

Lesson 7

Joel 1:11-12

Joel 1:11-12 – Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.

We have now reached the third of the four groups specifically addressed in the first chapter of Joel. Earlier, in verses 2 and 5, we saw elders and drunkards. Later in verse 13 we will see priests. Here in verse 11 we see farmers.

Again, we are still wondering why these four groups. What do they have in common? Let's continue to save that question until we get to the final group in verse 13.

Verse 11 addresses both of the common categories of farming the time: horticulture (tillers of the soil) and viticulture (vinedressers).

And Joel likewise lists all of the common categories of crops at the time: wheat, barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranate, palms, and apples.

There is some doubt about whether the Jews had apples as we know them, and so many say that the word translated “apple” in verse 12 refers instead to an apricot.

And, yes, I know we usually think of Eve eating an apple, but the Bible never identifies the fruit that she ate. (The idea that the fruit was an apple is so deeply embedded that the Latin word for “apple” is “malum,” meaning “evil” – but maybe Eve ate an apricot!)

The appearance of the pomegranate here is interesting. Why? Because we see images of that fruit so often in the decorations of the tabernacle and the temple and on the garments of the high priest. And the early blossoming of the pomegranate was one of the signs of the arrival of spring.

Song of Solomon 7:12 – Let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom.

But now the pomegranates were gone, and so there would be no sign of spring. The only pomegranates that the people would see now would be the metal variety that they could still see in the temple as a reminder of the blessings they had once enjoyed.

We are told here that the vine dries up and that the trees are dried up. That is our first hint that this calamity involves more than just locusts – this disaster

also involves a drought. (We will see that drought even more clearly later in verse 17.)

And this drought had not just dried up the crops – verse 12 tells us that this drought had also dried up “gladness ... from the children of man.”

For ancient Israelites, the harvest was the high point of the year, and it was celebrated each year with the Feast of the Tabernacles (also known as the Feast of the Booths or Succoth).

There are important connections between that feast and the book of Joel, but we need to look a bit below the surface to find them. Let’s start by reading about that feast from Leviticus.

Leviticus 23:39–43 – On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the feast of the Lord seven days; on the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. You shall keep it as a feast to the Lord seven days in the year; it is a statute for ever throughout your generations; you shall keep it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days; all that are native in Israel shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month, Tishri, which is typically around the end of September or early October.

The Feast is primarily agricultural and celebrates the gathering of the harvest. In John 7:37 it is referred to just as "The Feast."

On the first day of the feast, 13 bulls were offered, 12 on the next day, 11 on the third, and so on until 7 bulls were offered on the seventh day – making a total of 70 offerings.

The rabbis taught that there were 70 nations in the world and so the number 70 looked forward to a time when both Jew and Gentile would worship God together. That is something we will see later in our study of Joel.

One of the most important rituals during the feast was the pouring of water in the temple.

A specially appointed priest was sent to the Pool of Siloam with a golden pitcher to bring water from the pool. This water was then poured by the High Priest into a basin at the foot of the altar amidst the blasting of trumpets and the singing of the Hallel (Psalm 113–118).

The significance of that pouring was twofold.

First, it was a symbolic and ritual prayer for abundant rain. But second, it looked toward the outpouring of God's spirit upon all nations. And, once again, that is something we will see later in our study of Joel.

As with the other Jewish feasts, this feast looked forward to the coming Messiah. And it was at the end of such a feast that Jesus stood up and announced that he was the real source of living water.

John 7:37–38 – In the last day, that great day of **the feast**, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

So, what can we say about the Feast of the Tabernacles and its relation to the book of Joel?

First, as we just saw, that great Feast looked forward to some great events that we will see in this short book of Joel – God’s plan for the Gentiles, and the outpouring of God’s spirit.

But second, that great feast shows us just how joyous of an event a good harvest was to the Jews. In fact, the Rabbis said that “he who has not seen Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles does not know what rejoicing means.”

But we do not see that joy here in Joel. We see the harvest in verse 11, but we are told that it has perished. And verse 12 tells us that the crops have dried up; we do not see any water being poured.

The locusts have destroyed the harvest, and the people’s gladness has dried up along with their trees and their vines. Rather than abundant rain, there is just a terrible drought.

We need to always be thinking about this feast of the harvest as we study the book of Joel. This great feast of joy is the backdrop to what we are seeing here, and that backdrop will help us understand the great prophecies in the book of Joel.

Before we move on, we still have a question we need to consider about verse 11. “Be **ashamed**, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers.” We can understand why the vinedressers were told to **wail** – but why were the tillers of the soil told to be **ashamed**? What had they done?

According to the lexicons, the Hebrew word translated “ashamed” in the ESV translation of verse 11 means “to be ashamed, confused or disappointed.” That definition gives us two other possible meanings, and we see those possibilities in other translations of verse 11:

- [ASV] Be **confounded**, O ye husbandmen, wail, O ye vinedressers, for the wheat and for the barley; for the harvest of the field is perished.
- [NRSV] Be **dismayed**, you farmers, wail, you vine-dressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined.

Those other possibilities may solve our problem. While it is not clear why the farmers should be ashamed, it is easy to see why the farmers might be dismayed or confounded as they watched an entire year of work suddenly turned into nothing by those locusts. I think that would leave anyone confounded and dismayed.

So perhaps verse 11 is not telling the farmers to be ashamed, but is only telling them to be confounded and dismayed. And that may be correct, but I'm not sure I'm convinced. That proposed solution may be just a bit too simple. Why?

For one reason, I'm not sure why those farmers would have needed a command to be confounded or dismayed. It seems that those feelings would have come naturally, although perhaps we could say the same thing about the command to wail.

But second, I don't think we should be so quick to dismiss the possibility that these farmers are told here to be ashamed because of sin they had committed or were committing.

Why not? At least three reasons.

- First, the previous group – the drunkards – seem to have been called out because of their sin.
- Second, as we have seen, Joel may be referring us back to Deuteronomy 28 with the use of the word “nation” in verse 6, and, if so, that reference would confirm that sin is involved here.
- And third, Joel will soon tell the people to repent, which also tells us that sin is involved here.

That second reason about Deuteronomy 28 is particularly compelling. Why? Because when we compare Deuteronomy 28 with what we are seeing in Joel we find some remarkable parallels.

As we know from our study of Hosea, Deuteronomy 28 begins by listing the blessings that the people would enjoy if they were faithful to God, and Deuteronomy 28 ends by listing the curses that the people could expect if they were faithless.

What do we see in that list of blessings? We see the same blessings that had just been taken from the people here in Joel.

- (28:4) – the fruit of your ground.
- (28:5) – blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.
- (28:8) – the blessing on you in your barns ... and he will bless you in the land.
- (28:11) – abound in prosperity ... in the fruit of your ground.
- (28:12) – to give the rain to your land in its season.

And what curses do we see in that list of curses? We see the same curses that had just arrived for the people here in Joel.

- (28:22) – with drought and with blight.
- (28:24) – make the rain of your land powder.
- (28:38) – you shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it.

- (28:39) – you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes.
- (28:40) – you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off.
- (28:42) – the cricket shall possess all your trees and the fruit of your ground.

As for that word translated “cricket” by the ESV, I agree with the Pulpit Commentary: “The name given here to the ravaging insect is not the same as in verse 38; but there can be no doubt it is the locust that is intended.” The Hebrew word seems to be naming the locusts based on the sound they make – it may literally mean “buzzer” or “whirler,” and the Hebrew word for “cymbals” (the percussion instrument) comes from the same root word.

So, for those three reasons (and especially the second reason) I don’t think we should so quickly dismiss the idea that these farmers were, in fact, told to be ashamed because they had sinned.

And I think when we look at the Hebrew we can add a fourth reason – **wordplay**.

There is some wordplay going on here in the Hebrew, and it is wordplay that we see elsewhere in the Old Testament.

The root word for the Hebrew word translated “ashamed” in verse 11 appears five other times in this chapter, where it is translated “dries up” or “dried up.”

Joel 1:10 – ...the wine **dries up**.

Joel 1:12 – The vine **dries up** ... all the trees of the field are **dried up**...

Joel 1:17 – ...because the grain has **dried up**.

Joel 1:20 – ...because the water brooks are **dried up**.

By repeatedly using two Hebrew words that share a similar sound, the text of Joel seems to be linking God's command to these farmers in verse 11 with the drying up of their harvest.

If we tried to achieve the same effect in English it might be: "Shame. Your crops have shriveled!"

But how does that observation help us understand the meaning of the command? How does that wordplay help us interpret the Hebrew word translated "ashamed?"

The answer is that the wordplay in verses 11–12 helps us when we compare another place where the same wordplay is used.

Jeremiah 50:2 – "Declare among the nations and proclaim, set up a banner and proclaim, conceal it not, and say: 'Babylon is taken, Bel is put to **shame**, Merodach is **dismayed**. Her images are put to **shame**, her idols are **dismayed**.'

That word "shame" in that verse from Jeremiah 50 comes from the same Hebrew root word that is translated "ashamed" in Joel 1:11.

And we should note that in Jeremiah 50:2 it is a *different* Hebrew word that is translated "dismayed."

And later in that same chapter from Jeremiah we find the same Hebrew root word translated "shame" in Jeremiah

50:2 again, but here it is translated “dried up,” just like we see in Joel 1.

Jeremiah 50:38 – A drought against her waters, that they may be **dried up!** For it is a land of images, and they are mad over idols.

What do those verses from Jeremiah tell us?

They tell us that we may have taken a wrong turn when we said that the word “ashamed” in Joel 1:11 might just mean “confounded” or “dismayed.” That is most certainly **not** the meaning in Jeremiah 50. There we see a different word used for “dismayed,” and there we know that the word used in Joel 1:11 means “shame.” Babylon’s false gods are put to shame.

So where are we after looking at that? Where we are is that I think the farmers were told to be ashamed in verse 11 because they had sinned. And I think Joel is using wordplay to link the farmers’ shame with the drought that had dried up their vines and their trees.

But what had the farmers done? What was their sin?

Perhaps we can find the answer to that question by looking at another farmer. Let’s listen as Jesus describes him, and as we read this let’s think about what we have said so far about the theme of the Day of the Lord in the book of Joel.

Luke 12:16–21 – And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will

store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Is that rich farmer in Luke 12 like our farmers here in Joel 1? Were they both guilty of complacently thinking that all things would just continue on forever the same as they always had? Were they both guilty of trusting in themselves with no thought of God? Were they both guilty of praying only to themselves and saying, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry"?

"Eat, drink, be merry." There we see it again – that theme we saw with the drunkards and the gluttons. I think we are seeing that same theme again with the farmers.

And what is that theme? It is a theme that runs all throughout the Bible from beginning to end. It is the theme of people eating and drinking with no concern for God. It is the theme of people thinking that everything will continue to be as it always has been. It is the theme of a people fast asleep in desperate need of a wake up call.

Again and again in the Bible, we find God interrupting the complacent lives of such people and suddenly changing everything.

Remember that, at this point in our study of Joel, our working definition for the Day of the Lord is **a sudden intervention by God into the affairs of a self-satisfied complacent people that leaves those people with a world that is completely changed from what they knew before.**

I think that is exactly what we are seeing here with these farmers. And they are told to be ashamed!

Why ashamed? Because their riches have dried up!

Why ashamed? Because God has suddenly shown up and said to them: "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Why ashamed? Because the Day of the Lord has come!

Joel 1:13

Joel 1:13 – Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.

With verse 13, we see the fourth of the four groups that are specifically addressed in the first chapter of Joel. We saw the elders in verse 2, we saw the drunkards in verse 5, we saw the farmers in verse 11, and now we see the priests in verse 13.

Why those four groups? We have been kicking that question down the road ever since verse 2, but now the time

has come for us to answer it if we can. And surprise! There are several possibilities.

Perhaps those four groups are addressed because they are affected the most by this disaster.

The very young and the very old were most at risk even in good times, and especially in bad times. Perhaps that is one reason why we see the elders in verse 2 – although we know the main reason we saw the elders was because of the question they were asked. If they couldn't remember such an event, then it certainly must have been a long time since something like that had happened. But the elderly were also at great personal risk from such a disaster.

Likewise, the drunkards and the gluttons were affected more than most. They loved wine, but now the vines had been stripped. They loved food, but now the fields had been stripped. Soon there would be no drunkards and no gluttons left in the land.

And the farmers, of course, were greatly affected. They had not only lost their food, but they had lost their livelihood. It would take years to recover from such a disaster.

And the priests? Were they also affected more than most? Yes – for at least two reasons.

First, as we saw earlier, the priests could no longer make the required daily grain and drink offerings. But second, the priests depended on those offerings for their own food.

Deuteronomy 18:1 – The Levitical priests, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel. They shall eat the LORD's food offerings as their inheritance.

If we are looking for what these four groups all have in common, then that is certainly one answer – they are each affected more than most by the locust invasion.

But we also see something else they all have in common when we read what God tells them to do – each of these four groups hears a very unexpected command from God.

What are the elders commanded to do in verse 2? **HEAR!**

Shouldn't the elders have been the ones talking? Shouldn't the elders have been telling the young people to listen? Instead, the elders surprisingly are the ones told to listen!

What are the drunkards commanded to do in verse 5? **WEEP!**

Aren't the drunkards supposed to be happy and jolly all the time? They certainly look that way on all of those TV commercials. I thought the drunkards were the ones who had all the fun. But here they are surprisingly told to weep!

What are the farmers commanded to do in verse 11? **BE ASHAMED!**

If anyone could rightly be filled with pride, wouldn't it be the farmers? They worked hard to achieve a good harvest that fed the people. Without the farmers, there would be no harvest and no joyous feast celebrating the harvest. In most situations the farmers would be very

proud of their accomplishments. But here they are surprisingly told to be ashamed!

What are the priests commanded to do in verse 13? **GET DRESSED!**

If anyone did not need a command to get dressed, it would have been a priest. Priests had special outfits designed for glory and beauty.

Exodus 28:40 – For Aaron's sons you shall make coats and sashes and caps. You shall make them for glory and beauty.

But here the priests are surprisingly told to get dressed!

And why the surprising messages at the beginning of the book of Joel? Why does the book begin with things that no one would ever have expected to hear? Is it perhaps because the theme of the book involves a day that no one ever expected to come?

A third possibility is that God may have chosen these four groups because each of them has a different relation with God's blessings for his people.

- The elders had seen God's blessings for many years.
- The drunkards perverted God's blessings.
- The farmers reaped God's blessings.
- And the priests offered back God's blessings.

Each of the four groups had a different view of God and a different view of God's blessings. And so, perhaps God spoke to those four groups because he had a different message related to each of those different viewpoints.

So where are we? We are looking for what elders, drunkards, farmers, and priests have in common – and we have found at least three answers. They were each affected more than most by the locust invasion, they each receive a surprising command from God perhaps to perfectly set the stage for the major theme of the book, and they each had a different relation with the blessings God had provided them.

Those are three possible answers to why we see these four groups in chapter one. All of that (and more) could have been intended, so I don't think we have to choose a single answer.

But if I did choose, I might choose the second option because of its relation to the major theme of the book – the Day of the Lord that comes as a sudden unexpected surprise to those who are not sober and watchful.

Now that we have answered that question about why we see these four groups, let's focus on this fourth and final group – the priests.

What are the priests commanded to do in verse 13?

They are commanded to lament and to wail, and they are commanded to put on sackcloth and wear it all night.

Why? Verse 13 answers that question – “Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.”

We have already talked about all of that. We saw the same lamentation, the same mourning, and the same priests back in verse 8, and we saw the same reason for the same lamentation and the same mourning back in verse 9.

Why is Joel repeating himself? For at least two reasons.

First, as we said earlier, we are reading Hebrew poetry here, and the fundamental characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Something is said, and then it is said again in some parallel manner. We saw that very clearly in verse 4, and I think we are seeing it again with verses 8-9 and verse 13.

But second, even without the Hebrew poetry, repetition may be used here for the same reason it is used by any teacher – to emphasize something that is very important. (I don't know about you, but when a teacher told me the same thing more than three times, I would always turn to back of my notebook where I listed topics that I was sure would be on the next exam!)

But what very important message for the final exam is being emphasized here? It is the same message we talked about when we looked at verse 9 – it is that this terrible disaster has had a terrible impact on the worship of God. The daily offerings have been cut off!

Did the people see that cutting off as God saw it? Did the people view those daily offerings as God viewed them? Did the people understand the importance of those daily offerings?

The locusts had invaded! Did the people view those ceased offerings as the **least** of their problems or as the **greatest** of their problems?

Let's fast forward a few thousand years. The Covid virus has come! Did we view our ceased in-person worship assemblies as the **least** of our problems or as the **greatest** of our problems?

We could discuss that question all day and likely get many different viewpoints – but you know what? The only viewpoint that matters is God's viewpoint.

How does God view it? Was it the least of the problems – or the greatest? Verse 13 answers that question when it comes to this locust invasion. It was the greatest of problems.

God did not say: "Yes, the worship service has ceased, but you have bigger things to worry about now, so go take care of all that, and then later you can get things restarted in the temple. But don't lose any sleep over it. After all, it's all just ritual. You have bigger fish to fry!"

Instead, God says: **"Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God!"**

Why? Because your harvest has been destroyed? Because your fields have been stripped bare? Because your food supply has been decimated? No. **"Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God."**

Were those other things terrible? Yes, they were. Were those other things a reason to weep and lament? Yes, they were. Were they the biggest problem? They were not. Verse 13 gives us the biggest problem: "Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God."

Let's all keep something very important in mind about the Day of the Lord in the Bible – it is always accompanied by **a sudden attitude adjustment!** People always have a completely different attitude about things after the Day of the Lord than they had before the Day of the Lord.

We will certainly see that with the last great Day of the Lord. Think for a moment about the smug, smirking, self-satisfied attitude of those today who wallow in their sin and ignore God and God's word. What will their attitude be when they hear that final trumpet and see the King of kings appear in the clouds to judge this world? Now that is what I call a sudden attitude readjustment!

Today such people do not see things as God sees them, but one day that will change. One day they will see their sin as God sees it. One day they will see this world as God sees it. One day they will see their possessions as God sees them. One day they will see the church as God sees it. But if they wait until that last great day to see things as God sees them, they will have waited too long.

What do they need to do? Joel has already answered that question. In fact, Joel answered that question

with the very first word he spoke after he told us about the locusts in verse 4. Look at the first word of verse 5: **“Awake!”**

Almost all of the commentaries tell us that the major theme of Joel is the Day of the Lord, and perhaps it is. But we don’t see that phrase until later in verse 15. Perhaps the major theme of Joel is the first thing Joel said – **“Wake up!”** And, of course, those themes are closely related – the Day of the Lord is a wake up call!

We have had some truly terrible hurricanes this year. We thought Beryl was bad – and it was – but it was nothing compared to Helene and Milton.

Here is a question for us about those hurricanes – **for what should we be praying?**

There is not a single answer to that question. We can certainly pray, as I’m sure we have, for the safety of those in the path of such a storm.

But I think we are given an additional answer here in Joel – something we should pray for whenever a disaster hits, whether it is a storm, a war, or a virus. We should pray that those things will be **a wake up call** for those who desperately need to wake up!

That is how Joel viewed this locust invasion. It was the first thing he said about it. **Awake!** Wake up!

Yes, this is a Day of the Lord – but there is another Day of the Lord coming! You were sleeping when this one came – will you be sleeping when the next one comes?

I think that is Joel's message here, and it is not just a message for an ancient people battling ancient insects – it is a message for all of us!

1 Thessalonians 5:6 – So then let us **not sleep**, as others do, but let us keep **awake** and be **sober**.

Romans 13:11–12 – Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to **wake from sleep**. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

1 Corinthians 15:34 – **Wake up from your drunken stupor**, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

2 Peter 3:10–12 – **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. 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!