

August 9, 2020 Joel

Jason Rodgers

August 28, 2020

Sermon Audio file

Joel

Aug. 9, 2020

We're in a series on the Minor Prophets, a set of books most people skip right over in the Bible...

And that's first of all because they are called "minor," and so we think, "Well, if they are called 'minor', how important could they be?"

Plus, they can be hard to understand.

But like I told you last week, they are not called minor because they are unimportant, but because they are short.

Which, to be honest, I like—they get in, state their case, wrap up.

Some of you say, "Yeah, I wish your sermons were more minor."

Fair point.

These 12 books are short, but they are really important because they describe how life in Israel went so wrong, and what they could do to bring about restoration.

Joel's book is second in the Minor Prophets.

- You may not realize this, but Joel is actually one of the earliest

recorded prophets—and most people miss that because his book comes so late in the Old Testament—but your Old Testament is not arranged chronologically.

- Joel lived and prophesied early in Israel's history—after Solomon but before the exile. He probably was a student of Elisha.

His book was written during a time when a lot of things had gone wrong in Israel. They had some really bad leaders, and they had just suffered through a national plague (which I'll tell you about in a minute). There was civil unrest and economic problems. Their stock market was down, foreign trade was low, national confidence was non-existent, and their FBI director had just gotten fired. Almost everyone believed the country was headed in the wrong direction.

Joel writes to diagnose the problem—and he tells them there's only one real problem—they think a bunch of things are wrong but he tells them there is really only one thing wrong.

Joel reminds me of the story I heard about the guy who went to the doctor and complained that "everything on his body hurt." The doctor said, 'show me,' and he pointed to his shoulder and says, "It hurts here." Then he pointed to his head, "It hurts here." Then he pointed to his

stomach and said, “And it hurts here.” And the doctor said, “You idiot. You have a dislocated finger.”

Many times, we feel like a host of things in our lives are going wrong, when it’s actually only one thing that is wrong.

(This book is short—only 3 chapters, we’re going through the whole book.)

I. A Self-Inflicted Plague (Joel 1:4–2:5)

Joel opens his book with a description of gigantic locust plague:

“What the cutting locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust has left, the hopping locust has eaten; and what the hopping locust has left, the destroying locust has eaten.” (Joel 1:4)

Joel uses this locust plague as both an illustration of their sin as well as a warning of God’s future judgement of their sin.

(Illustration)

Let me talk 1st about the Illustration aspect: Like the locust plague, the devastating power of sin is total, gradually destroying everything in its path.

The laws God gave us are life—his commandments and rule in our lives lead to our flourishing.

We see this illustrated in the Creation account. When God created the earth, it began as a dark, shapeless, chaotic mass. Genesis 1:2 says that God’s word then spoke into that chaos and brought life and beauty and order out of it.

o This shows what God’s word does when it enters our lives—it brings order and beauty.

Sin, by contrast, unravels creation and plunges our lives back into darkness, and God’s judgments in Scripture often illustrate that.

We saw that most clearly in the 10 Plagues... /not magic tricks, but the systematic reversal of Creation. Not just to show off his power, but to illustrate what Pharaoh’s rebellion was doing to the world.

We see that same kind of picture again here with the locusts.

(Warning)

...warning of a coming judgment, one much more terrible than the locusts

Joel says that unless Israel wakes up, God is going to send the armies of Babylon into Israel like a horde of locusts. Listen to how Joel prophesies about the Babylonian invasion in terms of the locust plague:

1:5–7; 2:2–5

And here’s the thing: The active wrath of God—the lightning bolt—is usually just an extension of, and affirmation of, the passive wrath. In his active wrath, he affirms and extends what we have chosen for ourselves.

No one has helped me get my mind around the wrath of God as much as C. S. Lewis. He said,

Sin is like cancer. It never stops growing. And we live forever. There’s a lot of things that wouldn’t be worth worrying about it they only grew in us for 70 or 80 years. But what does it look like for that temper and jealousy to grow in you unabated for a million years? Hell is precisely the technical term for what it would

be.”3

God doesn't destroy, sin destroys. And when you understand that, you'll start to see any earthly experiences of God's judgment—like this plague of locusts—as expressions of God's mercy.

- God is trying to let you see where sin is taking you before it is too late.
- A lot of Bible readers wonder how the threats of judgment we see all through the MP are consistent with God's love.

o (Remember, if you were here last week, the Minor Prophets started with one of the most mind-bending illustrations of God's love—Hosea's faithful, persistent love to a notoriously unfaithful wife.

o And you may wonder how to reconcile these warnings of judgment with that beautiful picture of love. This is how.)

Any experience of the painful consequences of our sin before it's too late is God, in mercy, in love, trying to wake you up.

o He's not trying to pay you back but bring you back.

Is something like this happening with you right now?

- Maybe you feel like “locusts” are eating away at every part of your life.

o You are trying to save money, but God keeps letting stuff break down.

o You are trying to be better in your marriage, but new issues of conflict keep cropping up.

o You keep trying new strategies to get happy, but it always feels like only a skin-deep, pseudo-happiness.

o (If you have to spend money every day to get happy, that means nothing is solid on the inside.)

o If you are constantly having to find an escape from real life to be happy—shopping, TV, porn, a hobby, drinking—that means something is rotten on the inside.

God is trying to wake you up. No new strategy is going to fix you. And that's because the source of the problem is not found in the horizontal. It's a vertical problem.

And good news, bad news: God has more locusts than you have solutions. Quit looking for solutions!

In order for God to bring you to your senses, he has to bring you to end of yourself.

For some of you, he's been calling out to some of you for years, but you haven't been ready to listen because you haven't come to the end of yourself yet.

In order for God to make you new, he's got to rip out the old. He has to tear you down. So, don't be surprised if your world keeps crumbling.

You might be happy with just little changes... but God has so much more for you. The shag carpet may not bother you. But God doesn't like it. He will rip it up.

God has so much more for you than you have for yourself, which is why he allows the locusts to wake you up.

So again: Where is this happening for you? Is there something in your life that maybe you are asking God to take away, but you should realize instead that God is trying to send you a warning through it?

So, what does God say?

II. What God Wants (Joel 2:12-13)

12 “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 and rend your hearts and not your garments.”*

The thing to notice here is the kind of repentance he is calling for is the kind that grows out of love. Look at the words: “All your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning, (tear) your hearts, not your garments...”

He’s describing repentance that comes from a broken heart. Not just a bent will, but a heart that is heartbroken over what its sin did to God.

Because that’s the only kind of repentance that really works.

The reason some of us can’t repent effectively is that we don’t really love God.

Which is the connection to fasting.

Some people treat fasting like it earns God’s favor. Almost like it’s a way of inflicting a mild punishment on yourself.

Muslims around the world are about to enter Ramadan...

But that goes against everything else the gospel teaches.

Forgiveness is given as a gift.

Fasting, for the Christian, is an expression of longing for God.

We don’t fast in order to gain favor with God—like Muslims do—but as a grateful response to the favor God has already given us in Jesus.

In a fast you say, “God, I need your power in my life—in my family or in our church and I am heartbroken that I don’t have it

o Things are not “OK!”

o And what I need is not a better marriage or a little

more financial help or a new boss or for this person to leave me alone, what I need is your presence and power in the center of my life and I want that even more than food!"

- o Or you cry out to God and say, 'I'm not ok with my kids not knowing Jesus and I want that more than anything!"

- o Or when we as a church say, "I'm not ok with the amount of people in our community who don't know Jesus and the amount of families in our church splitting up and the injustice that still affects people in our community and the tragic amount of people in our world who still haven't heard about Jesus and I want your presence and power in those things more than food!"

God presence and power flow through a repentance that grows out of love for him.

Which may make you ask the question: Well, how do we learn to have those feelings again? You say, "I've lost that loving feeling..."
How do you fix that?

Start with Hosea! This is why Hosea comes 1st in the Bible (Not accidental). Start with his love for you demonstrated in how he comes for you faithfully again and again!

Joel says it himself in vs. 2:13

Return to God because of who he is. Think about that love... Grasping the love of God for us produces love for God in us.

1 John 4:19, "We love, because he first loved us."

You'll learn to repent like this when we submerge ourselves in the truth of the gospel

You can only learn to repent of your sin the more you immerse yourself in the free and gracious love of God

Watch now what God promises will happen when they do... Several things:

III. How God Responds (2:14-29)

[2:14] "Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him,"

- Turn and relent = mercy: "leave a blessing." = Grace: Mercy is withholding from us wrath that we do deserve; grace is his pouring out on us goodness that we do not deserve.

- o If you break into my house and steal my stuff and I catch you,

and I don't call the cops, that is mercy. (I am withholding from you the trouble that you deserve.) But if I go on from there to say, "Well, obviously, you are in financial need" and I give you a check for \$10,000 to help get you back on your feet," that is grace. I am not only withholding from you what you do deserve, I am giving to you goodness and privilege that you don't deserve.

- o (Don't actually try this, btw, I'll just call the cops).

God not only wants to shield his wrath from you, he wants to return blessing and prosperity to your life.

Let's go on 2:19

That means .

- o He'll actually pour out blessings on you.

But this verse points to something else, too: “you will be satisfied.” - contentment

Which is a greater blessing? For God to dump stuff on your life, or to enable you to be happy with what he’s given you?

Contentment is one of the greatest heavenly gifts:

Isn’t this what we are always trying to teach our kids? You don’t need every new version of every new toy to be happy. Happiness with your stuff has more to do with your character than your possessions. Contentment is a character quality, not a condition.

Sometimes God will bless you with more stuff, sometimes he’ll give you greater contentment in the stuff you already have.

Sometimes God will bless you by taking away the pain, sometimes he’ll give you joy and peace within the pain.

He goes on, in another of my favorite verses in the OT: 2:25

This is . God will go back and make up for in your life what sin destroyed.

Has there ever been another expression of grace like this? This how much God wants to love and bless us: He will replace, restore, and make up for what sin has destroyed in our lives relationally, financially, emotionally.

Sometimes, you’ll experience that on earth; other aspects you won’t experience it until you get to eternity.

- o A good example of this is Job who lost everything—fortune, family, health (who wasn’t suffering for his sin, just suffering). But in the end, what he lost was restored 7 times... a picture...

What has sin destroyed in your life?

- o Has divorce destroyed your heart or your family?
- o Or have you just made decisions that you think mess up your life beyond repair?

Return to me, says the Lord, “and I will restore the years the locusts have eaten.”

Your life is not over. If you return to God, he promises that all you went through will be swallowed up in goodness.

It’s a joy that will never end! When we’ve been there 10,000 years... sing of God’s grace...

That will free you from the despair of regret! Or bitterness. No one has ever taken from you what God will not restore in abundance in eternity.

A couple other promises here: 2:28

- A couple of things here: Peter cites this verse in Acts 2 as being fulfilled by the coming of the Spirit, saying it is God’s presence in us, and the Spirit’s presence would better to us than any other earthly blessing. He’s more life-giving than money, more secure than good health. More constant than great relationships.

- If you are a believer, you have the very Spirit of God—that created the world and raised Jesus from the

dead, in you. Look at your neighbor: If they are Christian, they have the actual Spirit of God in them. You say, "They don't look like it!" Well, you don't either. But the Creator of the galaxies loved that person enough to fuse himself into them permanently.

And he's got a job for us: *"...your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...

Peter says this points to the empowerment of the Spirit in the church for mission.

Jesus had said that when we got the Holy Spirit he would be our power for mission: "You will receive power, after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses..."

That's the way you know the Holy Spirit is in you: not that you feel serene at night, but you are a witness. You can't shut up about it.

- When you've been through all that Joel promised in chapter 2,

you're going to have something to say!

o Isn't that what happens when you fall in love? You annoy the

heck out of everybody talking about your new man... but you

can't help it! You have to tell somebody!

o Or when you are excited about your team winning the

- When God restores you, you are going to want to tell somebody.

God doesn't just revive and restore you so that you feel better on the inside. He wants some witnesses.

And the Holy Spirit comes on you to help you with that. The book of Joel opened with God telling Joel: 1:3

Is this happening? Is God's Spirit on this church?

o Are you telling your friends—who is your one? o Are we busy telling our kids?

These are all the things God wants to give to us—mercy, grace, blessing, restoration, presence, and power for witness:

You say, "What happened to all that wrath God had against our sin? The hordes of locusts." That's a great question.

Throughout the book, Joel keeps talking about the coming "day of the Lord" where God will pour out his judgment on sin.

On that day, Joel says, 2:31, "the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood." (2:31-32)

And there the wrath of God will be poured out for our sin.

Paul said this day Joel refers to was fulfilled at the cross (Romans 10:13).

When Jesus died, the sun was darkened. The locusts of God's wrath devoured the body of Jesus, and he was sent into the exile of God's wrath on our behalf.

He took our sin in our place so that nothing but the power and blessing of resurrection would remain for us. He took the judgment dimension of the Day of the Lord into himself, so that our "Day of the Lord" would only be about resurrection, reunion and power. Paul quotes Joel in Romans 10 and says, 'God has taken wrath, so that whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved!'

God wants to give us all these things. The first sermon preached after the resurrection, Joel was the text. And the message is, "Just ask! I'll give you the power and presence you ask, just ask!"

The absence of God's presence and power and blessing from our lives (or our church) has nothing to do with his unwillingness. It's our sin: Isaiah 59:1-2

Question: How badly do we want the presence of God? In our church? In our nation? Answer: As seriously as we take sin and severely as we hunger for God's presence. These are shown by our heartbroken repentance and fasting...