

## **“Never Again Be Put to Shame”**

Joel 2:23-32

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I don't know when the last time was I preached out of the book of Joel. Maybe I never have. Certainly it is a fairly obscure book in the Old Testament, less than 75 verses total, spread out of a mere 3 chapters. Joel is probably most well known for containing a prophecy that Saint Peter quotes in his great Pentecost Day sermon in the book of Acts; perhaps you recognized some of those verses as I read them. There are also a couple shorter quotations from the book of Joel in Paul's letter to the Romans and in the book of Revelation. But, for the most part, he kind of fades from view; many Christians might know that there is a book of Joel in the Old Testament, but might not know much about its contents. Is there a meaningful message for *us*, Christians alive *today*, in this fairly obscure book?

Let's start with the man himself. *Joel*. “Jo-el,” a two-syllable name in the original Hebrew. The first syllable is short for “Yahweh” or “Jehovah,” the divine name, typically rendered as “The Lord.” The second syllable is the word for “God.” “The Lord is God,” that's what Joel's name means.

Of course, we have no idea what he looked like. Here is how Michelangelo envisioned him, in his magnificent fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome. He looks studious here, reading a scroll. Although, interestingly, the book of Joel makes no reference to any other book.

We know very little about Joel. We know his father's name – Pethuel – but we don't know the names of any other family members. We don't know which Israelite tribe he belonged to; we don't know if he got married, or had any kids. We know of no significant events in his personal life. We don't really know when or where he lived. We have to piece that together from clues he gives us in his book. He mentions Judah six times, Jerusalem six times, Mount Zion in Jerusalem seven times, suggesting that he lived in the southern part of Israel, probably in or near Jerusalem. He refers to “the valley of Jehoshaphat” – a valley where God will judge all the nations – but he is the only biblical writer to mention this valley, and we have no idea where it is. It might have even symbolic, for “Jehoshaphat” simply means “The Lord judges.” He refers to priests and the altar; that suggests the temple was standing and in operation – but was that the original temple, Solomon's temple, that was destroyed by the Babylonians; or the second temple, the one that was re-built on the remains of the first, after the Jewish exile in Babylon? Joel mentions some other places or nations – Tyre, Sidon, Egypt, a few others – and he even refers to “the Greeks,” literally “the children of Yaven,” which is how the Israelites referred to people living in that region. Honestly, there's not a whole lot of information to help us place Joel.

But there is a reference to a great plague of locusts that ravaged the land and the crops. Such plagues happened from time to time. “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 1:4) – four different kinds of locusts, four different waves of devastation. “The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails.” (Joel 1:10) Joel says it was like a “great army” that came against the land. (Joel 2:25)

And, perhaps, that plague of locusts was a metaphor for a *real* army. Indeed, Joel even refers to the locusts as an army. There are also some references here and there to great suffering at the hands of foreign powers, great violence to the people of Judah, the spilling of innocent blood. *Locusts* didn’t do all that. Some interpreters maintain that Joel was written before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, but when you actually look at the events that Joel refers to *in the past tense*, it sure sounds like there has been great destruction in the land – wrought, not just by locusts, but by *people*. An invading army. I’m inclined to stand with those interpreters who think that Joel was written *after* the Babylonian exile.

Not that it really matters *when* it was written. Whatever the specific circumstances, Joel offers a word of *hope* to a people who have been suffering. Rejoice and be glad: there is an abundance of rain, the fields will be harvested; the granaries will be full; there will be olive oil and wine in abundance once again. This is a gift from God, a *welcome* gift, after much suffering. “You shall eat 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.” It sounds like God is saying, *You’re never going to have to worry about the land being destroyed again; you’re never going to have to worry about being scattered again*. Which makes me scratch my head, for the Romans would cause all kinds of trouble for the Jews a few centuries later, and – ultimately – destroy the holy city all over again. And think of what happened to the Jews who were living in Europe in the 1930s and 40s. Remember the cattle cars ... remember the concentration camps ... remember the stories of little girls like Anne Frank, and little boys like Elie Wiesel. “My people shall never again be put to shame” – I would like to know how Jews today interpret those words from Joel, in light of the fact that *six million* Jews were exterminated in the space of about 12 years, less than a century ago. Both the Romans and the Nazis went to very great efforts to put the Jews to shame.

That sobering reality suggests to me that we need to be careful whenever we’re dealing with biblical prophecy. For there were prophets, like Joel, people with a divine message from God, who said all sorts of things about the future. It’s hard to know sometimes what, *exactly*, they were referring to.

Thankfully, the New Testament helps us out to a considerable degree. Most of the rest of this passage from Joel 2 is quoted, practically word-for-word, in Peter’s Pentecost speech. “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.” That part’s easy; Peter tells us how to interpret those verses; you remember the Pentecost story; the disciples are gathered together after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, when there comes a sound, like the rush of a violent wind; and divided tongues, like fire, rest on each of them; they are all filled with the Holy Spirit, and start speaking in other languages. That part’s easy!

But what about this: “I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” When did those things happen? Or are they *yet* to happen? Some people think that the “portents” are the miracles that Jesus did during his ministry on earth – and/or, the miracles that the apostles did in the book of Acts. Other people think that phrase is referring to the events that will occur in the “end times.” Some people think the “sun turned to darkness” and the “moon to blood” refer to what happened on Good Friday, when Jesus died; others, again, see references to the apocalypse. One Christian hymn-writer from the 5<sup>th</sup> century said that the *blood* referred to the incarnation of Jesus, the *fire* referred to the divinity of Jesus, and the *columns of smoke* to the Holy Spirit. I might say that the “blood” refers to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, the “fire” refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and the “columns of smoke,” perhaps, to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Who’s to say who is right – when the New Testament isn’t very clear?

Finally, there is this line: “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” That line gets quoted twice in the New Testament; once by Peter, during that speech on the day of Pentecost; and a second time in the book of Romans, when Paul is talking about salvation through Jesus Christ. “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,” he says, “you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9) “For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call upon him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’” (Romans 10:10-13) Here in the book of Joel, the line is referring to people who escape from Jerusalem during a terrible calamity. In that context, “being saved” has to do with *escaping death*, at least for a time. But when we move into the New Testament, “salvation” takes on a whole ‘nother meaning. It is salvation in a *final* sense, the ultimate salvation of those who are faithful to God. Not salvation *from* death – but salvation *beyond* death. Paul makes it clear that our ultimate salvation is connected with belief, with faith: *we believe* with our heart, which justifies us – puts us right – in the eyes of God; then we *confess* our faith in our living Lord, which leads to our salvation. Salvation is a generous gift from God, a gift – Paul stresses – that is available to *everyone*. It doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Greek; that is, it doesn’t matter where you come from, what your race or ethnicity is, what kind of faith tradition you grew up with, if any at all; salvation through Jesus Christ is available to *all*.

Now there’s more to the book of Joel, especially in the third chapter, where we hear about God’s judgment upon all the nations, in the valley of Jehoshaphat. We also hear about God dwelling eternally on the holy mountain called Zion. None of those verses are quoted anywhere in the New Testament, but the *concepts* are very much there. The Day of Judgment. The City of God, the New Jerusalem. Joel points forward to the same reality that we read about in the New Testament: there will come “the Day of the Lord,” a great and terrible day, a day of God’s great judgment. The only real difference is that the *Lord* is Jesus Christ. Ultimately, in God’s good time, there will come a day when all that is wrong in the world will be turned right, a day when all that is evil in the world will be vanquished, forever. A day when those who are faithful to God will never again be put to shame. Thanks be to God!

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