

THE DAY OF THE LORD IS NEAR **Joel 1:1-2:11**

On December 26, 2004, a massive earthquake struck off the coast of Indonesia. The quake triggered a devastating tsunami that killed approximately 230,000 people across south Asia. It was the greatest natural disaster of recent memory. The world was rightly shocked by extent of the devastation and the unbelievable loss of life. Still to this day, thousands of people remain unaccounted for. In the wake of the tragedy, many people began to ask, "Where was God in the midst of the tsunami?" The question prompted a number of different answers. Some said God has no control over such things. He can only work to bring good out of the disaster, but he has no control over preventing the disaster. This doesn't seem to square with biblical testimony concerning God's government of the world, and it also doesn't seem all that helpful either. If God has no control over such disasters, aren't we simply at the mercy of nature?

Still others said that the tragedy was evidence of a fallen creation, which is quite true as far as it goes. The devastation associated with natural disaster is certainly an evidence of the fall, and it reminds us of the need for redemption across the creation. But isn't there something else that should be said? All in all, the events of the tsunami demonstrated the need for Christians to think biblically about disaster and devastation in the here and now.

So, how would the Bible answer that question? Does the Bible answer that question? This morning, we begin our study in the book of Joel, and what we will find is that the Bible absolutely gives us the framework to understand precisely these kinds of tragedies. Joel 1:1-2:11 is a good starting place to answer the question, "Where is God in the midst of disaster?"

Joel ministered during a time of crisis. The nation was crushed by disaster, and Joel, as the LORD's prophet, was sent to give God's perspective on such times. As we understand Joel's words to the nation in his day, we are equipped to better address the times in which we live, even when those times are full of disaster and tragedy. The truths of this morning's passage are difficult. They will stretch us, I think, because they stretched me this week as I studied. In light of this, it is only appropriate that we begin with prayer, asking that the Lord would give us open minds and soft hearts to hear his truth.

Father, give us grace to embrace the truth of your Word this morning. May the Holy Spirit illuminate our minds to see and embrace your truth. Amen.

SETTING THE SCENE

The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel: 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? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. 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. (Joel 1:1-4)

The historical context is extremely important for understanding the book of Joel. As the book opens, the nation of Judah is in the midst of national crisis, unlike anything they have encountered before. A massive locust invasion has devastated the land. Wave after wave of locusts has invaded the nation, and there is nothing left. Locust swarms are devastating events, still quite dreaded in the Middle East and North Africa to this day. These swarms are large groupings of grasshoppers, each about 4 inches long, that become agitated during the early stages of life and begin swarming. They tend to travel at night and feed during the day. When traveling, these swarms ride the winds and move up to 300 miles at a time. When they land, they devour every green thing in sight. Some swarms have been known to contain over a billion locusts and cover hundreds of square miles. And they do often come in waves. With each successive day during a swarm, another wave will land in the area, eating whatever they can find. That is what has happened to the nation during Joel's day.

Joel goes on to describe the results of the invasion in verses 5-12.

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. 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. 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. Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth. The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes. Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. 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. (Joel 1:5-12)

In short, everything is devastated. There is no food, no livestock, no wine, no grain, nothing. Even the religious life of the nation is threatened. Without grain, there are no grain sacrifices to offer, and there is no food to keep the animal sacrifices alive. The people cannot eat, and they cannot even worship. Joel's words in verse 12 are appropriate – gladness itself has dried up. There is nothing left but desolation.

Normal life comes to an end.

Midtown Baptist Church

"The Day of the LORD is Near" (Joel 1:1-2:11)

We may not feel the weight of Joel's opening description because we do not live in an agricultural society. The closest contemporary parallel would be a catastrophe that destroyed our power grid and communication system. Life as we know it would stop. No mass communication, no food preservation, no transportation systems, no security. Nothing. Normal life would stop, and we would be left wondering, "How will things go on from here?" I imagine that is something of how the people of felt during this locust invasion. Things that people took for granted are now gone. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the future existence of the nation is in question at this point. Will they survive and continue as God's people?

THE WORD OF THE LORD COMES TO JOEL

It is in the midst of this crisis that the word of the LORD comes to Joel. We are given little background to Joel, other than what verse 1 tells us – the word of the LORD came to him. This is really the most important thing to know about Joel. He is God's spokesman. And as God's spokesman, he has something to say to the nation regarding the current crisis. This is the point of verses 2-3, where Joel calls the people to listen. He will give them God's perspective on what has happened. How should God's people think about disaster? The prophet Joel will tell them. It is up to them to listen.

As God's spokesman, Joel tells the people how they should respond to this national crisis. They should cry out to God with whatever desperation they can muster.

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. 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... 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. 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. (Joel 1:13-14, 19-20)

Joel calls the people to mourn and cry out to God. The priests are to exchange their robes of worship for clothes of mourning. And then they are to lead the people in a national service of repentance. Once the people face the reality that they have nothing left, they have only one option – cry out to God. What else can they do? Joel's point in chapter is this – the devastation should drive the people to God. From Joel's perspective, this is the only possible response. Everything else is gone.

But, this response raises one of the big questions of our passage. Why such a religious response to natural disaster? Joel calls the people to a national service of repentance. But this seems strange in

light of the fact that the crisis is a physical, natural disaster. Why the religious response to a natural disaster? Verse 15 hints at the answer.

Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels under the clods; the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are torn down because the grain has dried up. How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep suffer. (Joel 1:15-18)

According to Joel, the locust invasion points to something greater – the final day of the LORD. Joel's mission is to get the people to see that this locust invasion is about more than locusts! It is a warning, a foreshadowing of God's greater judgment that will come on the day of the LORD. This is how the prophets typically work. They relate contemporary events to God. That is what Joel is doing here with the locust plague. The devastation points to a greater reality, and that reality is the day of the LORD.

This phrase – the day of the LORD – is the key theme of Joel's ministry. It is the hinge on which the book turns. In order to understand Joel, we need to understand this phrase. Many of the Old Testament prophets used the phrase, though Joel is the most frequent. We can summarize the day of the LORD in two statements. On the one hand, the day of the LORD was the moment of God's final judgment on the nations who had persecuted and afflicted his people. So, it was the day of his vengeance against his enemies. But on the other hand, the day of the LORD also referred to the time when God would gather his people, purify their worship, and make them wholly devoted to him.

The prophets used the phrase to refer to both contemporary events and a final, future event. So, the day of the LORD could refer to God's judgment on Babylon or Egypt. But it also referred to a final day, when all of God's enemies would be finally defeated. Again, this is how the prophets would typically work. They could speak of something – an event or person – as being fulfilled both in the here and now and in the future. In that sense, many themes of the prophets are fulfilled incrementally, with contemporary fulfillments building to a climactic fulfillment in the last days.

MORE THAN LOCUSTS

That brings us to chapter 2, where we encounter more closely Joel's shocking explanation for the locust invasion. In chapter 2, Joel takes the locust invasion, and he personifies those locusts as an invading army on the day of the LORD.

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. 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. Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run. 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. Before them peoples are in anguish; all faces grow pale. Like warriors they charge; like soldiers they scale the wall. They march each on his way; they do not swerve from their paths. They do not jostle one another; each marches in his path; they burst through the weapons and are not halted. They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls, they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief. The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. 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? (Joel 2:1-11)

In terms of layout, chapter 2 is closely related to chapter 1. Chapter 1 opens with a call to listen. Chapter 2 opens with a call to listen. Chapter 1 describes the devastation of the locusts. Chapter 2 describes the devastation of an invading army. The two chapters parallel one another in terms of structure. Here's the point. Joel uses the contemporary event of the locust swarm as the material for his vivid description of the day of the LORD. These locusts are like the army of God. Just as the locust invasion resulted in total devastation that was unavoidable, so also will the day of the LORD. From Joel's perspective, the locust invasion is a harbinger of things to come. It is a prophetic sign, a pointer to the day of the LORD. And in Joel's mind, that day is imminent. It is coming soon. Therefore, the people should turn to God with heartfelt urgency. This is the LORD's perspective on the locust invasion, delivered through his prophet Joel.

Now, this connection raises another big question. Why is the day of the LORD approaching God's own people? I thought the day of the LORD was reserved for God's enemies. So, why does it fall on the nation? Joel doesn't give us a specific answer. There is no specific sin mentioned in the book. But I think we can discern an answer to the question, even without specifics. Think about what has happened in the nation. Everything related to normal life has been taken from them, and they are left only with God. The LORD used the disaster to drive them to himself. He took away all other supports until the people had nowhere to turn but him. From this perspective, I think we can say that before the locusts, the people had begun to live life with little to no reference to God. Maybe they thought that life would simply always go on as it had. There would be food. There would be worship in the temple. There would be goodness and gladness in the land. And over time, they grew complacent and slowly drifted away from the LORD. They

began to live life without reference to God; not overtly sinful, just complacent and content with themselves.

The locust invasion was a wake-up call. The LORD took away everything so that they would realize they needed him above all things. It was a call to reorient their lives to the LORD, to live with reference to him. And they needed to do this because if not, when the day of the LORD did finally arrive, it would result in their destruction rather than their salvation. This is why Joel calls the people to respond with brokenness. They need to cry out to God, to mourn and seek only him. Our message next week will focus entirely on this response to God, on this need to turn to him in brokenness and repentance.

DISASTER THAT LEADS TO DEPENDENCE

At this point, however, I think we should stop and reflect on what Joel's message means for us today. Joel addressed a specific historical situation, but his words are timeless. They apply to any era of history and any people who face disaster. That is true for us. We can and should learn from Joel at this point, though I will admit that these truths are at times difficult to embrace. So, I have two reflections that I want to offer on our passage at this point.

First reflection – at times, God will allow disaster to afflict his people so that they will turn to him in dependence. Did you notice that Joel never really explains where the locusts came from? In his mind, the answer is clear. God sent the locusts. That is why he refers to the invasion as the LORD's army in verse 11. The LORD sent the locust on his own people.

Why would God do this? Why would God allow such a disaster to strike his people? This is a hard question, and it is a question that many people try to answer when they face disaster in the here and now. Joel gives us an answer. At times, God will afflict his people so that they will realize their need and turn to him, their only true source of deliverance. Or, to say it another way, God uses the devastation to drive us to himself.

Now, some people will say, "Doesn't this question the goodness and kindness of God? A good God wouldn't send disaster on his own people." But follow me for a moment. Where will God's people find ultimate satisfaction? Where will God's people find true and lasting goodness? Where will God's people find actual salvation? The answer is only in God himself. Everything else will eventually fail us. Only God

brings ultimate satisfaction. Only God can deliver true and lasting goodness. Only God can save. Only God.

But don't we find it very easy to seek such realities in things other than God? Don't we find it easy to seek satisfaction in material things? Don't we think that goodness is found only when the comforts of life are flowing in rich supply? Isn't that true? I think it is. We crave satisfaction, goodness, salvation, but we seek those things in all the wrong places.

So, isn't then the ultimate display of God's love for us the fact that he will do whatever is necessary to wean us from those lesser things in order to deliver us finally to himself? Isn't the ultimate display of God's kindness and mercy that he warns us of the coming judgment so that we will flee to him now and find final salvation?

With this in mind, do you see how God's use of disaster, even in the lives of his people, is actually a display of his goodness? It doesn't question his goodness and love; it shows us the extent of his goodness and love. God is so committed to his people and so committed to show them kindness that he will even use difficulty to deliver us to himself. The author C.S. Lewis referred to this as God's severe mercy. It is severe in that it hurts; it is painful. But it is mercy in that it delivers us from the greater judgment and provides us with the only lasting joy, the only true salvation. So, when disaster strikes, whether on a national scale or on an individual level, remember the mercy of God, even if it is severe in the moment. He will use whatever means necessary to deliver you from the great, final day and deliver you to his everlasting salvation.

DISASTER AS WARNING OF THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Second reflection – disaster in the here and now is a warning of final judgment and thus a call to turn to the LORD. I know this is hard to come to grips with; this is a difficult truth to be sure. But this is the clear point of Joel's prophecy. When disaster strikes today, we should see it as an imminent warning of the final judgment. The present is a warning of the future. Disasters are God's megaphone, loudly calling people to turn and seek only him, and to do so soon before the final day arrives. So, as God's people, when we see disaster and devastation around us, we should pause, examine our own hearts, and ask in what ways we need to turn to the LORD. Disaster should cause us to check our lives and make sure that we are living in relationship with the LORD as we should. Yes, we must respond with compassion to

those who are afflicted by disaster. And yes, we must mourn with those who have lost. Those things are a given. But in our compassion and in our service to others, we should also remind ourselves, “There is a great day coming. Am I ready to face it? In what ways do I need to turn to the LORD now? In what ways do I need to seek repentance right now?”

But, we must be careful here. We must be careful how we think and talk about this. I don't think Joel gives us warrant to identify specific sins that cause natural disaster. I think this is part of the reason why Joel doesn't identify a specific sin in the nation. He is addressing a general attitude of life without reference to God. In doing so, he gives us a wise pattern to follow. I don't think we can say, “God ordained this disaster in order to punish this specific thing.” It is not wise or warranted to make such specific statements. Joel's primary concern is not identifying the specific cause of disaster. Instead, his primary concern is to create a willingness and desire for God's people to repent. So, we must be careful in how we talk about this.

Here's another caution. I don't think Joel gives us warrant to say that *personal* disaster is always the result of sin. Sometimes, people will endure personal disaster, and someone will say, “Well, it is because of sin in your life.” I don't think we can say that from Joel's message. Remember, Joel was addressing the nation, not individuals. When individuals face disaster, we cannot always be sure that the cause is sin. We simply don't know. It could be a moment of testing or trial. We must not make it sound like personal disaster or suffering is always the result of personal sin. That is not what Joel has in mind. Joel is addressing the nation as a whole; his focus is on the larger scale than individuals.

Devastation in the here and now points ahead to the final day and calls us to repent. That was Joel's message to the nation, and that is Joel's message to us, even if it is difficult for us to hear.

THE DAY OF THE LORD AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST

I want to close this morning by considering Joel's final question. It is found in verse 11. Look there with me. “For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?” As you read through this passage, it is easy to be frightened. This is a difficult passage because the day of the LORD is a sobering reality. In light of all that Joel has said, you feel the force of this rhetorical question. If the day of the LORD is truly like this, who can endure it? This is a good question to ask.

And we are, in some ways, more equipped to answer this question than Joel was. We have seen the greatest manifestation of the day of the LORD yet, and we have witnessed someone survive it. Look at verse 10, where Joel writes that the day of the LORD will come with an earthquake and the sky will be darkened. We have heard of these events before, at the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior. When Christ was crucified, the earth trembled and the sky grew dark. Why? Because at that moment, the judgment of the day of the LORD, judgment reserved for God's people, was being poured out on God's Son. In that moment on the cross, Jesus endured the worst of the day of the LORD for us. Yes, there is a day coming where those who oppose God will be punished. But that day will hold salvation for all who repent of their sins and trust in Christ. Why will it hold salvation? Because Jesus lived through the judgment of that day for us, so that we might be able to say, "We will endure that great and final day, not because we are able to on our own, but because we are found in the One who has endured it for us." In Christ, we find safe refuge from the day of the LORD. Those who are hidden in Christ by faith will be saved when the great and awesome day arrives. Are you hidden in him this morning?

When disaster strikes around us, we should pay attention to the warning. When disaster strikes, we should turn to God and cry out to him alone. But most importantly, when disaster strikes and reminds us of the final day, we should remind ourselves of the sure refuge we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. The day of the LORD will not result in our judgment because we are hidden in the one who endured the judgment of that day for us. Let's pray.