

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: Joel 1:1-13

30. THE BOOK OF JOEL

J.R.R. Tolkien's three volume epic "*The Lord of the Rings*," is a novel of momentous events on a vast scale in a place called Middle Earth. The armies of powerful kings clash in horrific battles. Towering spiritual forces engage in a cosmic struggle of good versus evil. Yet, when the book has ended, we learn that all the sweeping events of the story including the fate of Middle Earth, hinged on the actions of the humblest, smallest creatures of all, a small band of three foot creatures called hobbits. *The theme of the book is clear, never underestimate the power of the smallest things.* The little book of Joel is only three chapters long and yet it is often underestimated. That is tragic because this is one of the most powerful books in the Word of God. You see, just as the fate of Middle Earth hinged on the actions of the little hobbits, so the fate of our world hinges on the prophecies in the little book of Joel.

Do you recall that Hosea's message grew out of a personal heartbreak in his own family ? Well Joel's message grew out of a national calamity, the invasion of a plague of locusts. Now in order to see this book in its proper setting I want us to notice a few things by way of introduction.

1. The Person of the Book:

We have very little information about Joel except that except that he was " *the son of Pethuel.* " (1:1) As the prophets name meant "*Jehovah is God*," his parents may well have chosen it as a declaration of their faith. Although his residence is not given, most likely he came from Judah and lived in Jerusalem. 1.

2. The Period of the Book:

Unlike Isaiah, Hosea, Amos and others Joel does not locate his prophecy in a distinct period in Judah's history. However most Bible scholars believe that he wrote sometime between 838-756 B.C. There are a couple of reasons for saying this. Firstly he made no mention of either the Assyrian or Babylonian invasions of Israel. And then again no King is mentioned in the book, but Joel does mention " *Tyre and Sidon*," (3:4) and "*Egypt and Edom*," (3:19) who were Israel's enemies during the reign of King Joash. This would coincide with the time that Queen Athaliah had the royal seed of Judah ,murdered. You see, after the death of King Ahaziah Queen Athaliah had all her grandchildren put to death, but the baby Joash was spared, he was the only surviving royal seed. He was hidden by his aunt Jehosheba and Jehoiada the high priest in the Temple complex.

Seven years later Joash was crowned King of Judah, (2 Kings 11:12) and Queen Athaliah was slain by her own people. (2 Kings 11:16) So this book could have been written just prior to Joash's coronation in 835 B.C.

Now keep in mind that when Joel is writing this book he is writing to the nation of Judah and especially to the city of Jerusalem, (3:1,17) prophesying against the Temple, its priesthood and its offerings. (1:9) And when he mentions the name Israel he is not referring to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom but rather to the twelve tribes during " *the day of the Lord.*" (3:2, 14) You see,

3. The Point of the Book:

Is the " *day of the Lord.*" Now the phrase " *the day of the Lord,*" is used some five times in Joel. (1:15 2:1 2:11 2:31 3:14) And although it has reference to the local judgment God would bring on Judah, it speaks of a future day when God will intervene in judgment upon the world. For example (2:31) must be speaking of a future day of judgment because the sun was not darkened, nor the moon turned into blood during Joel's day. Again (3:14) does not speak of Joel's day but a future day of judgment upon the enemies of Israel. You see, the plague in Joel's day (Ch 1) and the invasion beyond Joel's day (Ch 2) was a prototype of an awesome " *day of the Lord,*" yet future. Now to understand what is meant by " *the day of the Lord,*" we need to get a few of the " *days of Scripture,*" into perspective. You see, there is

The Day of Man:

Man's day. The phrase is used in (1 Cor 4:3) in reference to " *man's judgment.*" Paul says "*But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment, yea I judge not mine own self.*" J. N. Darby

translates it, " *But for me it is the smallest matter that I should be examined of you or of man's day.*" We are living right now in man's day, the day when God is largely silent and when man has so much to say. I mean any judgment passed on Paul was merely human judgment. Paul was not nearly so concerned with the opinion of a human court in this, man's day, as in the judgment of that higher Court in a coming day.

The Day of Christ:

Do you recall Paul's words to the Philippian believers ? " *Being confident of this very thing that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*" (1:6 1 Cor 1:7-8) Paul mentions this day again and again. It's the day when we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and will be assembled at the judgment Seat to receive reward and blessing.

The Day of the Lord:

Which speaks of a dark, and gloomy day, (2:1) a time of judgment. Now this subject, " *the day of the Lord,*" is found time and again in the Old Testament. It is mentioned by name at least eighteen times in the Old Testament (Is 2:12 13:6,9 Eze 13:5, 30:3 Joel 1:15 2:1 2:11 2:31 3:14 Amos 5:18,20 Obad 15 Zeph 1:7 1:14 Mal 4:5) and four times in the New Testament. (1 Thes 5:2 2 Thes 2:2 2 Pet 3:10 Rev 1:10) The " *day of the Lord,*" refers to the direct intervention of God in the affairs of men after the Rapture of the church.

It probably covers the Tribulation (Rev 6:19) Millennial Kingdom (Rev 20:1-10) and the Great White Throne Judgment. (Rev 20:11-15) It is not only a time of judgment on the wicked, but a time of blessing for the redeemed of Israel and the church. Now there is another day we need to mention and it is called,

The Day of God:

For Peter talks about it when he says, "*Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat.*" (2 Pet 3:12) The day of God seems to be the eternal day. Very little is said about it in the Bible. We only know that for all the rest of eternity God will be all in all. So we need to keep these different days in mind. The Day of Man, the Day of Christ, the Day of God, but Joel deals primarily with the Day of the Lord, that future day when the nations will be judged and Christ shall return to set up His glorious kingdom. Now it seems that Joel refers to three important events here each of which he calls "*a day of the Lord.*" He sees the plague of locusts as an immediate day of the Lord (Ch 1) he sees the invasion of Judah by Assyria as an imminent day of the Lord (Ch 2:1-27) and he sees the final judgment of the world as the ultimate day of the Lord. (2:27-3:21)

So Joel, is moving here in there circles. He begins with a recent locust plague that had devastated the land. Then he enlarges his vision and see's the coming Assyrian invasion. Finally he focuses on the end times, although what he has to say earlier about the coming invasion of

the Assyrians looks forwards to, and is a picture of the fearful events of the last days. Indeed the plague in Joel's day, the invasion of the Assyrian army are both a prototype of that awesome day of the Lord which is yet future.

(1) THINGS PRESENT: CH 1:1-20

You know, when you are in a crisis you'll hear all kinds of voices explain what is going on and telling you what to do. The optimists will says, "*this crisis is not going to last, be brave.*" The pessimists will say, "*it's going to get worse and there is no escape. We're done for.*" The alarmists will see the enemy behind every tree and the scoffers will question the news reports and shrug their shoulders saying, "*what difference does it make anyhow.*" But Joel was a realist who looked at life from the standpoint of the Word of God. You'll notice as the opening chapter opens,

(a) *THERE WAS DEVASTATION:*

A plague of locusts had hit the country. Indeed Joel calls the invaders "*a nation.*" (1:6) The whole country was in the grip of a fearful locust plague. Now in our country we have no idea of what locusts can do. Locusts are like big grasshoppers. In a swarm of locusts there may be up to 600 million insects covering 400 square miles. They can eat up to 80,00aons of food a day, so when they descend on an area all vegetation ceases. They travel 2,000 miles per month at a speed of between 2 and 10 miles per day for 6 weeks and lay 5,000 eggs per square foot. Their

appetite is voracious and their heads look like those of horses. Someone has described the locust as " *the incarnation of hunger*." Reminds me of some boys I know. One lady was speaking to another lady one Monday morning. She said, " *I had the locust preacher yesterday for dinner*." The other lady said, " *you mean the local preacher don't you ?*" *Locusts are things that eat all before them and leave nothing behind*." The other lady said, " *Yes that was him*." You see, the appetite of the locust is never satisfied, they devour all vegetation in their path. And Moses had taught that locusts and crop failure could be a source of divine judgment. (Deut 28:38-39) Do you see how Joel describes them in (1:4) ? The four different names here could be the four stages of development of the locust, or Joel could be describing here four different species of locust, over eighty species are known to exist in the East.

Whatever this was devastation. Joel is asking the question, " *Has this ever been in your days or the days of your fathers ?*" (1:2 Ex 10:1-20) The picture is clear, locusts, locusts and more locusts. The result ? The land was stripped bare. It was a national tragedy. Are we not living in days of national and international tragedies ? The day of the tsunami, the day of the missing airplane, and the day of the overturned ferry. Floods, volcanoes, earthquakes that have devastated so many lives. The problem is this. *A whole lot of people could see the locusts but they could not see the Lord*. They could count the material loss but they could not see the spiritual truth. An old commentator looked at the four different names here in (1:4) that left everything barren and applied them

to God's people. The four chief passions were lust, vainglory, gluttony and anger. My what is the swarm of locusts that's bringing barrenness to your life ? Is it lethargy ? Have you a half- hearted attitude ? Perhaps its laxity. You are careless about your walk with the Lord. Could it be that its lukewarmness ? And Christ is about to spew you out of His mouth ? What is it that has brought devastation to your spiritual life ? (a)

(b) THERE WAS LAMENTATION:

Do you see what the Lord says in (1:13) ? You see Joel addresses several different groups of people as he describes the terrible plague and its devastating results. The **old men** in (1:1-4) are asked if they can remember such a tragedy from the years gone by. No, they cannot. In fact, they will tell their children and even their great - grandchildren about the awful event. Joel next turns to the **drunkards** in (1:5-7) who weep and howl because the vineyards have been ruined and their supply of drink is gone. Is it not sad when people can weep over a loss of luxuries and sinful pleasures and not over the loss of basic necessities ? Joel then turns to the **worshippers** in (1:8-10) who go to the Temple empty-handed because there are no sacrifices to bring. He addresses the **farmers (1:11-12)** who are howling because their crops are all ruined.

Finally, Joel turns to the **priests** in (1:13-14) and tells them to fast and pray. And here we reach the heart of the matter, for it was because of sin that God was punishing the nation. So long as the people obeyed Him, He would

send the rain and the harvest, but if they turned away from Him, He would make the heavens like brass and destroy their fields. (Deut. 11:10-17; 2 Chron. 7:13-14) My is it not so easy to drift along from day to day taking our blessings for granted until the Lord permits a national calamity to occur and remind us of our total dependence on Him ? I wonder, do you need to be reminded of that this ? You see, God didn't have to send great battalions to Judah to bring the people to their knees. *All he needed was a swarm of little insects and they did the job.* I wonder, will the Lord send something to the United Kingdom to bring it to its knees ? (a) (b)

(c) *THERE WAS PROCLAMATION:*

Do you see it in (1:14) ? Do you recall what I said about a Queen sitting on the throne ? God had promised David that they would never lack a son to sit on the throne of Israel. (2 Kings 7:12) He allowed them to have a King but not a Queen. Now Queen Athaliah was on the throne and what a treacherous Queen she was. You see, *national sin had been committed and national repentance was required.* This plague wasn't just a freak of nature this was God speaking to the nation. My at such a time of national calamity is there not a place for national prayer and fasting ? We need to waken up to the fact that God wants to speak to us through the events of our lives. He wants to bless us but we will not listen. Is this not our problem ? I mean, has the Lord ever allowed events in your life to awaken you to your need of Him ? (1)

(2) THINGS IMMINENT: CH 2:1-27

You see, in (Ch 2) Joel's vision focused on the future but on the nearby future, the day of the Assyrian. In (Ch 3) he focuses on the future but the far distant future, the day of the Antichrist. But he sees it all as " *the day of the Lord,* " for the one was a type of the other. Unless Joel had some other attack in mind about which we know nothing he was probably referring to the Assyrian invasion, during the reign of King Hezekiah which took place in 701 B.C.

Is Ch 36-37) The Lord allowed the Assyrians to ravage the land but He miraculously delivered Jerusalem from being taken. You'll notice that Joel speaks here of,

(a) *THE ALARM:*

He says, "*Blow ye the trumpet in Zion and sound an alarm in my holy mountain,*" (2:1) This was real war so Joel commanded the watchmen to blow the trumpets and warn the people. Now what we have in (Ch 2) is almost a repetition of the plague of locusts in (Ch 1) I wonder is Job using the locusts to describe the Assyrian soldiers ? You see, just as the locusts had destroyed everything edible before them so this army would use a " *scorched earth policy.* " They would devastate the towns and the land. (Is 36:10 37:11-13, 18) The locusts looked like miniature horses but the Assyrians would ride real horses and conquer the land. You see, this whole section pictures the onward march of a ruthless, relentless and resistless army. All of which was highly descriptive of the Assyrians. Yet this invasion of Israel dreadful as it would be would be nothing compared with the invasion of Israel in the end times.

Now do you see what Joel is doing here ? He seems to be wavering back and forward from one invasion to the other. The one was the shadow, the other was the substance. The nearer invasion, terrible as though it would be, was merely illustrative of the later invasion. And so the trumpet was sounded. My in the light of the fact that the "*end times*," are upon us, do we not need to sound the trumpet ? Do you recall what Paul said of the believers in Thessalonica ? "*For from you sounded out the Word of the Lord.*" (1 Thes 1:8) My could that be said of us ? Are we trumpeting out the gospel ? (a)

(b) THE ADMONITION:

For do you see what the Lord says in (2:12) ? Watching someone tear their clothes can be impressive, but that wasn't good enough for the Lord. It's interesting that this exact phrase is not used anywhere else in the Bible but its meaning is clear. The heart of the people's problems was the problem of their hearts which were "*deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.*" (Jer 17:9) This was where the change was needed. Do you recall that King Hezekiah led them in that change ? Sadly, it was only superficial for they returned to their evil ways.

(2 Chron 18:1) My in the light of end time prophecies " what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness." (2 Pet 3:11) So often all we offer in worship is a postured pretense, a shameful sham and a sick stench in the nostrils of the Lord.

(c) THE ASSURANCE:

The assurance, that if there was true repentance God would work for Israel, with Israel and through Israel. What faith Joel had. He says, "*the Lord will answer His people.*" (2:19) Do you recall in one night, God killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and Sennacherib went home a defeated king ? (Is 37:36-38) Here God promises to drive away the army of locusts and the army of Assyria, and restore the pastures again. In fact, God will give them bumper crops and restore to them the years that the locust hath eaten. Why will God do this ? Not because they deserve it, but that they and the heathen might know that He is the Lord. (2:27) There's a principle here that we need to grasp. It's a promise to all who return to the Lord with sincere and broken hearts, for God says "*I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.*" (2:25) God will restore those wasted years if there is a brokenness of spirit. So Joel has described (1) he has described (2) and now he turns to the future to talk about,

(3) THINGS DISTANT: CH 2:28-3:21

Here Joel describes a series of events relating to " the great and the terrible day of the Lord," (2:31) He talks about what will happen before that day, during that day and after that day.

(a) Before That Day: The Spirit is Poured Out:

Look if you will at (2:31) Now we need to consider these words from,

Israel's Point of View:

Look at (2:28) "*And it shall come to pass afterward* " after what ? After the events in (2:18-27) when the Lord heals the nation after the Assyrian invasion. But look at how Peter explains this word in (Acts 2:17) He says "*And it shall come to pass in the last days saith God I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.*" So Peter interprets "*Afterward*" as "*the last days.*" Now "*the last days,*" began with the ministry of Christ on earth (Heb 1:2) and will conclude with "*the day of the Lord,*" that period of time that is called "*the tribulation.*" (Matt 24:21) Now many Bible scholars think that this special time is brought before us in (Rev Ch 6-19) and that it will climax with the return of Christ to earth to deliver Israel and establish His kingdom. (Is 2:2-5 Zech 12-14 Rev 19:11-20:6) Now Joel promised that before the "*day of the Lord,*" would come there would be a remarkable outpouring of the Holy Spirit accompanied by signs in the heavens and on the earth.

Do you recall that during the Old Testament period the Holy Spirit was given only to special people who had special jobs to do ? People like Moses and the prophet's (Num 11:17) the judges (Jud 3:10) and great men like David (1 Sam 16:13) But here is the promise through Joel that the Spirit will come upon "*all flesh,*" men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile. "*And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered.*" (2:32)

The Church's Point of View:

And the question is was Joel's prophecy fulfilled

completely, partially or not at all on the day of Pentecost ? Well, let's look at (Acts 2:14-21) Now is Peter saying that Joel's prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost ? I don't believe he is. *In fact Peter never used the word fulfilled or any word to suggest fulfilment.* What then did Peter mean ? Well, look at the context. Peter was answering the accusation that the believers were drunk and in order to counter the Jewish mockers Peter says "*But this is that,*")in other words, "*stop your mocking for this is similar to what Joel said would happen when God pours His Spirit on all flesh prior to the Kingdom Age.*" If this were a fulfilment of Joel's prophecy Peter would have said "*this is a fulfilment.*" Something else Joel said that God would pour His Spirit out "*upon all flesh.*" (2:28)

That certainly did not happen at Pentecost. But there is another reason why Joel's prophecy was not fulfilled at Pentecost. For Peter goes on to quote Joel and he says (Acts 2:19-20) Tell me did that happen at Pentecost ? Not at all. No, what happened at Pentecost was but the beginning of God's blessing on Israel. Had the nation received Christ instead of arresting the apostles and killing Stephen, the promised "*times of refreshing,*" would have come with the return of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom (Acts 3:19-26) Joel is telling us that during the last days of Israel's history, during the Tribulation period, the Spirit of God will work in mighty power in the saving of both Jews and Gentiles, and there will be mighty wonders and signs in the heavens. (Zech 12:10 13:1 Rom 11:26) Indeed these are recorded in the book of Revelation. (Rev 6:12-13)

(b) During That Day: Judgment is Poured Out:

You can see from the opening verse (3:1) that the Jews will be back in their land, delivered from the captivities in Gentile nations. But all the nations will gather together to fight Jerusalem. The prophet Joel sees the nations massing against Israel. North, east, south and west, they encircle the land. They are determined to uproot the nation of Israel and rid the world, once for all of the hated Hebrew people. Look at what the Lord says, (3:2, 12, 14) Is this not the same judgment that Christ speaks of in

(Matt Ch 25) ? At this judgment He will separate the " sheep," from the "goats," those who have helped Israel in the time of trouble and those who have been set for her destruction. Did you notice that Joel lists some of the sins that the Gentiles have committed against the Jews ?

Scattering them among the nations, selling them into slavery, treating them like cheap merchandise for which people cats lost, plundering the land off its wealth, and taking what belonged to the Lord and using it for their own gods. Its worth noting that God refers to the Jews as " my people," " my heritage," and to the land as " my land." The wealth is " my silver," and " my gold." (3:5) I tell God has not forsaken Israel. The promises of God to Israel cannot be broken. Indeed, if God can't hang on to Israel, He can't hang on to us either. Joel is saying " Nations prepare for Judgment: (3:1-8) Nations prepare for War: (3:9-15) Nations prepare for Defeat: " (3:16) In (3:2) when God promises to " plead," with the nations, this does not mean He will beg them to repent. The word " plead," can be translated " execute

judgment. " (Isa 66:16 Jer. 25:31) In (3:13) the battle is compared to to a ripe harvest of grapes. This is generally called " *the battle of Armageddon*," (Rev. 14:14-20) when the armies of the nations of the world unite against the Lord and His Christ (Ps 2:1-3) and gather to destroy Jerusalem (3:16 Zech 12-14) Then " *the Lord shall also roar out of Zion*" (3:16) My when the Lamb becomes a Lion the nations had better tremble. Do you see plat phrase " *the valley of decision* ?" The Hebrew word for " *decision*," (charute) has a basic meaning of " *to decide and sharpen or to cut.*" Its talking about God's decision to cut these huge armies into pieces as one would mow down grain with a sharp threshing instrument. My Christ will defend His land, His people, and His holy city. God knows what the nations have done to the Jews and He will one day settle accounts.

(c) After That Day: Blessing will be Poured Out:

As Joel preached, the people could see the dry fields, the starving cattle, and the empty barns. They could see and hear the locusts as they ravaged the country. But Joel is) picturing a time when wine, milk, and water shall flow in ceaseless measure in the land. This is, of course, the kingdom age when Jesus Christ shall sit on David's throne in Jerusalem, and when the land shall be healed and the blessing of God restored. Can you see here,

The Restoration of the Land:

Look if you will at (3:18-19) The Lord gave the land to Israel as an everlasting possession in an unconditional, eternal covenant known as the Abrahamic Covenant.

(Gen 17:7, 13, 19) And when the King comes to reign the land will be like the Garden of Eden for beauty and fruitfulness. *"He will make her wilderness like Eden and her desert like the garden of the Lord."* (Is 51:3) There will be wonders in animal life. (Is 11:5-11) There will be wonders in agricultural life. (Is 35:1-2) Still again there will be wonders in physical life. (Is 65:19-23) What a day it's going to be when the King comes to reign.

The Residents of the Land:

" But Judah shall forever and Jerusalem from generation to generation, for I will cleanse their blood that I have not cleansed." (3:20-21) What good would it be to have a restored land if it were populated with a sinful people ? When the Lord returns, He will pour out His Spirit on the on the house of David and Jerusalem at which time all Israel shall be saved. (Rom 11:26) *" In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness."* (Zech 13:1)

The Religion of the Land:

" So shall ye know that I am the Lord your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain." (3:17) Mount Zion, where the Temple stood, was a very special place to the Jews because it was the place God chose for His own dwelling. (Ps 48: 87: 132:13) Today, the Jewish people have no temple on Mount Zion, instead a Muslim Mosque stands there. But God promises that He will restore Zion and dwell there in all His glory. (Is 4:1-6 51:3) Can see the

blessings that will be outpoured after this day ? But don't miss how the book ends for it says " For the Lord dwelleth in Zion," (3:21) that's

The Reign of the Lord:

The prophecy of Joel begins with tragedy, the invasion of the locusts but it ends with triumph, the reign of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Today, we are living on the threshold of that " *great and terrible day of the Lord,*" we are living in the day of man, when man judges and runs the affairs of this planet and not for better but for worse. But the day of Christ is about to dawn and we shall be *caught up to meet the Lord in the air.*" Then the Lord will make those final moves on earth that will bring an end to man's mismanagement of earth's affairs. My " *the day of the Lord,*" is imminent. Will you then, accept the challenge in these last days to give all out service to the Lord ? (Lk 19:13 1 Cor 4:2) To pray with anticipation for the coming of Christ's kingdom ? (Matt 6:10) To say with Francis Havergal,

**Oh the joy to see Thee reigning
Thee, my own beloved Lord
Every tongue Thy name confessing
Worship, honour, glory, blessing
Brought to Thee with glad accord
Thee my Master and My Friend
Vindicated and enthroned
Unto earth's remotest end
Glorified, adored and owned.**