

# The Prophets

## Lesson #4

### Introduction To Joel

#### I. **Structure Of Joel**

- A. The three brief chapters of this book are divided into two major sections of about equal length. In the first section (1:1-2:17) the prophet Joel introduces himself and speaks to his readers about their need to turn from their sins. The speaker in the second part of the book (2:18-3:21) is the all-powerful God, who warns His people about the approaching day of judgment and assures them of His abiding presence, in spite of their unworthiness.
- B. In the first section of the book, Joel calls attention to a devastating swarm of locusts that had recently swept through the land (1:4). These destructive locusts stripped the foliage from all trees, shrubs and crops (1:7). The people and livestock of Judah were facing the threat of starvation because of the famine that followed this invasion (1:15-18). As bad as this natural catastrophe had been, the prophet declares it will be as nothing in comparison to the coming day of the Lord. This is the day of judgment, when God will vent His wrath upon His sinful and disobedient people. Joel also informs the people that this terrible day can be avoided. The way of escape is to turn to God "with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning" (2:12).
- C. After Joel delivers his pleas for repentance, God Himself speaks to His wayward people. In spite of the famine, He declares that there will be plenty to eat in the days of blessing to come (2:18-19). This day of renewal will be marked by the outpouring of His Spirit on all people (2:28-29). All the nations of the world will take notice as God gathers His people together in the holy city of Jerusalem to serve as their ruler: "Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation." (3:20).

#### II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. The title of the book comes from its author, the prophet Joel, whose name means "Jehovah is God." The author of this book was the prophet Joel, who identifies himself in the introduction as "the son of Pethuel" (1:1). This is all we know about this spokesman for the Lord. From evidence in the book itself, we can assume that he knew a great deal about Jerusalem, Judah's capital city, and the rituals associated with temple worship (2:15). He probably was not a priest, since he called upon the priests to go into mourning because of the sins of the nation (1:13). Indeed, Joel's many references to agriculture (1:7, 10-

12) may indicate he was a farmer or a herdsman, although this is not certain.

- B. It is difficult to determine the exact date of this book's writing. Unlike most of the other Old Testament prophets, Joel mentions no kings of Judah or Israel and no historical events that might give us some indication about when he wrote his prophecy. The book has been dated from the very earliest writing prophet, 900 B.C., to the period after the exile, 400 B.C. Although evidence for the late date is impressive, the evidence falls in favor of the earlier date. Joel apparently wrote during the days of young King Joash (835-796) who was under the regency of priests when he ascended the throne of Judah at the age of seven (2 Kings 11:21). The early date is also supported by the fact that Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Ezekiel, Malachi and some of the psalmists quoted from him.
- C. The only enemies which are mentioned are the Phoenicians, Philistines, Edomites and Egyptians. The author never mentions the invasions of Assyria, Babylon or Syria (which is mentioned in 2 Kings 12:7). It seems incredible that he would not have mentioned these attacks if they had occurred within the time of his prophesy. Furthermore, the sin of idolatry is not mentioned while the regular worship of God is presupposed. Under the three monarchs preceding Joash, idolatry was prevalent; and under Joash himself pure worship was degraded as soon as Jehoiada the high priest died. This would argue for a date that was early in Joash's reign, when he was still under tutelage.

### III. ***Historical Background***

- A. Joel's prophesy is introduced by a plague of four stages of locusts: (1) Palmerworm (gnawing locusts), (2) Locust (swarming locust), (3) Cankerworm (creeping locust), and (4) Caterpillar (stripping locust). Although invasions of locusts were not uncommon to Palestine, this plague which Joel describes is such that the elderly cannot remember ever seeing another one like it.
- B. A vivid description of a locust plague is found in the December, 1915 issue of National Geographic Magazine where John D. Whiting experienced first-hand a plague of locusts. Whiting describes the plague as beginning late in February of that year, and extended over all Palestine and Syria from the borders of Egypt to the Taurus mountains. Similar plagues are known to have overtaken at least portions of Palestine in the years 1845, 1865, 1892, 1899 and 1904. The following are some of the accompanying phenomena in 1915. A loud noise was heard before the locusts were seen, produced by the flapping of myriads of locust wings and resembling the distant rumbling of waves (cf. Revelation 8:9). The sun was suddenly darkened. Showers of their excre-

ments fell thick and fast, resembling those of mice. Their elevation above the earth was at times hundreds of feet; at other times they flew quite low. "In Jerusalem, at least," Whiting says, "they invariably came from the northeast, going towards the southwest, establishing the accuracy of Joel's account in 2:20."

- C. Tons were captured and buried alive; many were thrown into cisterns, or into the Mediterranean Sea, and, when washed ashore, were collected and dried and used for fuel in Turkish baths. The government issued a proclamation in April, 1915 requiring every man from sixteen to sixty years of age to gather eleven pounds of locust eggs daily and deliver them to the officials. The stork, which the Arabs call Abu Saad, "the father of good luck," was especially numerous over Palestine in 1915, and greedily devoured the innumerable host of the locust-pest. Hens gorged themselves on them.
- D. Aaronshon, another witness of the plague in 1915, testifies that in less than two months after their first appearance, not only was every green leaf devoured, but the bark was peeled from the trees, which stood out white and lifeless, like skeletons. The fields, he says, were stripped to the ground. Even Arab babies left by their mothers in the shade of trees had their faces devoured before their screams were heard. The natives accepted the plague as a just judgment upon them because of their wickedness.
- E. It was, accordingly, a calamity such as this which Joel employed to call the husbandmen, the vinedressers, the priests and the drunkards of his day to repentance.

#### IV. ***Scriptural Contribution***

- A. The message of the book is the doom of the nations and the ultimate glory of God's cause. The invading locust army is to be looked upon by the people of God as a warning to them, out of which came the urgent call from God for repentance. The locusts, drought and fires heralded the "day of the Lord," which could be averted only by genuine repentance. The book echoes the familiar message: sin brings punishment, punishment produces repentance and repentance produces hope.
- B. The book of Joel is remarkable because it shows that a message from God can often come packaged in the form of a natural disaster. The truth of the book is rooted in the disastrous invasion of locusts, which Joel describes in such vivid language. This prophet teaches us that the Lord may use a natural disaster to stir in His people a renewed awareness of His will.

V. ***Special Considerations***

- A. Joel promised that if the people would seek God, there would come material blessings following by an outpouring of spiritual blessings. Although other prophets may have intimated or indicated the coming of the Holy Spirit, Joel is the one who makes a clear prediction of His coming, so graphically fulfilled in Jerusalem fifty days after the Lord's resurrection.
- B. Because of this prophecy, Joel is sometimes referred to the "prophet of Pentecost." It may be said that though the book begins in gloom, with a dark and terrifying picture, it closes with the anticipation of a bright and glorious day to come.