



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

Joel: The Day of the Lord

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Dr. Matthew J. Hook

I admit I've never preached from the Book of Joel before. Now I know why! This prophet is tough! The whole thing is based on an enormous plague of locusts. Nothing like a nice little summer sermon on locusts, judgment, repentance, and the Day of the Lord—a day of judgment, hellfire and brimstone! The Day of the Lord is described in both the Old and New Testaments (22 times total, 5 from Joel), the Day of the Lord is a special day at the end of time when God's will and purpose for humanity and the whole creation will be fulfilled. It will be a time of great darkness for any in rebellion against God. Joel writes "*It will come as destruction from the Almighty (1:15)...A day of darkness and gloom (2:2)...who can endure it? (2:11)...the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood (2:31)...multitudes in the valley of decision!...The Lord roars from Zion. (3:14,16)*" The Day of the Lord would be a time of judgment, as well as restoration. And yet in the midst of it, is an underlying message that we've got to hear today, in 2005.

Hear these words: Joel 2:12-13 "*‘Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.*"

I think for us to comprehend the scope of what Joel was speaking to, we've got to go back to that day—September 11th, 2001. We'll never forget it. The horror of the devastating attack shook us like few things have the power to do. Like the bombing of Pearl Harbor or shooting of JFK, no one will ever forget the feelings of anger, vulnerability and fear. And think of the millions affected by the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

Joel wrote his letter during a time of crisis and he used that crisis to try to awaken people to their need to align their lives with God. This morning we look at the three different elements of this message from Joel: the Crisis, the Response, and the Renewal that God promised.

Joel begins with a crisis. It was huge. There was a great plague of locusts that attacked Israel. This plague was worse than any plague anyone had ever seen. It was so bad the old men couldn't even say, "Ah, I remember back in 46 . . . We find it hard to grasp how bad a plague of locusts could be. But there have been documented plagues in the Middle East of swarms as large as 2,000 square miles. (No wonder Joel thought about the final judgment Day of the Lord!)

As these locusts reached their various stages of growth and development they ate progressively more of the vegetation so that nothing was left. They even ate the bark off the trees! If that wasn't bad enough it seems that a severe drought also overtook the land. So not only was the vegetation destroyed, there was no way to replenish it. Joel was saying "Get in touch with reality and weep!" One thing that bothers me is that I can get wrapped up in my own life so easily that I forget things like poverty in the world; victims of war; the persecuted church (did you know over 100,000 Christians will lose their lives this year?); and the suffering of other people. Joel would say "Get in touch with reality and weep!"

Joel says, "If you think this is bad just wait and see what God could do and someday will do. There is a coming Day of Judgment that will make this plague look like the Dexter Daze parade. (Joel's got some nice counseling techniques!) You don't tell hurting people that things could be a lot worse!! Yet Joel wants the people of Israel to understand that God allows (and sometimes even sends) tragic times as a desperate attempt to awaken spiritually asleep and dying people. When things go well we have a tendency to drift. We feel self-sufficient. Our "need" for God diminishes and we turn in the direction of anything but God. That's sin. We live the "carefully balanced compromise." And when huge things happen, we are forced to wake up. Just think of the church attendance after 911.

Joel follows the crisis with a response. Rather than cutting ourselves off from our best resource to see us through, rather than just trying to “manage our sin,” Joel gives us these words in 2:12-13 “*‘Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.*”

The Message translation put it this way: “The calamity is urgent, but here’s the hope: Joel says change your life. It’s not too late—God’s personal message to you! “Come back to me and really mean it! Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins!” Change your life, not just your clothes. Come back to God, your God. And here’s why: God is kind and merciful. This most patient God, extravagant in love, always ready to cancel catastrophe.”

3 words we tend to use a lot: justice, mercy, and grace.

Justice gives me what I deserve.

Mercy gives me not all I deserve.

Grace gives me what I don’t deserve.

(Never ask for justice if you can get mercy.)

When you are in Christ. God sees you as crucified in Christ satisfying the justness of God. When God says to you, “*Even now, return to me...*” God shows us mercy as He offers us a way out of getting all that we deserve. The whole act of God reaching out to us in Christ gives us mercy, not all that we deserve, but His grace gives us what we don’t deserve. The grace of God is not wasted on me. The grace of God is a dynamic stimulus in me. It is a powerful, motivating factor.

Why? Because sin is that serious. We can’t play with sin. A mother came into her home one day to see her five children playing on the floor in a circle. As she got closer she noticed that they were playing with five young skunks. In her well composed manner, she yelled, “get away from there quick!” The children got up and ran away . . . each carrying a skunk. You know what happened! The children got away but they carried the stench with them. We can’t play with sin. We are like these children, we profess to run toward holiness but we are carrying the skunk of sin around with us. Our repentance must be from our hearts and not just something on the surface.

And when we do, we are always on the brink of the Day of the Lord.

With the response, Joel prophesied about God’s renewal. In the midst of telling of the Day of the Lord, Joel uses the last half of his book to paint a picture of the things that God will do for those who come to Him with all their heart. The first thing he says is that He will renew them. In 2:25 Joel says “*I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten*”. That is a great theme throughout the Bible: that God will restore us to wholeness. It begins in Genesis chapter 3 when God makes a plan for Adam and Eve, and the whole rest of Scripture is the carrying out of that plan. God promises to restore the sinner’s wasted years, the family’s wasted years, his people the church’s wasted years. What locust-eaten part of your life are you willing to bring before the Lord today, in order to allow Him to restore you? Is it your marriage? Your thought life? Your wound that is expressed as anger, escape, fear, or hopelessness?

Allow God’s Holy Spirit to speak into your situation. In 2:28-30 Joel writes: “*And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.*”²⁹ *Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days*” (Joel 2:28-29).

Such is the magnificent grace of God. We are sinners but He is willing not only to forgive us . . . He is willing to re-make us and empower us. Don’t miss the nature of this blessing. We take it for granted because we are “used” to it. It is like the blessing of freedom. We don’t appreciate freedom until someone tries to take it away from us. God gives His Spirit to those who turn to Him. It is an astounding blessing that we must never take for granted.

Finally, in chapter 3 Joel tells the people that God will vindicate His people. Those who seemed to have the upper hand, those who seemed to be getting away with everything . . . will indeed face a day of reckoning. They will get away with nothing.

Okay. Now. What does a locust-plague inspired prophecy have to do with the world of 2005? Plenty. First, God's purpose is to be God. Let's never lose sight of God's purpose in history—from grasshopper swarms to world-wide judgment to the dissolving of sun and moon—his purpose is to be God in the eyes of the whole world. Joel's conclusion of the grasshopper swarm as well as his vision of the Day of the Lord states it: "*You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I the Lord am your God and there is none else!*"(2:27, 3:17). If we are God's people everything we do must have this as its aim.

Second, God's purpose is to call us to Him. If our hearts wander from this God, he will fight against us to bring us to repentance. I have seen it in my own life: I begin to think "Hey, I'm doin' all right...confidence becomes self-confidence and prayer starts to feel unnecessary. I begin to find ways to live the carefully balanced compromise. And then the locusts come. God clogs my way. He brings me down. Things will go sour at home. Tensions arise at work. Frustration and depression build. Joy is elusive. He boxes me in and clogs my way. He fights against me in my pride. For he is a jealous God and will have our heart's trust 100%. When he says in 2:12, "Return to me with *all* your heart" it is clear, isn't it, what he is fighting for: *all* our heart, not a piece on Sunday and a piece at mealtime and a piece at bedtime. If you are his, he will fight you until you give him all your heart all the time. Don't be bitter at God because he clogs your way and frustrates your day. Realize it is God's discipline. A loving Father fighting against our pride, our self-reliance, and our love for the world.

Third, therefore, as Joel pleads, rend your hearts and not your garments. Turn from the sin you cherish. It's your *sin* that makes you feel guilty every day, not God. I believe we're all doing the best we can. And that's the problem. We haven't claimed Joel's prophecy of God's Holy Spirit to help us. God will grant that to us. He's promised us. We surrender and God moves in us and through us.

This is what it is like to be a child of God. We may be tossed about by the world. There may be terrifying moments and sudden changes in life. But in the midst of it all we do not despair because God has given us His Spirit to protect us and to make sure we make it safely home. He has promised to care for us. There are times we may feel that we are going to "fall out" of God's hands but we won't because He holds us firm in the grip of His grace. He has promised to protect us. His promise is sure.

Today is the Day of the Lord. When we live lives of carefully balanced compromise, like the people of Israel, you and I stand on the brink. Joel says the Day of the Lord means different things, depending on if you have rent your garments or your heart.

Who has your soul today? There is a tug of war going on....Years ago, on a hot summer day in south Florida, a little boy decided to go for a swim in the old swimming hole behind his house. In a hurry to get out of the hot sun, he ran to the water hole, to dive into the cool water, he ran out the back door, leaving behind his shirt, his shoes, and he dove into the lake, not realizing that as he swam toward the middle of the lake, an alligator was swimming toward the shore.

His mother in the house was looking out the window and saw the two as they got closer and closer together. In utter fear she ran out of the house, yelling toward her son as loudly as she could. Hearing her voice the little boy became alarmed and made a U-turn to swim back to his mother. But it was too late.

Just as he reached her, the alligator reached him. From the dock the mother grabbed her little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his leg and there began this tug of war between the mother and the alligator. The alligator was much stronger than the mother, but the mother was much too passionate to let go. A farmer happened to drive by and hear her screaming. He raced from his truck and he took aim and he shot that alligator.

Remarkably, weeks after the little boy had been attacked, he recovered. His legs were extremely scarred from the vicious attack of the animal. On his arms were deep scratches where his mother's fingernails had dug into his flesh in an effort to hang on to the one that she loved.

The newspaper reporters had heard about it and they came to interview the little boy after the trauma, and they said “Now, show me the scars. And he rolled up his pant legs and he said “look at ‘em.” And then, with obvious pride he said “But look at my arms. I have great scars on my arms too. I have them because my mother wouldn’t let go.”

You and I can identify with that little boy. We have scars too. Scars from a painful past, from years the locusts have eaten. But some wounds are because God refused to let go. In the midst of that struggle, in the midst of that war, he’s still holding on.

We’re too busy swimming. We don’t see it. But God sees it. And he calls “Come back! Come back!”

The swimming hole of life is filled with perils, and we forget that the enemy is ready to attack us. If you have sensed that struggle, that tug of war, remember, somebody always wins. You’re either on the Lord’s side, or that alligator of sin has attacked you. God wants to save this morning. He wants to save completely. God can save. I’m a witness for him today. He wants to make it all right today. No matter what regrets, what sin, God forgives. God’s ready to go deep today. Rend your hearts, Joel says. Are you ready?