for now I think we can safely say that there are some great lessons about the church of Christ in the pages of Joel.

We just looked at the book of Daniel – let's briefly consider its counterpart in the New Testament.

Is the book of Joel related to the book of Revelation?

We just saw a connection between the book of Joel and the book of Daniel. Is there also a connection between the book of Joel and the book of Revelation?

Yes, I think so. As with the book of Joel, the book of Revelation was also written at a time when the people of God were suffering a terrible trial.

Initially, Rome ignored the church, seeing it only as a branch of Judaism, but that all changed after Christians were cast out of the synagogues and after the church began proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. By the time Revelation was written, Rome was actively persecuting Christians.

What did those suffering Christians need to hear? Two things – they needed to hear a message of comfort, and they needed to hear a message of victory. And, not surprisingly, the combination of those two messages is the theme of Revelation: **Fear not! We win!**

And what is the message of Joel? **Fear not! We win!**

And however one dates the book of Revelation or the book of Joel, that message is timeless! That is a message that we all need to hear all the time! **Fear not! We win!**

That is one big similarity between Joel and Revelation, but are there any others? I think so.

In both Joel and Revelation we find locusts.

Joel 1:4 – 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.

Revelation 9:3 – Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth.

In both Joel and Revelation we find apocalyptic language.

Joel 2:10 – The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

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

Revelation 6:12-13 – When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

In both Joel and Revelation we find a great northern army arrayed against the people of God.

Joel 2:20 – “I will remove **the northerner** far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his vanguard into the eastern sea, and his rear guard into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things.

Revelation 20:7-8 – And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, **Gog and Magog**, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.

Ezekiel 38:14-15 – Therefore, son of man, prophesy, and **say to Gog**, Thus says the Lord GOD: On that day when my people Israel are dwelling securely, will you not know it? **You will come from your place out of the uttermost parts of the north**, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great host, a mighty army.

And in both Revelation and Joel, we find the number four.

Revelation 7:1 – After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.

Revelation 9:13-14 – Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.”

And we also have four beasts in Revelation 13:1-2. When we studied Daniel 7:3-7, we discovered that those four beasts were Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

We will also see hints of the number four in our study of Joel. We will see four kinds of locusts in Joel 1:3, and we will see four groups addressed by Joel in Joel 1.

Is that just a coincidence, or should we look a bit deeper when we see that number four? And why four? What is the significance of four? And is that similar language from Joel and Revelation all describing the same thing or different things? Let's save all of these questions for later!

What is the structure of Joel?

I think we should answer that question as we study the text, but I think it would be helpful to briefly consider the main headings of the book before we begin.

And, although we might find ourselves disagreeing with this initial outline a bit as we work through the book, I think we can spot at least these potential sections.

First, we see a locust plague in Judah, and that invasion of locusts is described as the day of the Lord and as a time for repentance.

Second, the locust invasion of the land is seemingly transformed into an image of a northern army sacking Jerusalem.

Third, we see repentance and restoration as the means of healing. Rains restore the land, and the northern army is destroyed.

Fourth, the image of rain falling upon the land is transformed into an image of the Spirit being poured out on all people.

And finally, God's fury falls upon the Gentile nations in retribution for their hatred of God's people.

Most commentaries agree that there some key pivot points in the book of Joel where Joel goes from discussing one thing to instead discussing something else. But there is a lot of disagreement about where those pivot points are located. A good exercise for us is to think about that question as we read the book of Joel each week – where are the pivot points?

Yes, Joel is a short book, but it is an action-packed book! Let's get started!

Joel 1:1

Joel 1:1 – The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

The opening words of the book of Joel are the most important words in the book of Joel – “the word of the Lord.”

If this book were just the word of Joel, then there would be no reason for us to spend much time on it. It

might be interesting, but at the end of the day it would just be a book of Joel's opinions.

But the book of Joel is not the word of Joel; the book of Joel is the word of God. And we might be surprised how many commentaries miss this all-important point about the book of Joel. But we will not miss that point – this book of Joel is the word of God that came to Joel.

Let's pause and look at that phrase: "the word of the Lord."

If you are using the ESV or the KJV, you might notice that the word "LORD" is written with all capital letters. That typographic convention is how those translations let us know that the Hebrew word translated "Lord" is the name of God, which we usually pronounce as Yahweh or Jehovah. We talked about the name of God in our introduction when we discussed the Day of the LORD or the Day of Jehovah.

There are four common Hebrew words used to refer to God in the Old Testament, and we can find them all in a single verse.

Deuteronomy 10:17 – For the **LORD** your **God** is God of gods and **Lord** of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome **God**...

In that one verse we find the name of God (Yahweh or Jehovah, translated LORD with all capital letters), the word "Lord" (with lower case letters) (Hebrew *adon* or *adonay*), and two words translated "God" (Hebrew *elohim* in the first and second occurrence and Hebrew *el* in the final occurrence). And so in the ESV those four

different Hebrew words for God are translated as two different English words.

The ASV uses three English words for the four Hebrew words:

Deuteronomy 10:17 – For Jehovah your God, he is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God...

Which word do we find in Joel 1:1? The book of Joel opens in the Hebrew by declaring that it is the Word of Yahweh or (as in the ASV) the Word of Jehovah.

What does the use of God's name in verse 1 tell us about the book of Joel? Two things: the use of God's name tells us something about God's **redemption** and tells us something about God's **retribution**.

First, God's name tells us something about redemption. The use of God's name in verse 1 shows us the special relationship that exists between God and those who had been redeemed by God and placed in a special covenant relationship with God.

We saw that special relationship characterized as a marriage in our study of Hosea. It is an intimate relationship characterized by a special knowledge and by a special bond.

The name of God always had special significance to those in a covenant relationship with God.

Exodus 3:14-15 [ASV] – And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children

of Israel, **Jehovah**, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.

Exodus 20:2-3 [ASV] – I am **Jehovah** thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

This special covenant relationship explains a puzzling verse in Exodus 6.

Exodus 6:2-3 [ASV] – 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.**

And why is that verse from Exodus 6 puzzling? Because of what we read much earlier in Genesis 4.

Genesis 4:26 – And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enosh. **Then began men to call upon the name of Jehovah.**

If Adam's children and grandchildren were calling upon the name of Jehovah in Genesis 4, then what did God mean in Exodus 6:3 when he told Moses that "by my name Jehovah I was not known to them"?

The answer is the covenant. In fact, that is what God says in the very next verse.

Exodus 6:4 – And I have also established **my covenant** with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, wherein they sojourned.

The name of God was known prior to Moses, but the character expressed by that name was not.

God had not previously made himself known in that special covenant relationship that he shared with his people. "By my name Jehovah I was not known to them."

We know that names in the Bible are often used to denote a person's status. We see that with Jesus, for example, in Revelation 19.

Revelation 19:12-13 – His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, **and he has a name written that no one knows but himself.** He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, **and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.**

In verse 12 we are told that Jesus "has a name written that no one knows but himself," but in the very next verse we are told that "the name by which he is called is The Word of God." What does that mean? How can it be that no one knows a name when that name is given for all to see in the very next verse?

The answer, as we said, is that names in the Bible are often used to denote a person's status. When one's status changed, his name was changed. We are reminded, for example, of Abram, Jacob, and Saul.

To have a name that no one else can know means that you have a status that no one else can share. That is what Revelation 19:12 means. Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, and no one else can share that status.

Roman emperors were a dime a dozen, but there is only one Christ. Only Jesus can wear the name, The Word

of God. Only about Jesus can it be said that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). “For there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Jesus is unique!

And so, when God told Moses in Exodus 6 that “by my name Jehovah I was not known to them,” Moses was being told that there was something about God that had not been revealed earlier – something about the status of God or the character of God that they did not know but that had now been revealed to them.

And that something was the special covenant relationship between God and the people of God.

Leviticus 26:44–45 [ASV] – And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them; for I am **Jehovah** their God; but I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am **Jehovah**.

This opening phrase in Joel 1:1 – the word of Jehovah – would, for a faithful Jew, bring this all to mind.

This was the word of God Almighty – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This was the word of Jehovah, who loved his people as a husband love his wife, and who redeemed and delivered his people from Egyptian bondage.

And, so, in verse 1 we see God's **redemption** of his people.