

Joel: I Will Pour My Spirit on You

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Prayer of Illumination

Calm us now, O Lord, into a quietness that heals and listens. Open wounded hearts to the balm of your Word. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. Amen.

Background

There's a shroud of mystery around the prophet Joel—we don't know much about him or exactly when he lived. No kings or historical events are mentioned in his book. Scholars seem to think that Joel prophesied in or around Jerusalem sometime after the exile—possibly in the mid to early 500s BC.

We do know the name Joel means *Yahweh is God* and his father's name was Pethuel. Joel was familiar with agriculture and temple rituals.

If you don't like creepy crawly things, the book of Joel might make you squirm a bit. There are locusts, lots of locusts, in Joel. In a plague of biblical proportions, locusts were like an invading army ravaging the Holy Land.

Joel describes it vividly, "Before them is the Garden of Eden and behind them is a desolate wasteland."

Although Joel uses apocalyptic language for these locusts—he wasn't exaggerating much. One square mile of locust swarms can include anywhere from 100-200 million locusts. They eat their bodyweight in food each and every day. A swarm of locusts can completely strip a full-grown tree in fifteen minutes.

In the 1980s, a swarm of locusts devastated Africa and consumed enough food for tens of thousands of people. And locusts don't just eat crops—they also consume things like straw huts.

With fangs like a lioness, this army of locusts laid waste vines, fig trees, and grain fields in Israel. There was no new wine, oil, or grain for sacrifices in the temple—temple services even had to be suspended. Humans, animals, the land, even all of creation groaned for lack of food. Joy had dried up and withered away for the people.

Joel says that this plague of locusts is a foreshadowing of the Day of the Lord—a decisive time in the future where God will intervene in history once and for all on behalf of his people—ending the present age as we know it.

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Joel offers no specific reason *why* this devastation by the locusts has happened. But he does tell his people *how* they should respond:

- Wake up! Weep and wail! Pray and cry out to God.
- Fast, put on sackcloth.
- “Rend your hearts, not your clothing.”
- Do a gut check, a heart check-up.
- Return to God wholeheartedly.

In other words, change from the inside out. Don’t just make an outward show of things.

Well, Israel listened to Joel and turned to God. So, let’s hear now about God’s promise to his people, and even all creation, to bring about a Great Reversal of their devastation.

Scripture: Joel 2:21-29 (NRSV)

Do not fear, O soil;
 be glad and rejoice,
 for the Lord has done great things!
Do not fear, you animals of the field,
 for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
 the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

O children of Zion, be glad
 and rejoice in the Lord your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
 he has poured down for you abundant rain,
 the early and the later rain, as before.
The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
 the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years
 that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
 my great army, which I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
 and praise the name of the Lord your God,
 who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
 and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Joel 2:21-29 (NRSV)

How do you respond in a crisis?

How do you react when things go south?

In my life, I've pretty much tried all six of these responses:

flight, fight, freeze, faint, fix, or freak out.

When a catastrophic situation strikes, it's so easy to forget to breathe deep, step back, keep calm, assess the situation, and take in other perspectives.

The prophet Joel's task was to stand up in his moment of catastrophe and clarify for his people who God is, how God acts, and how God's people are to handle themselves in a time of crisis.

Today, we don't worry much about locusts, but disaster can strike in other ways—illness or death, financial problems, marital conflict, a child struggling, or natural disasters like floods or hurricanes.

When calamity strikes, our understanding of God is at risk or vulnerable.

Our explanations run rampant in such times:

God didn't show up.

God doesn't care.

God is powerless.

I'm hopeless and alone.

Joel steers us in the right direction.

Yes—grieve. Lament. Pray. Cry out. Carry your pain into God's presence. Turn towards God, don't turn away from him. Above all, do not fear.

In fact, Joel tells us, be glad and rejoice in the Lord, for the Lord who has done great things, will do great things.

Every Christian has a calling to praise. God bids us to take a leap of faith and a jump of joy out of our dismal present into God's land of promise. Joel prods us and lovingly pushes us,

"Thank God ahead of time for what he's going to do—even if you can't see it yet."

Even if nothing has changed outwardly, we can face the future with lighter hearts because God is with us, and his promised deliverance is on the way. A glorious reversal is about to take place.

So trust. Don't push the panic button. Believe in God's promises.

Rest and relax—God will not leave you abandoned.

*I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten ...*

*You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.*

Jesus assures us, "Don't worry about tomorrow—I've got this."

This is an easy one to forget. When I start thinking about the future too much, it's like I'm trying to take it back from God's hands. And I pay the price. My stomach gets knotted, my pulse quickens. And then I remember Joel's words,

"Let the weak say I am strong."

I stop and remember I'm a child of God. My family is in God's hands. That this church is God's church. And I'm reassured again of the hope of a healed future and covenantal blessing that God has promised.

Joel also makes me think of the life of Jesus:

*The threshing floors will be covered in grain,
The vats will spill over with new wine.*

Remember when the wine ran out at the wedding in Cana, *what did Jesus do?* He turned the water into wine.

Or how about when the multitudes came to hear Jesus and there was no food. *What did Jesus do?* He miraculously multiplied the bread and fed the thousands.

Jesus still feeds our need at the Table with his bread and his wine.

This is the kind of God we serve. God loves to come in—not a moment sooner than he has to—and he provides. God comes through.

We just have to believe. To walk by faith, daily.

Will we trust God and walk in an abundance mindset or a scarcity mindset?

Will we be dominated by fear and anxiety and worst-case scenarios or will we walk in peace knowing that God will provide?

When we're going through hard times, everything is cleared away. All we have is God to depend upon. This deepens and makes our relationship with God more vital and close and urgent.

Joel reminds us we can trust God because God's trustworthy:

*God is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.*

And unlike the locusts, God will leave a blessing behind him. In front of God may be a desolate wasteland, but when he moves through, a lush garden and the tree of life emerge. We've got to let these spiritual realities grip and govern our lives—day by day, moment by moment.

Joel also tells us God not only gives us physical blessings, but Joel tells us he gives us spiritual blessings as well.

- God will pour out his Spirit upon us when we feel dried up.
- God's Spirit births a new vision in us when our dreams have withered and died.
- The Spirit imparts in us life-giving roots straight to God.

The good news is that God sends his Breath of life to all people—male and female, rich and poor, young and old. The Spirit transcends the superficial distinctions that formerly divided us and brings a divine unity and wholeness.

Do you remember in the church calendar when this passage is most often read? Peter quoted this passage at Pentecost—when the Holy Spirit fell upon the church. The followers of Jesus were on their own. Jesus returned to the Father. They had no idea what to do next. So they cried out to God. And God gave his Spirit, blowing fresh wind into their sails to continue the ministry of Christ in power.

I'm a big fan of Leonard Cohen, who had one of the greatest late-career resurgences of any musical artist. In 2005, it was discovered that his longtime manager had not only embezzled more than \$5 million from the 71-year-old's bank accounts, but also sold many of Cohen's publishing rights. His retirement was gone. After being inducted to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, the singer-songwriter came out of retirement and announced that he was going to generate some much-needed income the old-fashioned way — by going back on tour after 15 years off the stage. "Leonard was very reluctant at first," said his manager. "From his view, touring had always been a disaster — he would say, 'Performing is an opportunity for a thousand humiliations.' "

With his hand forced, Cohen formed a band and rehearsed for three months. During the next five years, selling out bigger and bigger concerts, Cohen's touring would propel his career to new and greater heights than he had ever known before.

But this wasn't drudgery or a "job" for Cohen. His intensity and joy onstage were evident. Well into his 70s, he would skip on and offstage, kneel and doff his fedora in tribute to his musicians. He would tear up at climactic moments. His three-hour-long concerts received glowing reviews by critics and fans alike. He ended up playing nearly 400 shows to more than 2 million people during his return from retirement. Cohen also released three albums of new material and a number of live albums. Friends said there was never a sense with Leonard Cohen of 'I finally triumphed.' Just a sense of gratitude. Leonard genuinely felt privileged to have the opportunity to share his music every night."

One of the last songs Cohen penned before his death in 2016 was the song *Come Healing*:

*O gather up the brokenness
And bring it to me now
The fragrance of those promises
You never dared to vow*

*The splinters that you carry
The cross you left behind
Come healing of the body
Come healing of the mind*

*O see the darkness yielding
That tore the light apart
Come healing of the reason
Come healing of the heart*

*O longing of the branches
To lift the little bud
O longing of the arteries
To purify the blood*

*And let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb*

If you're feeling like a withered fig tree, shriveled seed, or a dried-up riverbed—rejoice, for the God who has done great things WILL do great things *once again!*

The LORD, not the locust, has the last word.

Amen.

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