

Profiting from Joel

DATE AND SITUATION



It's nice when you're preaching through a prophetic book to be able to locate it in history. That's not a luxury Joel allows. The debate about when Joel was written is like the debate about whether Elvis is alive. Everybody has their theories, but nobody has much evidence to go on.

Joel has been dated from the 8th century BC through to post exilic times, but ultimately any dating of the book has to be inferential and speculative. On the basis of inference and speculation it seems clear that Joel was probably written under the circumstances of an invasion of Jerusalem by Mesopotamian enemy forces, either Assyria or Babylonia. If that is correct then the words were probably written on one of three occasions: the Assyrian invasion of 701BC; the Babylonian invasion of 598 or the Babylonian invasion of 588. This would mean the book was pre-exilic rather than post-exilic.

Ultimately, dating the book is not essential to appreciating its message. In the first half the book describes present distress (invasion, drought, desolation) and in the second half future deliverance (return from exile, defeat of enemies, final judgement of the nations). Understanding these themes is not dependent upon dating.

STRUCTURE

Joel breaks up into four sections. The first two deal with an enemy's invasion of Jerusalem and Judah. The second two deal with the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem and the judgement of the invading nations.

1:1-20 The Invasion

This section deals with the invasion of Israel by the enemy. Traditionally this section has been taken as a description of a locust plague. But this view is too narrow to deal with all the evidence. First, Joel's language seems to suggest that the invasion was without precedent (1:2-3), but locust plagues were quite common in this part of the world. Additionally, human armies are sometimes compared to locust plagues in the OT (Judges 6:5; 7:12; Hab 3:15-16; Jer 46:23).

Secondly, the way in which the book ends, with a description of God's judgement of the nations, also suggests that more than a locust invasion is on view in chapter one. I think Joel is describing the invasion of an army and he uses the metaphors of a locust invasion, a drought and judgement to do so. Israel has been ignoring Yahweh but they can do so no longer. As judgement devastates the land they must mourn their sin and call upon the Lord.

2:1-17 Sound the Alarm

This section has two sub-sections. Verses 1-11 describe an unstoppable invasion, the long awaited Day of the Lord. The section begins by calling for the trumpet to be sounded to awaken the city to the disaster, and it ends by asking the question "Who can endure the Day of the Lord?" The second sub-section (v12-17) answers the question the previous sub-section ended with by calling upon everyone to repent. The proper response to an unstoppable invasion is unstinting repentance.

2:18-32 Restoration

The previous section ended with the priests asking "Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" Israel's defeat would have been God's disgrace, and in response to their repentance restoration is promised. This restoration is both material and spiritual. The invading army will be driven away, the land will again produce wine

and oil and fruit, the rains will again be poured out to refresh the land. But best of all the spirit will be poured out on all people to refresh and save their souls.

3:1-21 Down with the Oppressor

The last section of the book brings it to a neat end. The book began with an invading nation licking the floor with Judah and Jerusalem, but it ends with them being licked by God. God assures his faithful ones that a Day of Judgement is coming when all the nations will be called to account before him. On that day, the Day of the Lord, the multitudes will wait on God's decision. but the Lord will be a refuge for his people.

PREACHING

The logical way to break the book up for preaching is to preach one sermon on each of the four sections. That is basically what I did, but because Joel 2:28-32 is such an important section, I gave an extra sermon over to it. Overall, the series was well appreciated.

Sermon 1 - Joel 1:1-20 PAY ATTENTION

1. Pay Attention

The things that grab peoples attention are sex, money and fashion. Israel were a nation who had once payed attention to God but faith had long since turned into formalism and their holiness into habit. In this book God is saying "Pay Attention To Me!"

2. How Does He Say Pay Attention?

He says it through Natural Events and the Prophetic Voice. The natural events are locust plague v4; an invading nation v6,7; drought v16,17 and fire v16,17. Through the prophetic voice he called upon the drunkards v5, the farmers v11 and the priests v13 to mourn. A spiritual death has occurred and God calls upon the nation to get ready for the day of judgement before it's too late.

3. The Day of the Lord

This idea is an important one in the OT. Originally the day was seen as a day of vindication of Israel in the eyes at the nations (Isaiah 13) Later it was seen as a day of judgement of Israel because she is no different to the nations. (Amos 5:18; Joel 1:15).

Joel 2:31 gives us a pointer

as to when the day will be. It is the judgement day. All of us therefore need to be sure we're ready for that day by paying attention to Yahweh.

4. What Do We Learn About God?

(i) Yahweh is God.

That is what Joel's name means. God is guiding history and everything he has made is answerable to him. Therefore we should pay attention to him.

(ii) God is Judge.

The events recorded in this chapter weren't chance events.

They were judgements from God. Israel had gotten away with their sin for a long time, but they needed to know they couldn't get away with it forever.

(iii) God is Saviour.

God didn't send these difficulties upon his people to be nasty and fickle but to save them. That has always been God's concern and we see it especially in Jesus.

Sermon 2 - Joel 2:1-17 WHO CAN ENDURE?

1. Judgement

We tend to think of Judgement in abstract rather than concrete ways. Judgement is not abstract. It's real and God has ordered the world so that in concrete realities of life we see spiritual truth. If we look at the pain that we and other's experience in this life we

can get a feel for what judgement will be like. This is what Joel does. He has described in chapter 1 an invasion that destroyed the land.

Now he describes the future day of the Lord in terms at that event.

2. Joel and Judgement

Joel makes three points about the Day of the Lord:

- a. It is coming
- b. It is unstoppable
- c. People will be destroyed

He brings us to the point at despair and then asks a question full of hope "Who can Endure?"

3. Who Can Endure?

The repentant can endure! But what does this repentance look like?

- a. Repentance is turning to God. It is not to be confused with sadness, or with penance.
- b. It's urgent. More urgent than breastfeeding screaming kids (v16) and more urgent than a honeymoon (v16).

Why is God able to pass over those who repent though?

Because one has endured the judgement for us already! In Jesus we see God's character as described in v13. In his love and grace and compassion Jesus died on the cross for our sin. He experienced our judgement. Only a fool pays bills twice. Jesus has paid our bill - we need to turn to him and repent.

Sermon 3 - Joel 2:18-27 THE GOD YOU CAN DEPEND ON

Introduction

Shame is a powerful feeling. Andrew Ettingshausen (Australian sportsman) experienced it when a magazine published a revealing photograph of him. We experience it too, especially when we consider that we stand completely exposed before God.

As God came against the Israelites in judgement they were shamed. The once great nation under Solomon was brought to it's knees and last week's passage ended with the nations taunting them "Where is their God?" There are two possibilities behind this:

- (i) Israel's God is too weak and can't help them
- (ii) God had left them, and he's now fighting for their enemies

1. God's Answer for Israel (2:18-27)

God will not allow his people to be put to shame (v18,19). Rather, he will take away their shame. How? By reversing the judgement of chapters 1 and 2:

- ◆ The northern army will be destroyed v20
- ◆ The trees and vines will again bear fruit v22
- ◆ Abundant rain will replace drought v23
- ◆ Joy and praise will replace mourning v21,23,26

In doing all of this God will provide powerful answers for the nations taunts:

- (i) Is God too weak? No. He alone is God and there is no other!
- (ii) Has he abandoned Israel? No. The Lord is in Israel.

2. God's Answer for Us

Our situation is similar to the situation of the Israelites in Joel. We are in the world, trusting in an all powerful God - and yet often we appear to be, or feel as though, we're defeated. We wonder if God is too weak to deal with our problems, or if he's left us. If we've entertained those doubts we're in good company. Paul did (Rom. 1:17) and Jesus knew we would (Mark 8:35-39), but he also offers us a perspective to deal with it. He will come in glory (v38), and then it will be clear to all - and especially to us - that God has not left us, and that he is not weak. Through the power of the gospel God ensures that we will never be put to shame (Rom. 9:33).

Sermon 4 - Joel 2:28-32 BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Introduction

When Arthur Ashe died his obituary was headed "Death of a man dedicated to breaking down barriers" Joel 2:28-32 shows that God is dedicated to breaking down barriers. Ask two questions to break the passage down:

1. What Time is He Speaking About?

Acts 2 shows that the time Joel is referring to here is the Day of Pentecost when the spirit was poured out upon the early church. But what was true of the Day of Pentecost is true of every day since.

2. What will be the characteristics of these days?

a. The Spirit will be poured forth.

The Spirit was present in the OT right from the beginning, but his activity was restricted to certain key individuals. In these verses God is promising to pour the Spirit out in an almost carefree way so that we are soaked in him.

b. Spirit would be poured on all flesh.

v28,29 are very radical. In them almost every Hebrew prejudice is attacked. The Spirit would be poured out on Jews and gentiles. On men plus women, On freeman and slave. Through the Spirit every barrier and social construct would be broken down. This is demonstrated dramatically

in Acts 2 (v8 with the phenomenon of tongues; and v42-47, the early church example).

3. A Spiritual Law.

On the basis of these passages it's possible to propound a spiritual law. Where the Spirit is, barriers will be broken down.

The Spirit filled person will be committed to breaking down barriers.

Proof of this law is found in Jesus. He is the ultimate spirit filled man. He was dedicated to breaking down barriers. It was his life's work and his death's work.

Sermon 5 - Joel 3:1-21 WHERE ARE YOU HIDING?

Introduction

Kids love to play Hide and Seek, and so do adults. Kids like to hide from other kids, and can spend hours doing it. Adults like to hide from God and can spend a lifetime doing it. You can't hide from God - but you can hide in him.

1. God's Judgement

(i) It is based on Knowledge

God knew exactly what the nations were doing (v2,3,5,6) and he knows exactly what we are doing.

(ii) It will be just

When we are wronged we want revenge. God always acts justly (v2 cf 7,8)

(iii) It will involve everyone

Even the weakling will be called to the field (3:9,10)

(iv) It will be decisive

The nations come against God with their garden implements and he will wipe them away with one sweep of his sickle.

You can't hide from God - this is illustrated in the story of Ahab and Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 18).

2. God's Salvation

You can't hide from God but you can hide in him. God is a refuge to his people. This truth is seen particularly in Jesus death on the cross.

COMMENTARIES

I found the most helpful book was Douglas Stuart's Hosea-Jonah in the Word Biblical Commentary Series. He makes little effort to relate the text to the NT except in the Explanation section, but his exegesis is careful and not too lengthy. Leslie Allen in the

New International Commentary of the Old Testament is also OK. He toes a more traditional line in terms of the locust plague, and is more lengthy.

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