

Joel series (Sept 2019)  
**'The Day of the Lord is Near'**  
Week 1: Joel 1

This week we begin a four-week series on the book of Joel. Joel counts among the twelve 'minor prophets' that conclude the Old Testament. Each prophet speaks to a part of God's world in which God has interest.

We're not quite sure exactly when Joel spoke (somewhere between 700–500 BC), but he certainly addresses the people of God directly. They have a temple in which to worship and a relationship with God to foster. How would God have them live in the coming decades?

Of course we don't live in exactly the same era. We worship the same God, but not in some stone building in Jerusalem (and our own stone building isn't a parallel either). This same God has similar expectations of his new-covenant people, though these aren't exactly the same as his old-covenant rules for Israel (see especially Week 3). We have to think hard and work hard to consider why God would preserve the message of Joel in the Bible for our benefit. And we might also appreciate why GWAC has chosen to study Joel as part of our envisioning process, as we consider our present state and future plans for the next five years.

The following three sections echo the three elements of this week's sermon. These are fairly complete notes to deal with a complex topic. If you're under time constraints, it may be helpful to skim through all the topics and work out which ones to devote time to.

### 1. God and natural disasters

Take time to reflect on what role you think God has in natural disasters (such as Black Saturday in Victoria in February 2009). Are they under God's control or not? Some questions and Bible texts help us with our thinking:

1. *Are we confident that God has full power over nature?*

- Ancient cultures defined a god's power based on their role in creating and sustaining the universe. This is also a common feature of Christian teaching. Review Genesis 1:1–2:3 for the most familiar account. We see the same at the other end of the Bible. The indescribable One on the throne of heaven in Revelation 4 is especially praised for his *creative* power (4:11).
- We also find Jesus' power over creation regularly affirmed. It's one more reason that we are confident to think that he is divine. Can you think of key passages that affirm this?

SOME SUGGESTIONS IN FOOTNOTE 1

- Make a list of where in our liturgies and songs we affirm these truths.
2. *Does this mean that every natural disaster and personal tragedy is God's direct judgment?*
- There are plenty of biblical examples where God *does* bring judgment upon an individual or a nation for disobeying God. Among *many* examples, you could review 2 Samuel 12:1–14 and 2 Kings 17:7–23 (and their surrounding contexts).

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1–3; Colossians 1:15–17; Hebrews 1:1–4; 1 Corinthians 8:4–6. Some of Jesus' miracles could also be seen this way – although they primarily confirm that God is happy to work *through* Jesus.

- Can you think of where in the Bible we might turn for the warning *not* to always link every drought and flood with the specific sin of some individual or nation?

SOME SUGGESTIONS IN FOOTNOTE 2

3. *Can we breathe a sigh of relief and assume that God never invokes such judgments?*

- There remains plenty of biblical content that affirms God's control over nature and natural disasters. Can you list examples of such events in the Bible? SOME EXAMPLES IN FOOTNOTE 3

4. *How should we respond to these observations?*

- If these insights make us uncomfortable, how do we deal with them? Do we discard the Old Testament? Do we dismiss God as being or behaving differently in Old Testament times than in the New Testament era? What strategies have you seen others use – or attempted yourself?
- How might I as an individual, and GWAC as part of God's global church, need to correct our views on God's control of nature? What theological, personal and pastoral issues might this raise?

*Some of these observations are very much at odds with the views in society and in many parts of the church, that God should be solely benevolent. Rethinking these may raise many questions about your view of God. It may also open personal wounds about friends and family who have been victims of natural events or other expressions of evil in the world. Do not stew alone over such matters, but seek help from trusted church leaders and staff.*

## 2. Joel's natural disaster

Read through Joel 1 again. You might use the sections outlined in the sermon:

1:(1)2–4 Joel's call to pay attention to the locust plague

1:5–14 Joel's call to various groups of victims to mourn

1:15–20 Joel's own lament for Israel's circumstances

5. *Review the severity of the locust plague and Joel's calls to lament:*

- List all the descriptions of the locust plague. What terms are used to describe its severity? And what descriptions are there of its consequences?
- List the variety and frequency of the commands to lament all this.
- Presumably Joel's people already knew about the severity of the locust plague! Why does Joel go to such length to draw their attention to it?

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<sup>2</sup> The book of Job is the classic example. Job's friends think Job's misfortunes are due to some kind of sin, but the point of the book – from its very opening verse – is that Job is 'blameless and upright' (just as Christians now are in God's sight; see passages like Colossians 1:22 and Ephesians 1:4). You might also remember two of Jesus' own teachings. One blind man he meets is not blind as a judgment on anyone's particular sins (John 9:1–3). And it's quite true that Jesus affirms that some victims of local violence and accident are not being especially singled out (Luke 13:1–4) – although the wider point of that message (Luke 13:1–9) is probably that *everyone* deserves greater judgment, so this chapter might better belong in our next category.

<sup>3</sup> Many of the common Old Testament stories (even that we teach to children!) emphasise God's complete control. We might think especially of creation (Genesis 1–2), the flood in Noah's day (Genesis 6–9; see esp. 6:11–13), the plagues upon Egypt and the rescue through the Red Sea (Exodus 1–15; see esp. 3:20; 6:6; 9:13–26; 14:23–31; 15:1–18). Once Israel moves into the promised land, God offers natural abundance for obedience – and natural and political disaster for disobedience (Leviticus 26:1–13, 14–39; Deuteronomy 28:1–14, 15–68). You might recall famines in the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 12; 26; 41–43), of Ruth (Ruth 1), of Gideon (Judges 6), of David (2 Samuel 21), of Elijah (1 Kings 18–19), of Elisha (2 Kings 6–7), of Amos (Amos 4; cf. 8:9–13). There are several others, including in New Testament times (Acts 11:27–30).

It is fair to observe that Joel 1 says little about God sending the locusts. But Joel 2:25 confirms that this was indeed God's work. We can see the same kinds of actions in Amos 4:9(–11). Such passages suggest that God uses disasters to get people's attention. Apparently we can be hard of hearing (see again some of the passages in footnote 3).

6. *Review Joel's teaching on 'the Day of the LORD':* ('LORD' = Yahweh/Jehovah = the Bible's God)

- Notice how frequent the theme is: esp. Joel 1:15; 2:1–2, 10–11, 31; 3:14–15, 18.
- Read through these verses and see if you can determine how Joel and God's Old Testament people saw this coming day.
- What does Joel 1:15 tell us about how the people should anticipate this coming day? (For a similar sentiment with a bit more detail, turn a few pages forward and read Amos 5:18–20.)

### 3. God's lessons for today

The regular challenge as we move from an Old Testament passage to living in the New Testament is to ask the two-pronged question(s): What characteristics of God (and his relationship to his people and to his world) stay the *same* between the two testaments? ... and what characteristics *differ*?

7. *Reflect on our feelings about judgment:*

- How well do we grasp the notion – common in the Bible and in many cultures today – that the behaviour of an individual can have consequences for entire communities?
- Compile a list of Bible passages that talk about judgment or suffering (or general hard times) that are for people's *benefit*. SOME SUGGESTIONS IN FOOTNOTE 4

8. *Does God still use such natural disasters to get people's attention?*

- We have seen many examples of God using disasters in the Old Testament to earn attention. Review question 5 and footnote 3 above.
- But we are learning to ask if God *still* behaves the same way under the New Testament – or might he do something different today? Can you think of New Testament passages that speak of natural disasters and God's role in them? Are these similar or dissimilar to the Old Testament examples? SOME SUGGESTIONS IN FOOTNOTE 5

What disasters have you heard about or witnessed? How have believers and unbelievers responded to them? Do you have confidence to determine God's role in them? Even if we are unsure of God's 'use' of these events, what can Joel teach us about lamenting them?

How do these get our attention about the (still future) Day of the Lord? What might you need to do to prepare yourself, your church, your family and your friends for this pending day?

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<sup>4</sup> The book of Proverbs has much to say about the nature of discipline. God disciplines Israel in their 40-year wilderness trek (see Deuteronomy 8:1–5). But the *New Testament* is just as keen to continue this pattern for we who follow Jesus; you might consider James 1:2–4 (see last week's pastoral email from GWAC staff); Romans 5:1–5; Hebrews 12:4–13.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus talks about all kinds of discomfort indicating the *beginnings* of God's future work (see Mark 13:(5)7–8). There is every reason not to excuse these as sometime *yet* to occur in our future. Romans 8:18–25 (just before 8:26–30 that we probably know better) acknowledges the brokenness of creation around us. And the visions of Revelation show God using natural disasters to get people's attention (for example, see Revelation 6, especially its closing verses; for even more of this, try Revelation 8–9 and the final verses there).