

**Historical Context.** Since nothing is known about the author of the book of Joel, scholars have found it hard to nail down when it was written. Having said that, most scholars believe, based on internal evidence, that the book was written after Ezra and Nehemiah, and before the world conquest by the Greeks in the fourth century, most likely around 400BC.

**Focus of the book.** The central focus of the book is the “Day of the Lord” which carries a twofold message: for those who worship God, it will be a day of blessing and restoration, but for the enemies of God, it will be a day of destruction and desolation.

**The story.** A plague of locusts ravages Judah. Joel sees this as a symbol of the coming of the Lord. He summons the people to repent and turn to the Lord with fasting. They convene a solemn assembly of prayer for deliverance. The Lord answers their prayer and promises to drive away the locusts and blesses them with peace and prosperity.

In his book *Reading the Old Testament*, Fr. Lawrence Boadt says: “*The style of Joel is very similar to a modern penitential liturgy for the sacrament of penance. The penitents lament their evil state and all their sins; the priests call for repentance and fasting; both together beg God to show mercy and forgiveness to them; finally, the penitents receive reassurance of God’s forgiving love through the blessing of the priest*”(p. 464).

### Division of chapters

- The plague and the call to fast (Chapters 1-2)
- The coming “Day of the Lord”: blessings for the faithful, punishment for the unfaithful (Chapters 3-4)

### COMMENTARY

#### CHAPTER 1: The plague and the call to penance

*“Hear this you elders! Pay attention all you who dwell in the land! Has anything like this happened in your days or in the days of your fathers?”(v.2)*

*“The field is ravaged, the earth mourns....” (v.10)*

*“Gird yourselves and weep, O priests! Wail, O ministers of the altar.... Proclaim a fast, call an*

*assembly, gather the elders and proclaim...‘The day of the Lord is near!’” (vv13-15)*

**Verses 1-12.** The elders and all the people are called to reflect on the nature of the devastating destruction that the plague of locusts has brought on the land. Having reflected on the meaning of the horrific event that has just occurred, parents are told to talk to their children and grandchildren about the event. It might be like the holocaust survivors of World War 2, recounting their harrowing experience during the reign of Hitler to their children and grandchildren.

**Verses 13-20.** Joel interprets the devastating plague that has come upon the land as a punishment by God for the sins of the people. Hence, the call to fast in these verses. In verses 19-20, Joel prays.

#### CHAPTER 2: Impending doom; Call to repentance; God’s response

*“Blow the trumpet...sound the alarm...! Let all who dwell in the land tremble...! Yes, it is near, a day of darkness and of gloom...!” (vv 1-2)*

*“Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord your God....” (v.13)*

*“See, I will send you grain, and wine, and oil....No more will I make you a reproach among the nations.”(v.19)*

**Verses 1-11.** Here we have a vivid and stirring description of the locusts advancing like a mighty army in battle array.

**Verses 12-18.** One thing that could stop the impending doom is a wholehearted return to the Lord. Verse 17 is Joel’s prayer: *“Spare, O Lord, your people....”* These verses are the first reading for Ash Wednesday.

**Verses 19-25.** God responds to the people’s prayer to be spared. There is a significant change here. The God who, through the prophet, had warned the people of impending doom (vv 1-11), now has pity on his people.

The change in God’s attitude presupposes a change in the people’s attitude. The act of national repentance is

an act of conscious turning from evil and returning to God. Peter Craigie writes:

*“Upon reflection, it becomes clear that the divine response to prayer really only presupposes one change, not two. God’s love continued always for his people, but as they turned from him, it was manifest in wrath. As they turned back to him, seeking again the intimate relationship that had been lost, they rediscovered the compassion that was always in the heart of God.”*(The Daily Study Bible Series – The Twelve Prophets, Vol.1, p.107)

### **CHAPTER 3: Outpouring of the spirit**

*“Then afterward I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. Even upon the servants and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. And I will work wonders in the heavens and on earth...”* (vv1-3)

In chapters 3-4, the Prophet’s focus is directed solely to the future. These words are made famous by Peter who quotes them on the Day of Pentecost.

The above words are spoken to the people of Judah during a time of grave crisis. Even though a promise of restoration had been given (2:18-27), the actual condition of the people has not changed. To these people, Joel brings prophecy about the spirit being poured out on all mankind, upon all their sons and daughters, which seems radical when we remember that previously God’s Spirit was only poured out on some special people like Kings and Judges. This promise of outpouring of the spirit on *all* mankind is fulfilled on Pentecost Day.

### **CHAPTER 4: Judgment on the nations**

*“...I will sit in judgment upon all the neighboring nations.”*(v.12)

*“Then you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain....”* (v.17)

*“Judah shall abide forever, and Jerusalem for all generations.”*(v.20)

The nations are indicted for three crimes: a) for scattering God’s people among the nations—a reference to the exile (v.2); b) for occupying the people’s land, thus “dividing my land” (v.2); and c) for

casting lots over my people (v.3)—a reference to how little the victors valued the lives of the deportees.

**Verses 4-8** elaborate on the guilt of the nations, resulting in their mistreatment of Israel.

**Verses 17-21—Salvation for God’s elect.** This final oracle speaks about the destruction of Judah’s enemies: “Egypt shall be a waste” and “Edom a desert waste” (v.19), but Jerusalem will experience abundance and Judah will last forever.

### **Concluding Word**

Joel looked at natural events and drew spiritual lessons from them. We can learn from him to see God at work in the world. His prophecy of the outpouring of God’s Spirit reminds us to pray that the Holy Spirit will touch the hearts of all people.

### **Resources**

- Collegeville Bible Commentary
- Daily Bible Study series - The Twelve Prophets, Vol.1