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# Near Horizon

## – the Judgment of Israel

### Joel 1:1-2:14

*Russ Kennedy*

**Introduction**      The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

Judgment in fierce and fearsome wrath..., vast, swift, painful, destruction..., present and eternal damnation in hell. These are not attractive themes and subjects for a self-serving, self-promoting, self-important, self-centered culture as our own. Let's speak and hear words of the sweetness of God's love for everybody. Well, as attractive as this may seem, its absence from preaching and pulpits has become a dereliction of duty. So, we come over the next few weeks to the book of Joel.

Let me remind you about the three horizons of prophecy that divide redemptive history and the book of Joel.



These three sections form a chiasmic structure mapped to the three horizons with Christ's coming at the center as follows:

A - Near Horizon – Judgment of Israel

B - Middle Horizon – Beginning of the Kingdom

A' - Far Horizon – Judgment of the Nations

Background: So who is the prophet Joel and what is up with him? The only thing recorded about Joel is his father's name. We are given no real historical information about him. He does not appear to be referred to in any other Old Testament book. His themes of locusts and the Day of the Lord are echoed in the book Amos. His standing as a prophet is attested to by Peter in his sermon recorded in Acts 2:16. The date of writing is unknown. Modern scholarship favors a date after the Babylonian exile because of references in the text to historical facts occurring between 400 and 300 BC. A date between the first and second deportations reads the text as prophetic of historical events and allows the literary structure and three-horizons to shape our

approach. His quotes from Ezekiel and parallels with Amos almost certainly make it after the first deportation. Even the first judgment appears to be yet in the future while invoking the horrible images of Babylon's armies.

What brings us to this book in the midst of a study on God's plan for the ages and future things? Joel uses a phrase to refer to the outpouring of the wrath of God. It is called, "The Day of the Lord." In each of the sections or horizons, there is an outpouring of God's fierce and fearsome wrath on the unbelieving and unrepentant. There are three "Days of the Lord" from Joel's perspective: one coming soon in the destruction of Jerusalem; one coming later in the wrath of God on the final Israel and one at the end of days on the living unbelievers.

So this book is very important. No study of God's purpose for redemptive history can exclude the wrath of God. So, given all that God is doing to redeem His chosen people, what is He doing to reward the wicked for their wickedness? This is the key theme through Joel.

Running all along the brassy, loud, trumpets and drumming notes of wrath and judgment runs the sweet violins and flutes of hope for the repentant.

## **A Call to Awake**

**(1:2-14)**

A call to hear and heed is issued to different groups of people connected to different parts of their culture. Throughout, two great dangers are intertwined: the coming swarm of locusts and the coming sweeping army.

### **The Elders and the Locusts**

**(v.2-4)**

<sup>2</sup> Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? <sup>3</sup> Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. <sup>4</sup> 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.

The leaders and the people are treated as children who need instruction. They need to "hear" with understanding. So the probing question presses upon them the need to interact and interpret the events to unfold in the light of the preaching and prophesying of God's man.

In many parts of the world, locusts swarm on a regular basis. Israelites would have been familiar with locusts' swarms from their own day. But the language here does not refer to an ordinary, seven-year event. It is an extraordinary event, even a supernatural one. The call here to the elders to give ear and the massive scale of destruction is meant to invoke the plagues on Egypt. The elders and the people were to associate this coming destruction with the judgment on Egypt in the days of the Exodus. Through their idolatry, wickedness and rebellion, they were now little better than Egypt. So the hand of God brings judgment.

## The Drunkards and Vines

(v.5-7)

<sup>5</sup> Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. <sup>6</sup> For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. <sup>7</sup> It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white.

The call to awake is shouted in the ear of slumbering, over-hung drunkards. They are oblivious to the danger that is rising. What is about to happen will endanger their ability to get their wine. Wake up from your drunken slumber for you are about to have your wine flasks savagely ripped from your lips.

How? By a nation that is already on the march. The language here invokes the description of Babylon by both Daniel and Ezekiel. Here was a nation, contrary to the Law of God, that made war not just on the people, but on the land itself. Imagine the scene: while a plague of locusts are stripping the land of foliage and bark like the raging lions of Babylon, inside the cities and villages, the drunkards lay slumbering in their beds and on the street corners. Awake, O slumberer. The judgment of God is beginning!

## The Virgins and Fields

(v.8-10)

<sup>8</sup> Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth. <sup>9</sup> The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. <sup>10</sup> The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes.

What vivid imagery in a call to lament, to sing sad songs of weeping and remorse. Cry, weep like the woman in burlap who has never married and weeps for her lost love and life. So, the house of the Lord knows no joy or laughter for there is no harvest and no celebration offerings. The ground weeps and the oil pines away as the dark horde of locust and nation scours the land.

## The Farmers and Harvest

(v.11-12)

<sup>11</sup> Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. <sup>12</sup> 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.

The proud farmers are called to be ashamed, to be humbled. It is not their lack of skill or ability that has wrought this devastation. It is their sin and rebellion against God. They have tilled and sowed well. They have watered and weeded. But they gaze with downcast eyes across the dusty ruins of stripped and barren fields. There, see there is the consequence for your sin.

**The Priests and the Temple****(v.13-14)**

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

Finally, the religious leaders are called to weigh what God is doing. They also must humble themselves, grieve over their sins and mourn. But it is not enough to merely be sad over the consequences of sin, they must also return to the Lord. In your sackcloth and sad songs, set aside a time to fast. Gather the people into the presence of God. Cry out to God.

So what do we hear in all this. Do we decry our own sin as Christians and fear the consequences that accompany God's judgment? Do we bring this text over to us directly? Can we even turn the search light of this text on our own nation or any nation of the world? Do we say to America, "Grave judgment awaits because you have sinned?" Are our present sins and wickedness any greater than before?

This portion of Joel does not come to us as Christian except as it reminds us to see the terrible betrayal our sin and covenant breaking is. It does prepare sinners to fear coming judgment and seek the mercies of God. In other words, its great value in Joel's day and in our day is to point us to Christ. Fearsome warnings of dire judgment illuminate the cross. There, this judgment was borne for us. Through these words, we fall down, not in terrible fear, but in tremendous joy. On the cross Christ bore the judgment of God of which these horrific warnings are but pale shadows of the final day of the fierce wrath of God.

**A Call to Pray****(v.15-20)**

So, there is a call to pray, to plea before God and pursue His face.

**Their Lament****(v.15-18)**

<sup>15</sup> Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty, It comes. <sup>16</sup> Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? <sup>17</sup> The seed shrivels under the clods; the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are torn down because the grain has dried up. <sup>18</sup> How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep suffer.

In a lament, a sad song of pain under the hard hand of God, they dread what is about to unfold. Their joy and gladness withered. It has been their food in the presence of God and now it has been cut off.

What suffering under the dread hand of a holy God! Once again, the wide-spread judgments of God on Egypt during the Exodus are invoked. Even the beasts and the fields groan under the hand of God for the sin of the people.

**Their Cry****(v.19-20)**

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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 the midst of pain, they call to the Lord (v.19). Their dire situation finally brought them to call on the Lord. On their knees, by their windows they see the

leaping fires consuming their fields and forests. The inferno set by the dread nation sweeping across their land speaks of the soul searing heat of the wrath of God.

Seeing the example of the beasts, they pant after the Lord (v.20). The water brooks are dried up. All across the land, the beasts are panting for water. The image strikes deep into their own hearts. God has dried up the water brooks of their pleasures and pursuits so that they will pant after God.

## **A Call to Fear**

**(2:1-11)**

Continuing his preaching, Joel calls Israel to fear the instrument and the intention of the Lord's judgment. He uses the phrase, "before them", to structure this section of his prophecy. The call to fear the judgment of God vividly blends the two images of locusts and an army.

### **The Darkness that Spreads**

**(v.1-2)**

Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.

Sound the warning trumpets. Tremble. For a dark and dreadful day is coming, the Day of the Lord. On that day, the hills and plains of Israel will be covered with a black horde. Mighty and awful they will be. There had never been nor ever will be a host gathered like this vast army.

### **The Fire that Devours**

**(v.3-5)**

<sup>3</sup> Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the Garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. <sup>4</sup> Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run. <sup>5</sup> As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle.

Fear the fire that devours the beautiful land. On that terrible day, the destroyer will roar across the land thundering like a vast herd of horses, leaving a scorched earth behind them. Across the mountains, through the valleys, across the plains they flow till they surge around the walls of Jerusalem.

### **The Warriors that Attack**

**(v.6-9)**

<sup>6</sup> Before them peoples are in anguish; all faces grow pale. <sup>7</sup> Like warriors they charge; like soldiers they scale the wall. They march each on his way; they do not swerve from their paths. <sup>8</sup> They do not jostle one another; each marches in his path; they burst through the weapons and are not halted. <sup>9</sup> They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls, they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief.

Why are the people shackled and shaken? Look, there over the hills. Like locusts they swarm, but disciplined the warriors that attack. Swift and frightful in ordered battle array they cut swaths of destruction through the land. There is no defense. There is no holding them back. Up the walls they scale. Into the houses they pile, surging to sure victory.

Israel crumbles under the mighty assault. The judgment of God has fallen. The near horizon of the Day of the Lord has come.

## **The Lord who Speaks**

**(v.10-11)**

<sup>10</sup> The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. <sup>11</sup> The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?

But imagine the horror to discover that in all the destruction that runs before this terrible army, God is behind them and on their side. In His power, He is executing His Word. His promise of wrath is just as sure as His promise of judgment.

But the prophecy begins to gaze beyond this horizon to see a darker one. There the heavens and earth are shaken. The lights in the heavens are dimmed. Who can endure it? Yes, who can endure it? Is there One who can endure the wrath of God?

## **A Call to Return**

**(2:12-14)**

Repent in your hearts in hopes of a measure of God's blessing.

<sup>12</sup> "Yet even now," declares the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

## **Rend Your Hearts**

Now the Lord Himself speaks calling for genuine repentance. Over and over again, Israel has appeared to return to the Lord in outward deeds and obedience. But their heart has remained far away. Their return to the land after exile has not meant a full return to the Lord in their hearts. So what is called for is a heart repentance and produces real sorrow over sin. It may be expressed differently in different people and cultures – but a genuine experience of heart rending will express itself outwardly.

Genuine repentance moves toward God grounded in the character of God. Repentance comes humbly believing and confessing that God is one who is full of grace, mercy and steadfast love. He is One who will yield His anger. His smile is ever waiting behind His frown.

## **Maybe the Lord**

We humble ourselves before God, not demanding that He respond to us. In this phrase humility and hope mingle.

May the Lord will relent of His anger...

Maybe the Lord will refresh with blessings...

Maybe we will rejoice once again...

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## Reflect and Respond

God's judgment is a fearful and frightening thing. In the frivolous and casual and carnal day, it is hard for people to imagine the seriousness of God's judgment.

God's judgment is always preceded by warnings. He sends preachers to denounce sin and declare God's judgment.

People need to be awakened to their sin in the particulars of their lives. The preaching here is powerful because it is graphic. It is full of imagery familiar to the listeners. It is intended to shatter the misplaced confidence of people.

God uses the nations as the instruments of His judgments. His wrath against Israel's sin brought the might of Babylon down on Israel's head. His wrath against the elect's sin brought the power of Rome down on Jesus' head.

True repentance is at the heart level. It is a call to and response of "rending our hearts, not just our garments." True and lasting change occurs when we turn about with and in our whole hearts: in all that we believe and all that we want in such a way that our affections and actions radically change.

The Old Covenant call to return to God is in the dim but possible hope that God will relent of His judgment. But the New Covenant call to return to God is in the bright and full assurance that God has already poured out His judgment.

So, to the cross, to the cross. Come, seek safety and refuge from the wrath of God, not in fleeing but in believing and bowing. There, at His feet, find His mighty mercy and love.

Psalm 97 is woven all through this section of Joel. But it is also wonderfully anticipating of Christ and His new covenant provision and pleasures.

The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!

Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around.  
His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.

The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.  
All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols;  
worship him, all you gods!

Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice,  
because of your judgments, O LORD.

For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.

O you, who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them  
from the hand of the wicked.

Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

