

## INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

# Joel

Joel highlights the coming of the Spirit (2:28-32), one of the brightest of all prophetic predictions, amid calls for repentance at a dark time for God's people.

**What:** second of the minor prophets

**Where:** between Hosea and Amos

**When:** unknown; perhaps 800 B.C.

Joel prophesied during a double catastrophe in Jerusalem and Judah.

The first was a natural disaster of drouth and a plague of locusts upon the land (1:4-12, 16-20). The vivid description finds no greenery or storage (7, 10-12, 16-18), only depressed priests, farmers, animals, and drinkers (5, 9, 11, 18). The agricultural economy was devastated.

The second crisis of Joel's time was military disaster, threatened by an invading army (2:1-11). This large, well-disciplined foe (probably Assyria) followed a "scorched earth" policy in the lands it conquered (2:3). The blast of a trumpet (ram's horn) by a watchman on the city wall signaled the enemy's approach (2:1, 15).

At the worst of this impending double disaster, Joel sounds an insistent call for the leaders and people to repent (1:13, 14; 2:1, 12-17). Colorful and passionate commands are piled up here:

- Blow the trumpet.
- End all celebration.
- Turn (return).
- Weep; cry out to the Lord.
- Tear your heart; fast.
- Lie in sackcloth.
- Call elders and people to God's house.
- Plead with God to save.

These are the classic cries of an Old Testament prophet.

The watershed in Joel comes midway in chapter 2. As the prophet's plea reaches its highest pitch (2:15-17), he suddenly turns to God's gracious promises for those who heed the call to repent

(2:18ff). Between the bad news (calamity) of Joel's first half and the mostly good news (prosperity) of his second, the bridge is repentance.

The contours of God's grace are that drouth and plague will end and the threatening enemy will be driven away (2:19, 20-27). The Lord's goodness restores to His people the years lost to the plague (2:25). The promise of "no shame" is repeated (2:25-27).

Yahweh's victory overflows all expectation as the prophet predicts the day when God's Spirit will be poured on all people, accompanied by heavenly signs and a universal opportunity for salvation (2:28-32). This is the text preached by Peter to the Jerusalem crowd when the Spirit fell after Jesus' ascension (Acts 2:14-22ff). The Day of Pentecost did not exhaust the promise of the Spirit and sal-

vation, however. The words of this prophecy exceed any limits of time and place, and will find their final fulfillment in climactic events yet to come.

Thus, the first two chapters of Joel begin with dismal circumstances for God's people and end with a bright promise for all humanity.

Chapter 3, more difficult to analyze, moves onward to a more remote future for God's people and for Zion, His holy mountain. An apocalyptic tone begins as early as 2:20, and is expressed in phrases and concepts like

- *great and terrible day of the Lord* (2:31)
- judgment of all the nations (3:2, 12)
- last great battle (3:9-13)
- darkening of sun, moon, stars (2:31; 3:15)
- permanent restoration of Israel and Judah to Zion (3:1, 17, 20, 21)

For the prophet, *day of the Lord* can describe the present, when God's earthly judgment (drouth, plague, invasion) comes upon His people for their sins (1:15; 2:11). In the largest sense, every day is the Lord's, when both His grace and His wrath are continually demonstrated in human affairs.

The same expression, *day of the Lord*, can also glance toward distant events and a final judgment (2:31; 3:14). Similar expressions are *in those days*, *at that time*, and *in that day* (3:1, 18).

Starting with the limited situation of Joel's day (1:1 — 2:27), this book broadens to express universal facts for all people in all times (2:28 — 3:21). Its later predictions have a permanent, worldwide ring to them (2:28, 32; 3:2, 9, 12, 17, 20).

**Joel in a sentence:** Beset by drouth, plague, and armies, Judah and Jerusalem are called to repentance with promises of blessing now and God's Spirit and salvation later when all nations are gathered for judgment.