

Tom Coop  
Joel 1:1-5, 2:12-14  
June 25, 2017

## **The Prophet Joel**

We are now in week 2 of our sermon series: The Wild and Crazy Minor Prophets of the Old Testament.

If you were here last week, you learned more than 95% of what all Christians about the prophet Obadiah.

This week you'll learn more about the prophet Joel than 95% of all Christians know about that Old Testament book.

Obadiah is the shortest book of the Old Testament and we read all 21 verses. We're not reading all of Joel (you can thank me later).

I think most of us would agree at the outset, especially if you are trying to read any of these prophetic books, that they are among the most difficult parts of the Bible to interpret or to read with any understanding.

Just ask Dottie, right?

We shouldn't be embarrassed to admit we have difficulty reading the prophets, for actually, we are in good company if we do.

In referring to the prophets, Martin Luther once said the following:

"They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next so that you cannot make heads or tails of them or see what they are getting at."

Now that is a comment to which I can relate. And Dottie!

Much of what we will read this summer can sound like a rant aimed at “sinners.”

If we are not careful, we might sound like one unnamed person who said:

“This is what the prophets sound like to me: ‘Blah, blah, blah, you’re bad! Blah, blah, blah, you’re all going to die!’”

Hopefully, we can do better than that. Luckily for you, I have done most of the hard work of figuring out what these guys (and they’re all guys, by the way) are trying to say.

Let’s look at a few reasons for some of the difficulty we have:

The word “prophet” refers to one who *tells forth* (or proclaims), as well as one who foretells.

The prophets did indeed announce the future. But it was usually the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations – not our future.

Case in point - less than 1% of Old Testament prophecy concern events still future to us.

Another matter that complicates our understanding the prophets is the problem of historical distance. Things clear to them tend to be opaque to us.

The prophets lived in a different times and cultures, with different figures of speech. Imagine someone 2,000 years from now trying to figure out what we mean when we say, “What’s Up?” Or “Text me.”

We all know what 9/11 was. We know the Warriors, 49ers and the Giants. But 2,000 years from now, people will need a commentary to decipher what we were talking about.

Plus, God spoke through his prophets largely in poetic form. People in those days were used to poetry.

Because it is so much more regular and stylized than prose, it too was better remembered.

All the prophetic books contain a substantial amount of poetry, and several are exclusively poetic.

The language of poetry is *imagery*. It is designed to stir the emotions and create vivid mental pictures, not necessarily feed the intellect.

And, remember, very few could read and almost all scripture was therefore memorized.

Bold, exaggerated, and imaginative language often served this purpose, helping to make their message sharp, provocative, and unforgettable.

However, the same metaphorical style that was effective then, strikes us as completely foreign today.

We, therefore, will probably need to read the prophets S L O W E R than any other books of the Bible if we actually want to know what they mean ...

And not just highlight a few nice or Jesusy verses (like I will probably do this summer!).

Okay, enough of that. On to the Prophet Joel.

But, before we delve into what Joel had to say, let me ask you, what kind of dreams do you have?

Fantasy? Real people and situations? Lots of detail? Not much detail?

How many of you can remember more than a smattering of your last dream?

I'll have a vivid detailed novel-length dream with wild animals, a flight to Mars, high school friends and by the time I get out of bed, it's vaporized. I can't remember a thing.

What if you had a long, detailed, vivid dream and could remember every event in it and exactly what was said well enough to write it down or type it out, word for word the next day?

And what if in the dream God told you to go to Senegal and tell the people of Dakar what will happen to them if they don't repent?

What would you do? Maybe get out a map and see where Senegal is?

Or, would you not believe it? Ask God to verify the details? Maybe for the next three nights running ask him to repeat the dream.

Still, you might not believe it. That would certainly be me. I'd want a lot more proof that it was actually God speaking to me and that was what he actually wanted me to do.

Well, from what we know, Joel doesn't show any of these doubts. He just launches into a warning to the people of Judah about a plague of locusts.

He's so anxious to blurt out his message that he doesn't even bother putting a date on his scroll or saying "I'm writing this in the time of King Joash" or "after the return of the exiles" or anything at all.

In fact, the only things we know from the book is that Judah is inhabited and the temple is functioning.

Maybe, it's the first temple built by Solomon. Or, maybe it's the rebuilt second temple. We just don't know. So, I picked the earlier date.

What we do know is that Joel is the son of Pethuel – which means "vision of God." But just like Obadiah, that's all we know about him

Nevertheless, this is an incredibly important book of prophecy because Joel is one of the only prophets who **isn't** just doom and gloom, but he also looks on the bright side and describes God's compassion and blessings as well.

We can learn a lot from this book.

The book starts off with Joel urging the elders and people in the land to hear what he has to say, and to pass this information on from generation to generation.

He says right in Chapter 1, Verse 3: "Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation."

What he's saying, is that this is a story for people of his day and for people of ours—a story for all times.

What did he tell them? That a terrible plague of locusts is coming. It will be followed by a drought and widespread fires, all of which will bring on a great famine and destroy the country.

Sounds pretty gloom and doom so far. And why is this plague—God's punishment—coming to destroy everything? Of course, he doesn't say.

Just as he assumes people know the date that he is writing the book, he also assumes they know the reason they are being punished.

And I wonder if that isn't true with us also? Does God have to spell out your sins? Don't you know in your heart what you did wrong?

You know when you've given in to temptation, don't you? You know when you've cheated, when you've lied, when you've been self-indulgent, when you've let your pride take over your life.

So Joel essentially says to the people, "you've turned away from the Lord and he's going to punish you with a plague of locusts."

He urges the people to mourn their loss. In fact, he says that drunkards and drinkers of wine should mourn because the grape vines have been destroyed. No more booze!

He says the land itself should mourn. Farmers should mourn. And priests should mourn because there are no more grain offerings or drink offerings.

Then he tells them (still in chapter one) in verse 13, to tear their garments, put on sackcloth, and fast—which shouldn't be too difficult as there was no food.

Then the people should cry out to the Lord for deliverance from this devastation.

Then, in contrast, in Chapter 2, also verse 13, he says, "Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.

"Return to the Lord your God, for he is *merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love*. He is eager to relent and not punish."

By the way, almost these exact same words to describe the Lord appear in Exodus, Numbers, Nehemiah, Jonah, Nahum and in three Psalms.

Just in the Old Testament, this phrase is repeated *eight* times: "The Lord your God is *merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love*."

Much better than gloom and doom, I think!

So Joel says, "repent, return to the Lord." And then what will the Lord do? Joel describes the Lord's response in Chapter 2, verses 18 to 27.

He says the Lord will have pity on you. He will repel the northern armies (Judah's enemies usually came from the north).

The trees will bear fruit, you'll have abundant rain, good harvests.

The Lord says, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten, you will have plenty to eat."

Hallelujah!!!

What does that have to do with us? God is urging us to return to him.

Yes, he's speaking to a nation, Judah, that has apparently turned away for years.

But returning to the Lord doesn't have to mean years. It could be weeks, it could be days, it could be an hour, it could be just a few minutes.

There may be some things in your life that have been there for years, while others crop up every day.

Now ... My question to you is: Is there something in your life that is standing in the way of you returning to the Lord, of calling on his name, of turning your life back over to him?

What are your idols? What is it that you need to repent of and for which you need to ask forgiveness?

Is it greed? Adultery? Pornography? Is it ego? Anger? A desire for revenge? Alcohol addiction? Drugs? Maybe a lack of compassion? Bitterness?

If the Jesus came back tomorrow, are you ready for it? Or would you say, "oh, give me a little time; could you come back next week? Work



with these other people first.”

There is only one way to come back into God’s favor: that is the way of repentance, as revealed to Solomon by God in 2 Chronicles 7:14 (our first scripture text this morning:

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

This law of repentance is still operative today; it was never rescinded. Anyone who takes hold of this promise and repents will receive mercy, forgiveness, and healing.

But, God will not accept mere external, superficial repentance. He demands heartfelt repentance.

1 Samuel 16:7 tells us, “The Lord does not look at the things mortals look at. They look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

The Lord demands a total change of our mind, will, and emotion. He will not accept a mere form of godliness, nor will he accept mere weeping, wailing, and tearing of garments.

Some people can easily weep; it is simply the way they are made, but mere weeping is not repentance.

A boy in Sunday school once gave this definition of repentance: “Repentance is feeling sorry for sins.”

Then a wise girl sitting next to him added, “enough to quit.”

This is true. Repentance is feeling sorry for sins enough to quit.

Maybe you're walking completely with the Lord, you've turned over your life to him, and none of these are issues for you—and that's great!

But speaking for myself, I'm still susceptible to temptation and every day I find myself saying, "Lord, I blew it again. Please forgive me. Please take me back."

I like to remember what the apostle John wrote in 1 John 1:9 ... "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

I'll take that!

The Psalmist puts it perfectly when he said that when we repent, "As far as the east I from the west, so far has the Lord removed our transgressions from us."

So, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is *merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love*. He is eager to relent and not punish."

That is so encouraging. Isn't it awesome to have such a wonderful, loving, forgiving God?

I think so.

*Amen!*

Next week we will be looking at the Prophet Jonah, probably the

one with whom you are most familiar.

And just in case you were wondering, he never spent three days in the belly of a whale.