

POTOMAC HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Joel - A Lesson on Hard and Soft Hearts **“Lessons from God” - a series from the Minor Prophets**

INTRODUCTION: *The World's Greatest Natural Disasters* ¹

People are fascinated with natural disasters ... unless of course, the disaster is happening to them. FOX even has a show called *The World's Greatest Natural Disasters* ... and as long as we're sitting in our living rooms, we get a certain visceral charge out of watching it. There's something about seeing nature run amok that sort of speeds up your heart.

Don't worry if you've missed that show, because I've compiled a short list of the most famous natural disasters that have happened in our country in the last 100 years. This is big scale stuff ...

The most famous earthquake occurred in San Francisco in 1906. This jolt hit 7.9 on the Richter scale and it destroyed 28,000 buildings and killed 3,000 people.

The most spectacular volcanic eruption occurred on Mount St. Helens in Washington State in 1980. The blast blew off the top 1,300 feet of the mountain, sent gas and ash 12 miles into the air, and killed 57 people.

The most expensive hurricane hit South Florida in 1992. Hurricane Andrew killed 41 people and caused \$17.5 Billion in damages.

But as much as we'd like to think that everything big happens in America, our disasters pale in comparison to the rest of the world.

The famous Krakatoa volcano in Indonesia killed 36,000 people in 1883.

In 1976, an earthquake in Tangshan, China killed a quarter million people.

And in 1970, a cyclone hit Bangladesh with such force it killed half a million people.

And if you think the earth has been relatively quiet lately, you're not keeping up with current events. In the year 2000, the world was hit with 850 natural disasters. That's 2.3 disasters each and every day of the year. And the people who keep track of this stuff say it's getting worse, not better. Floods and famine are hitting different parts of the world at the same time.

Marcy – it's looking like disaster relief is going to be a pretty secure job field ... as long as you can stay out of the disasters themselves.

Sometimes we look at nature and we see beauty and wonder.

Other times, we look and we see nothing but death and destruction.

I mean, who's in charge here?

Well ... the Bible says that God is.

Genesis 1:1, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*”

Not only did He create everything, but He keeps it going.

Colossians 1:16-17, “*Christ is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—kings, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities. Everything has been created through Him and for Him. [17] He existed before*

¹ Introduction is adapted from What Ticks God Off by Bruce & Stan, pages 14-18.

*everything else began, and **He holds all creation together.***”

Well, if God holds all creation together, what is He doing when all creation seems to be coming apart?

Well, the answer is, and I don't mean this to be a smart-aleck answer, but it appears that ... God is doing whatever He wants.

And that comes from **Psalm 135:6-7**, *“The Lord does whatever pleases Him throughout all heaven and earth, and on the seas and in their depths. [7] He causes the clouds to rise over the earth. He sends the lightning with the rain and releases the wind from His storehouses.”*

We're quick to give God credit when it comes to rain that breaks a drought or a beautiful sunset. But when it comes to hurricanes and earthquakes, we try to keep God out of it ... even though the insurance companies call them **“Acts of God.”**

So ... why is the world falling apart? What is God doing? And what does this have to do with the Prophet Joel?

Good questions ... but we're not ready for the answers yet.

Because we need to look at this God and nature thing a little more first.

BACKGROUND ON NATURE:

The world is not now the way it was back when God first made it. **Genesis 1:31** says, *“Then God looked over all He had made, and He saw that it was excellent in every way. This all happened on the sixth day.”*

There was no suffering, no pain, no disease, no earthquakes, no floods, no famines, no destruction, and no death. It was truly ... heaven on earth.

Then sin entered the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve and since that time sin has affected everyone of us, **Romans 3:23**, *“For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard.”*

But sin didn't affect only people, it also affected everything else in the world because God said to Adam in **Genesis 3:17**, *“Because you listened to your wife and ate the fruit I told you not to eat, I have placed a curse on the ground.”*

Sin personally offends God ... that we know.

But sin also dramatically affected the world.

Romans 8:20-22, *“Against its will, everything on earth was subjected to God's curse. [21] All creation anticipates the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. [22] For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”*

Creation, i.e. nature, is subjected to God's curse and the Bible says it is “groaning.” And so we have earthquakes and hurricanes and famines and floods. We also have global warming, phenomenal pollution and runaway comets to worry about ... think about that the next time you go to the beach and have to put on spf-97 sunscreen.

The bottom line is that God uses the forces of nature to wake us up to the reality of sin and to the effect of sin in our lives and in the world.

Natural disasters are supposed to get our attention.

Natural disasters are supposed to remind us that something's wrong with the world.

Natural disasters, as well as man-made disasters, remind us that **SIN** is alive and well on Planet Earth, and just so happens to be alive and well in your heart and mine.

And that's what Joel wants to talk to us about.

BACKGROUND: *Who is this guy?*²

We are in a series on the Minor Prophets that I've entitled "Lessons from God." This is the eighth message, having already looked at Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk. These men are known as the Minor Prophets, tucked away at the end of the Old Testament. They let people know what is **really going on**. Prophets see who God is, and what He's up to, and then they come with a message.

These books chip away at our hard hearts, reveal our lack of mercy, scrutinize our faith ... and then stretch it. They confront us with powerful themes of the Sovereignty of God, God's constant love and forgiveness, our need for faith and repentance, and God's demand that we listen to His Word and take it seriously.

And hopefully we will learn those things as we spend the rest of the summer reading and learning from the Minor Prophets. I'm not going through them in Biblical order, but in chronological order, and now we've gotten to Joel.

So what do we know about Joel?

Basically ... nothing.

We know virtually nothing about the prophet, we're not real sure of exactly when he was writing, except it seems to be sometime before the fall of Jerusalem, and he doesn't address it to anybody in particular, though he does mention Jerusalem, so it fits that it's being given to the people of Judah before their fall to the Babylonians in the 6th Century B.C.

At least that's our best guess.

However, the lack of chronological markers, as well as the nonexistent biography, gives Joel a timelessness that forces us to focus on the message.

Which is good ... because it's a difficult book to understand.

Joel repeatedly skips back and forth between literal descriptions and metaphors and it's easy to get lost. The book of Joel opens dramatically with a description of a natural disaster that has hit the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This isn't a run-of-the-mill Fox News disaster. This is a plague of locusts so thick it turns a fertile, agriculturally based economy into a hard, barren desert, both figuratively and literally.

We start with ...

JOEL 1: THE DISASTER FROM THE LORD

Joel 1:1-5, *"The Lord gave this message to Joel son of Pethuel. [2] Hear this, you leaders of the people! Everyone listen! In all your history, **has anything like this ever happened before?** [3] Tell your children about it in the years to come. Pass the awful story down from generation to generation. [4] After the cutting locusts finished eating the crops, the swarming locusts took what was left! After them came the hopping locusts, and then the stripping locusts, too!"*

This kind of "scorched earth" plague has never happened to the people of Judah before. It happened once to the Egyptians, but those in Judah sort of thought they deserved it. But not here, not in Judah, not at Jerusalem. It's so bad that God tells them verse 3, to, *"Tell your children about it in the years to come. Pass the awful story down from generation to generation"*

We want to downplay tragedy. We want people to tell us that everything's going to be fine. We're sitting in the E.R. with a gaping head wound, and we want to hear the doctor say, "Oh, you'll be up and around in no time. It's just a flesh wound."

² Background and Exposition of the text is adapted from Unexpected Wisdom by Dan Schmidt, page 9-14, 126-139 and What Ticks God Off, pages 18-28.

Joel offers no such hope. He tells them that this is the worst possible thing that could happen to them. And just to make sure they get the point, he singles out different groups of people that need to get this, that need to understand this.

He picks on the leaders in verses 1-4.

He tells the drunks in verses 5-7 (no vineyards = no wine).

He hits the priests in verses 8-10 and the farmers in verses 11 and 12.

He comes back at the priests in verses 13-14.

He includes all the people in verse 16; all the crops in verse 17; all the animals in verses 18 and 20.

It may seem like overkill for this prophet to get in everyone's face about the locusts. You would think that the scorched earth would be enough to convince them that they had a problem! But evidently, they were treating this disaster rather lightly. So Joel is trying to get their attention.

It's always been this way with people and disasters. At first we're shocked, and maybe bothered some, but soon we get back to business as usual and do our best to put the disaster out of our minds.

"Montana is on fire? Hey, happens every summer."

"A mud slide has killed thousands in India? (Yawn) That's too bad."

"Millions are dying of starvation in Africa? Didn't that happen a few years ago, don't they ever learn?"

"World relief organizations are pulling out of Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan because of all the violence? Well, they got what's coming to them. Do you wanna go to Starbucks?"

And so it goes. We hear about something tragic, we process it for a minute, and then we shrug our shoulders and move on.

But Joel is trying to tell them, and us, that indifference to disaster, and tragedy, and suffering offends God. But it reveals an indifference to the reign of sin in the world. And sin offends God.

Do you really think God allows devastation occur just to provide a story line for CNN? No ... it is a warning to God's people.

It is a warning of ...

JOEL 2.1-11: THE DAY OF THE LORD

Actually, the warning first comes back in **Joel 1:15**, "*The day of the Lord is on the way, the day when destruction comes from the Almighty. How terrible that day will be!*"

The Day of the Lord sounds like an invasion. The locusts have come upon them like a mighty army.

Joel 2:1-3, "*Blow the trumpet in Jerusalem! Sound the alarm on My holy mountain! Let everyone tremble in fear because the day of the Lord is upon us. [2] It is a day of darkness and gloom, a day of thick clouds and deep blackness. Suddenly, like dawn spreading across the mountains, a mighty army appears! How great and powerful they are! The likes of them have not been seen before and never will be seen again. [3] Fire burns in front of them and follows them in every direction! Ahead of them the land lies as fair as the Garden of Eden in all its beauty. Behind them is nothing but desolation; not one thing escapes.*"

It doesn't sound much like locusts anymore, does it?

This is one of those literal to metaphor jumps that Joel likes to make.

He's comparing the devastation of the locust plague to the devastation they will face on

the Day of the Lord, when God returns in Judgment. He describes the invasion of God's Army in horrifying detail. And he makes it clear who's in charge of this devastating event.

Joel 2:10-11, *"The earth quakes as they advance, and the heavens tremble. The sun and moon grow dark, and the stars no longer shine. [11] The Lord leads them with a shout! This is His mighty army, and they follow His orders. The day of the Lord is an awesome, terrible thing. Who can endure it?"*

The phrase "The Day of the Lord" is repeated five times in this book. It refers to one of two events; either a current disaster (like the locust plague) or the final event in history where God will once and for all defeat the forces of evil and reward the faithful.

But it can all be very hard to take.

God is bringing disaster upon hordes of people?

Why?

Because all people, in all places, and in all times, need to be warned what will happen if they remain in rebellion against God.

That's the picture here.

God loves us so much that He has given us some great warnings. They may be personal circumstances, or they may be national tragedies, or they may be natural disasters. Whatever God uses to get our attention, He uses it because He doesn't want something far worse to happen to us. The consequences of refusing to pay attention to His warnings are final and eternal.

Which brings us to ...

JOEL 2:12-17: THE CALL TO REPENTANCE ³

The whole point of Joel is to convince people to turn away from sin, which leads to destruction, and to turn toward God, who's the source of eternal life. That's the essence of repentance.

Eugene Peterson, who's a great writer, had this to say about repentance ...

"Repentance is not an emotion. It is not feeling sorry for your sins. It is a **decision**. It is **deciding** that you have been wrong in supposing that you could manage your own life and be your own god; it is **deciding** that you were wrong in thinking that you had, or could get, the strength, education and training to make it on your own; it is **deciding** that you have been told a pack of lies about yourself and your neighbors and your world. And it is **deciding** that God in Jesus Christ is telling you the truth."

There is a definite correlation between disasters and repentance. Eugene Peterson concludes, "God's arrows are judgments aimed at provoking repentance."

And that's pretty much what God told Judah in **Joel 2:12-14**, *"That is why the Lord says, "Turn to Me now, while there is time! Give Me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. [13] Don't tear your clothing in your grief; instead, tear your hearts." Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful. He is not easily angered. He is filled with kindness and is eager not to punish you. [14] Who knows? Perhaps even yet He will give you a reprieve, sending you a blessing instead of this terrible curse. Perhaps He will give you so much that you will be able to offer grain and wine to the Lord your God as before!"*

And just so you don't think that this is one of those mean Old Testament things, we read in **2 Corinthians 7:10**, *"For God can use sorrow in our lives to help us turn away from sin*

³ Eugene Peterson quote is from his book, A Long Obedience In The Same Direction, page 25. C. S. Lewis quote is from his book, The Problem of Pain. Charles Dickens quotes is from his book, A Christmas Carol, page 16.

and seek salvation. We will never regret that kind of sorrow. But sorrow without repentance is the kind that results in death."

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "No doubt Pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul."

And so God wants that sorrow, that pain, that weeping and mourning to have a dramatic effect on who we are. It should affect our hearts. And that's why he says in verse 13, "***Don't tear your clothing in your grief; instead, tear your hearts.***"

You see, the real problem is not locusts and the hard, barren ground they leave behind. No, the real problem is sin and the hard hearts it leaves behind.

Charles Dickens has one of the best descriptions of a hard heart ever written. He writes about the hard heart of Ebenezer Scrooge and he says that Scrooge is "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features ... He carried his own low temperature always with him."

Where God is absent, hearts grow dry and hard, unable to bear fruit ... just as if locusts have come through.

Our hearts are fairly complex ... and yet stray so easily and so far from God.

Sometimes it is because of the evil one at work. Sometimes it is just our old sinful nature making excuses. Sometimes other affections occupy us and addict us to themselves. Sometimes we just get exasperated with life. The things we hoped for, counted on, come to expect do not materialize, and slowly disappointment turns to disgust. **Proverbs 13:12** says, "*Hope deferred makes the heart sick...*"

Sometimes it's sheer idolatry. We give over our allegiance to God to lesser things and pay the price of a wasted heart.

And sometimes we get confused by the developments in our life. Some things happen because they fit with God's larger plan, and you may never see the whole of that plan as long as you live. And that's an affront to those of us who are accustomed to having answers for everything.

And so much of life hardens our hearts to God.

The wonder of it all is that God even wants hearts like ours. Why He wants hearts that range far and wide from Him, hearts that fashion excuses as to why we've been away, hearts that hope in things that don't last, hearts that depend on what doesn't satisfy.

And yet He wants them. He says in verse 12, "*Turn to Me now, while there is time!*

Give Me your hearts."

And if we're honest, we really don't have much to give. Our hearts are too easily frozen solid.

Which is why they must break. And so God says in the next verse, verse 13, "***Don't tear your clothing in your grief; instead, tear your hearts.***"

God doesn't say move a little closer, do a little better, make a little space for Me. Not at all ... He says, "**Shred it.**" Tear up that heart that's been given over to over lovers. Open it up so that I can get in and clean it out.

And that's what He promises to do.

JOEL 2.18-32: THE PROMISES OF THE LORD

God promises to pay for our problems. These people are a lot like us. They've brought trouble on themselves by way of their own sins and vices, and, as we're often quick to say, they should have been prepared to suffer the consequences of their actions. You reap what you sow.

But not always. And the best exception to that rule is God's gracious provision of salvation. As **Romans 6:23** says, "*For the wages of sin is death (that's what we deserve), but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord (which is grace, getting what we don't deserve).*"

We know we've made a mess of things. We want our lives restored. And God does this. He enters our lives and cleans them out, at least for a time. He refuses to hold us accountable for the sins we chose to do.

He could hold it over us, and demand that we feel the pain of our own wickedness. But the Lord doesn't grind us down into the dirt of our own rebellion as a way of making us pay.

And it's the same for Joel. Look at **Joel 2:20-23**, "*... Surely the Lord has done great things! [21] Don't be afraid, My people! Be glad now and rejoice because the Lord has done great things. [22] Don't be afraid, you animals of the field! The pastures will soon be green. The trees will again be filled with luscious fruit; fig trees and grapevines will flourish once more. [23] Rejoice, you people of Jerusalem! Rejoice in the Lord your God! For the rains He sends are an expression of His grace. Once more the autumn rains will come, as well as the rains of spring.*"

The devastation brought on by the locusts was simply too great to be undone by the people. Only God can bring rains that will renew the ground, only God can restore crops sheared to the root ...

Joel 2:26, "*Once again you will have all the food you want, and you will praise the Lord your God, who does these miracles for you. Never again will my people be disgraced like this.*"

And only God can cover the shame, only God can redeem time that was carelessly killed.

This is a God who burns the records of rebellion and dips into His own accounts to replenish depleted resources. Sometimes the resources He provides are material. Always the resources He provides are spiritual.

We call this provision "Grace."

But we have to be careful that our familiarity with grace doesn't rob it of its power. Yes, God forgives and restores, but notice **what** He forgives ... willful sin. And notice **who** He forgives ... willful sinners.

He forgives hearts that have turned away from Him, hearts that have given themselves over to imposters and competitors, hearts that were corrupt and hard. Hearts like yours and mine. And it is to these hearts that God promises restoration. For grace and mercy to flow into our hearts, instead of destruction, is truly amazing.

So when God extends His grace, His mercy, His blessing to those who tear their hearts and make room for Him once more, He is doing something wonderful and awesome and completely beyond human comprehension.

And then He says, **Joel 2:28-29**, "*Then after I have poured out My rains again, I will pour out My Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions. [29] In those days, I will pour out My Spirit even on servants, men and women alike.*"

This promise is future for Joel, but no less certain. This is the promise the Apostle Peter claimed at Pentecost in Acts 2. The promise of the coming of the Spirit of God to His people. It

is to people who have left God in favor of other pursuits and yet are the recipients of His grace. The fact that He is not only willing to take back sinners, but also to give them the Holy Spirit, marking them indelibly as His own, is absolutely beyond comprehension. Perhaps this is why Peter speaks with such authority and why, **Acts 2:37** says, “*When the people heard this, **they were cut to the heart** and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*”

To which Peter replied, **Acts 2:38-40**, “*Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [39] The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”* (NIV)

And so, if repentance leads to salvation, we have to ask, what is ...

JOEL 3: THE SALVATION OF THE LORD⁴

And it’s good for us that Joel answers that chapter 3.

The question of salvation--especially our own--is personal. It is important. Is Christianity true? What bearing does it have on our lives today? Joel answers two important questions about salvation. First ...

1. Saved from what?

According to Joel, a great deal. We understand that God made the world and that we’re made to live as He intended. But we don’t, and we see that in every book of the Bible. Because we have rebelled against God’s law and have disobeyed our Creator, we are under His judgment. That’s what we need to be saved from.

- **God’s judgment on the nations**

In chapter 3, God speaks against the nations. He calls them a harvest that is ripe. Joel picks out typical sins of Israel’s neighbors as judgments being leveled by the Creator: theft, enslaving, bloodshed.

How can people defend themselves against God? They can’t. You can’t.

God calls them to appear for judging, not just if they will, but whether they will or not (verse 12). Verse 2 says He will gather them into the valley of Jehoshaphat – Jehoshaphat means Yahweh’s judgment – this is the valley of judgment, and God’s decision is what the people are there for.

The judge has weighed all the evidence, both open and hidden.

There is no appeal and no error in judgment.

Creation itself seems to hide from God’s judgment (verses 15-16).

The Lord will roar, and the earth and sky will tremble.

- **God’s judgment on Judah**

A verdict has also been made upon Judah itself, God’s people. Locusts have wrought devastation (verse 2) – everything was ruined. It was a historical event, and it also foreshadowed the Day of the Lord. The prophet’s meditation on the current disaster led him to think beyond that to the Day of Judgment.

Who is leading all of this? The Lord thunders at the head of His armies. Certainly the Lord is good, but it is not always clear to us what is good and what is not. Joel doesn’t agree with the supposition that there is nothing bad in the world. The Bible is clear that we have all sinned. What we need to be saved from is not our immediate difficulties but our **sin** – what we

⁴ This section is largely adapted from the Message, “*Who Will God Save?*” by Mark Dever, Capital Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC, 6-01-2003.

have done against God. Christ uniquely died to bear the wrath of God because of our sin. Sin is real. God will judge. God's just condemnation is what we need to be saved from.

So the first question Joel answers is What are we saved from?

The second question Joel answers is ...

2. What is salvation? (2:18-27)

Simply put ... Salvation is an act of God's mercy. He delivers His people from their enemies. He will restore His people to prosperity (2:18-22). Joel speaks in past tense of these things because they are so certain to happen. All will prosper now (2:23-24)

These images of prosperity are beautiful. Their lives came from the rain; without it, the crops were decimated, as was happening when Joel wrote his book. The second set of images include wine-dripping mountains, milk-flowing hills, water-filled ravines. God will preserve His people and fill them. The effects of the current devastation are completely reversed in a picture of the people's restored relationship with God (2:25-27).

God Himself will reside with His people (2:28-31). The prophecy also seems to describe Pentecost--this is the verse (28) that Peter quoted in his sermon recorded in Acts. Peter understood that to be a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.

The chief of all blessings is the presence of God. He will protect them. The core of the whole Bible's presentation of salvation is a restored relationship with God. He is the center of our hope of salvation, not what gifts He may give us. As holy as He is, and as sinful as we are, He is inviting us into fellowship with Him through Jesus Christ. This is the most important thing you can understand, and it is so widely misunderstood. The craving you have for approval will never be met by anything on earth ... His approval is what you have been designed to desire.

Do you believe you can have this restored relationship with God?

It is at the heart of salvation.

The Lord will be a refuge for His people.

CONCLUSION: *Why will God's people be saved?*

Not because we deserve it.

It is not based in us but in God.

Those who call upon the Lord will be saved, and those who call on Him are those whom the Lord calls. God saves His people to make His name known. It displays His character. He is gracious and compassionate.

God is not obligated to show favor to us; that is grace.

It's God's gracious initiative to give them this prophecy. It is no grace to sinful human beings for God to let them go on sinning with impunity. He warns them so that they can respond in repentance or disobedience.

Why would God care for us so much?

I don't know.

Somehow He gets glory through us.

Joel, like Moses, pled with God based on His character. God will save His people for His own name's sake. His concern for His own name is entirely appropriate. What is of more value than God's own self?

What do you think you need to be saved from?

And how can we be among those who are saved?

We all have an interest in these questions.

We should respond to God's Word. To Him we must cry out. The repentance Joel is

calling for is a true change of mind and heart, to turn back to the Lord. He is calling us to heed His warning, repent of our sins, and believe in Jesus Christ. "Call" is a synonym for "believe," or "trust". Call on the Lord. To call on God is to pray, to own Him as your Lord as He owns you, to believe and to trust in Him.

It means that you have to give Him your heart.

The heart, as any physician can tell you, is where life resides.

The heart, as any salesman can tell you, is where emotions reside.

The heart, as any pastor can tell you, is where faith resides. We ask, 'do you believe in Jesus with **all your heart?**'

When God says, "give Me your heart," He is asking for all of that. He wants you physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Nothing held back.

Joel teaches us that God will judge sinners; but even more so, God will receive repentant sinners. God will give them His Spirit and take up residence in their hearts. God wants you to follow Him whole-heartedly.

And all those who want that too, said, "Amen."