

Sermon Notes
by Jacques Boulet

Lament, O Priests, for the Offerings Withheld from God's House

Joel Series: The Day of the LORD is Coming
October 22, 2017

“Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming;” (Joel 2:1)

1. Introduction

Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Jacques. I am one of the elders here at New City Church Toronto. I am also a PhD student studying Hebrew grammar and with specialty in the Old Testament. Today we are going to start a sermon series on the book of Joel. Before we do that, let us pray.

2. Prayer for eyes to see and ears to hear

Lord God, we are here to open your Scriptures and listen to your voice from across the centuries. Give us, by your Holy Spirit, ears to hear what you are saying to us today and eyes to see where your priorities lie.

May you make me a blessing to these people. May you take the simple words that I have prepared and make them more than they are. Please take every good thing and fix them in all of our hearts and minds throughout the coming week.

We all depend on your Spirit. Give us wisdom, attention, and understanding.

All this for your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

3. Sermon

(a) Introduction to the Series

Joel is a relatively short book. It belongs to a collection of twelve prophetic books we call the Minor Prophets. The Minor Prophets get their name because they were short enough to fit together on a single scroll, whereas the Major Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel – were each long enough to take up a scroll by themselves.

The Old Testament prophets are known to be challenging, somewhere between high literature and cryptic message. But if the prophets are cryptic to us, I believe that they were much less so to their contemporaries. Like reading only half of any correspondence, we are necessarily left in the dark about certain contextual details that both the prophet and his audience would have known very well. Our challenge then, is to do our

homework to reconstruct those details, and when we do, the prophet's message clears up significantly.

In a moment we will take a short tour through the history of Israel in order to get the necessary background for Joel's prophecy. But before we do that, let me summarize today's passage.

- The first verse of Joel authenticates what follows as the very word of God, a prophecy in the proper sense.
- Verses 2 and 3 summon an audience: the people of Judah and their leaders. The situation of this book is so dire that Joel declares, by way of rhetorical question, that no one in Israel has ever seen such a cataclysmic famine. Things are very bad indeed, and they should not be forgotten.
- The famine is caused by at least two separate things. First, bugs! Read verse 4 with me (READ Joel 1:4). They are everywhere. They are eating absolutely everything. Read verse 7 (READ Joel 1:7). The poetic imagination of the book casts these locusts as an invading army and we will see more of that in chapter 2. But see already in chapter 1:6 how the locusts are referred to as though a foreign nation (READ Joel 1:6).
- The second problem is drought. Joel doesn't give us the same poetic treatment of the drought, but it is clear that the land is dry. For example, see verse 20 (READ Joel 1:20). There is also Joel 2:23 which suggests that God later sent rain to alleviate the situation.
- The result of the locust plague and the drought is that there is nothing to eat, there is no wine to drink, and there is no olive oil. Read these passages with me:
 - (READ) Joel 1:10-12
 - (READ) also verses 17 and 18

The situation is serious. God's community is in danger of disappearing. But why? Let us now return into Israel's history to find out. We will see how Israel's covenant with God explains what we are reading in Joel. It explains the disaster that has befallen the people. It also explains the hope that Joel preaches in later parts of the book.

Our sketch begins around the year 2100 B.C. with a man called Abram and his wife Sarai. Abram and Sarai lived with their family near the ancient city Ur in southern Mesopotamia, what is today southern Iraq. In Genesis 12 the true God, whose name was given in Exodus 3 and which we reproduce in English as Yahweh, spoke to Abram saying this: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3 ESV).

The land that was promised was called Canaan. In modern times, Canaan covers parts of the territories that we call Israel, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. There were already people there, and Abram, whom God later called Abraham, lived mostly at peace with them during his lifetime.

This same promise was passed along to Abraham's son Isaac, and then to Isaac's son Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, a name that reflects Jacob's lifelong struggle

with God. Jacob had twelve sons, and these sons became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. The promise passed to all of them. When Israel was an old man the whole family went to live in Egypt during a severe famine. They stayed there for four hundred years, eventually being subdued and oppressed as forced labourers, as we read in Exodus chapter 1.

During the lifetime of Moses, Yahweh delivered the people from slavery in Egypt and made a covenant with the people Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. Yahweh would be their only God; they would be Yahweh's special people. Their whole reason for existing was, as with Abraham's promise, to bless the whole world by existing as a model of true religion in a polytheistic culture. As Exodus 19:6 puts it, Israel was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

A covenant is somewhat like a contract. There are terms which govern the covenant relationship and there are consequences for breaking covenant. On His end, God promised to take good care of the people if they were faithful to His commandments. If they worshiped Yahweh alone and treated each other well, then God would make sure that the Israelites had plenty to eat and that they would be safe from their enemies. On the other hand, if they did not comply, then God promised a series of curses. Some of these curses were that Israel would go hungry because the rain would not come,¹ because insects would eat the crops,² and because foreign enemies would come and steal what they had grown.³

Hear Deuteronomy 28:23-24 (ESV): "And the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed."

And then also Deuteronomy 28:33 (ESV): "A nation that you have not known shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors, and you shall only be oppressed and crushed continually."

And then again Deuteronomy 28:38-40 (ESV): "You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off... The cricket shall possess all your trees and the fruit of your ground."⁴

I hope some of what I just read sounds familiar based on the reading from Joel chapter 1. We'll come back to that in a moment.

After covenant, God brought Israel out of the wilderness and into Canaan. Because the people of that land had done so much evil, God pushed them out of the land ahead of the Israelites.⁵ At first there was no kingdom, but over time the people asked for a king and

1. Lev 26:19; Deut 28:23-24.

2. Deut 28:38-42.

3. Deut 28:30, 33, 49-51.

4. See the full covenant curses in Leviticus 26 and especially the updated version in Deuteronomy 28.

so God granted their request. The first king, Saul, was rejected for disobeying God. The second, David, who became king around the year 1010 B.C., obeyed God and he started a dynasty that would last hundreds of years. The memory of David was so strong that the prophets promised that when God's salvation came in the future, that it would be through one of David's descendants. We know which one it was, don't we: Jesus, Son of the Most High God and the distant son of David, king of Israel. You can read about Jesus' human lineage in Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapter 3.

Unfortunately, the kings of Israel were no better than the people had been in the wilderness wanderings or in the period of the judges that we haven't had time to cover. They did not keep covenant. The kingdom was very soon broken up into two pieces. Both kingdoms came to a sad end. In 722 B.C., Sennacherib king of Assyria swooped down on the northern kingdom, called Israel, and destroyed it, taking many people with him to the east to serve his empire. In 597 B.C., the southern kingdom, called Judah, was defeated by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. In the years that followed they made Nebuchadnezzar so angry that in 587 B.C. the Babylonians returned and destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. In both campaigns the Babylonians took people from Judah into exile in Babylonia. Exile was predicted as a consequence of breaking covenant in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In all of this, God was holding up his side of the covenant promise. God cannot break a promise; it is God's very nature to be true and faithful.

The period from 587 to 515 is the period generally referred to as the exilic period. This is the period where there was no temple in Jerusalem and there was no Israel to speak of.

However, the Babylonians got what was coming to them in 539 when Cyrus, the Persian king toppled the Babylonian empire over night. Cyrus is the one who, in 2 Chronicles 36 and Ezra chapter 1, gave the decree to have the temple rebuilt in Jerusalem. At that time some Israelites returned to Jerusalem in the old kingdom of Judah to rebuild. These people were from the tribe of Judah. It is from the name Judah that we get the words Jew and Jewish. All the other tribes had been annihilated by the Assyrian deportations. Only the Jews were left to inherit God's promise to Abraham.

(b) Introduction to the book of Joel

So, now you have the bare outline of Israel's history. Where does Joel fit?

When studying a book of the Bible one begins with a few simple questions: Who wrote the book? When was it written? Who was the intended audience? and What genre of literature is it?

I already told you that Joel is prophetic literature. The surest sign of that is the first verse: "The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel" (Joel 1:1 ESV). It is a standard prophetic formula, similar to the one that begins the book of Hosea. A prophet is someone who communicates the message of God to the rest of the people. Therefore we know that someone is a prophet if the word of God comes to that person.

5. See Gen 15:16; Lev 18:27-28; Deut 9:5.

Prophetic literature can be written in prose or poetry. If you read Joel in Hebrew, then it becomes clear that much of the book is written in poetic style. English translations like the ESV make an effort to display this fact using special formatting, dividing the text into poetic lines. The fact that Joel is poetic will influence how we interpret what we read.

As it happens, we know very little about Joel the man. Neither Joel nor his father Pethuel are mentioned outside of this book. Furthermore, Joel's book has no absolute or relative dating formula, like some of the other prophetic books do. This poses a challenge. We actually don't have any certainty about what period the book pertains to. But that is fine for two reasons:

First, we do know some general things. Chapter 3, verses 1 and 20 imply that Joel is concerned with Judah and Jerusalem, but not the northern kingdom. His message seems to be for Judah as a remnant of Israel. That gives us a spatial reference and it answers the question, 'who is the intended audience?' Additionally, today's passage complains that the grain and drink offerings have been cut off from the house – or temple – of God (see vv. 1:9, 13). That puts Joel in a period when there was a temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Joel 3:2 hints that the deportation and exile of the people has already happened. All this information leads me to agree with commentator Leslie Allen that Joel refers to a period not long after 515 B.C. when the second temple was completed in Jerusalem. That would put Joel in the 'post-exilic' period. This would correspond well with the fact that Joel apparently explicitly quotes Obadiah, itself an exilic or early post-exilic prophesy.

The second reason that it is fine to be somewhat uncertain about Joel's date is that the message of the book is clear regardless. By God's providence we have as much information as we need. Joel talks about a catastrophe in his present and then also about the coming Day of the Lord in his future. For us it is enough to know that Joel's present is past with respect to Jesus. With Jesus as a reference point in time, we will be able to determine whether the Day of the Lord is in our past, in our future, or, a little of both.

(c) On Covenant, Suffering, and Severe Mercy

Do you remember the passages that I read from Deuteronomy? The consequences of breaking covenant with God include drought, bugs, and foreign nations, all of which are hard on the food supply. Those are precisely the calamities that have befallen the people of Judah in Joel chapters 1 and 2.⁶

What you need to know about these terrible circumstances is that they are not for nothing. They are not the vengeance of an irritable God. They are discipline. It says so explicitly in Leviticus 26:23-24 (ESV): "And if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me, then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins." The discipline is precisely to remind the people of their failure to keep covenant and to show them how much they depend on God for everything. The discipline is, if I may borrow the title of a book, "a severe mercy." If God did nothing to

6. I believe that it is possible that Joel, having something like Deut 28:33 in mind, casts the locusts plague in Joel 1:6; 2:2, 20 as an invading nation.

catch the people's attention, then they would just keep on going away from God, the only source of true life, and end up lost. But God cannot deny Himself, and He cannot deny the covenant he made with Abraham. God disciplines the people in order to get them to repent, literally to turn back to Him and find life there. In Leviticus 26:40-42 God says this:

“But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies—if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.” (Leviticus 26:40–42 ESV)

So, two things should be clear by now. First, the famine and disaster of Joel chapter 1 is best understood in light of failure to keep covenant. We don't know what the Jews did or did not do – Joel, unlike most prophetic books just doesn't say – but God is sending them a potent sign that they need to repent. Second, the calamity is not for nothing. We will see more clearly in a future sermon how Joel exhorts the people to repent and pray for mercy and how God does indeed have mercy.

You may not like the idea, but the fact is that God will do what it takes to save his people, even if it means intense suffering. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18 ESV). In other words, God has the reward of eternal life without suffering waiting for us. But to receive that reward we need to cling to God and believe in the sacrifice that Jesus made for our sins. Stray from Jesus and you are lost forever.

It is that eternal separation that God is actively trying to avoid here in Joel. They didn't yet have Jesus, but we will see later on how the Day of the Lord foreseen by Joel involves Jesus in our past (but Joel's future) and in our future (also Joel's future). In the meantime, it was essential that Judah, the people of the promise, not be lost. Remember how Abraham's offspring is supposed to be a blessing to all nations? If Judah disappears into the dark night of sin, then so too does the blessing. The other eleven tribes are already gone! Judah must stand! There must be a remnant. Someone must be faithful to covenant long enough for God's Son, Jesus, the Christ, to come and do His saving work.

They may not have realized it at the time, but this locust plague that Judah suffered, they suffered for the sake of us all. Truly, as it says in Isaiah 55:8 (ESV): “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.” Praise be to God that this is in fact so.

And consider, you too, how the suffering that you endure in this life will be a blessing to future generations. Because we exist in this world we share in its suffering. But our suffering and the suffering of the world are not for nothing. As with the old covenant, suffering is a reminder that we are not gods, but rather we are dependent for everything on the one true God. Faith and salvation in Jesus Christ come by hearing God's word

preached.⁷ Someone must be preaching. Someone must be sharing the Good News with friends and coworkers. That someone is you and me; it is the Church universal, the continuing people of Israel.⁸

(d) On learning to see with God's perspective

For the remainder of our time today, I want to draw your attention to the the verses that inspire this sermon's title. As we read those I want you to keep in mind the notion of covenant.

Do you know what covenant is for? God made covenants with His people because through the history of those covenants Israel and the rest of the world get to see God's character. God made promises and God kept those promises. Through covenant we get to know who God is.⁹ Thanks to God's faithfulness to covenant in the past, we have reason to trust in God's promises which we are still waiting to see fulfilled in the future.

Covenant is both about getting to know God and about getting to see the world as God sees it. It is about gaining the right perspective on our circumstances in this world.

What I want you to notice about Joel chapter 1 is the way that, in the face of unspeakable disaster, the prophet brings God's perspective to a people which has become numb to priorities other than its own. And not just numb, but in a stupor. They are asleep and need to be woken. Read verse 1:5 with me (READ Joel 1:5).

It is true that the people and the animals are short on food, but the prophet emphasizes how this has affected God's glory. Food is so scarce that the priests have had to stop offering the daily grain and drink offerings in the temple of God. Does anyone care? Is anyone concerned that in the one place in all the world where God has chosen to put His name, that God's proper worship is cut off? How will the nations know God if Israel does not worship and glorify God with a joyful heart?

Famine is not just bad for God's people. It is bad for the whole world. Salvation of the world requires hearing about the majesty of God. That message of the glory of God depends on the people of God to live it like they mean it. The prophet Joel calls attention to this problem. Read with me starting in 1:8 (READ Joel 1:8-9). And again in 1:13 (READ Joel 1:13-16).

Why should people and priests lament? Joel says this: because the grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of God. In other words, think first of God's reputation, even before your own situation.

But God is not just some attention hog. God cares deeply about what He has made and about His people. God suffers with you in your suffering. Pay attention to the possessive pronouns in verses 6 and 7 (READ Joel 1:6-7).

7. See Romans 10:14-17.

8. See Romans 11.

9. See John H. Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

When a prophet speaks on behalf of God it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the first person references: sometimes ‘I’ refers to the prophet; sometimes ‘I’ refers to God. I think the verses we just read are in God’s own voice. Only God has claim over the land.

What these verses betray is God’s own attachment to the land, the vegetation, and the people. They are all His creation. They are all beautiful to Him. And that is why God sends Joel in the first place. A disaster by itself accomplishes only suffering. A disaster with the inspired and prophetic word of God leads to restoration. We will cover repentance and restoration in greater detail another time, but turn with me briefly to chapter 2, verse 12: (READ Joel 2:12-14).

(e) Conclusion and Exhortation

Finally, in closing, what about us? Unlike Joel and his contemporaries, we are not under the old covenant. God no longer relates to us according to the covenant blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Instead, we are under a new covenant. In a moment we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper and then we will rehearse the words that Jesus said: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

The old covenant served its purpose, that is, to show us God so that we would have some basis on which to believe in Him. But the old covenant could not save us. Israel’s history is potent testimony to the fact that in every person there is a sinful nature, a part of our being that is disobedient and selfish. God’s chosen people were, by nature, unable to keep their side of the covenant. The prophet Ezekiel identified this problem using the notion of a stone heart. In the reality of exile, facing up to the devastation of Jerusalem and the complete failure of Israel and its kings to keep covenant, God says this through Ezekiel (36:26 ESV): “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”¹⁰ Our hearts are like stone. That is why Jeremiah promised a new covenant.¹¹ That is why Isaiah prophesied that God had to act alone to bring salvation.¹²

Jesus is that salvation. The name ‘Jesus’ is a short form. It means ‘Yahweh saves.’ In the new covenant, Jesus, the divine saviour, has died to cleanse us from all our sins. By doing so, he has made possible the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised in Joel chapter 2.

The first Christians lived through that day. They were there when the sky turned black in midday and the earth shook. They saw with their own eyes when the saviour of this world died hanging on a cross. They were there when Jesus, raised from the dead, walked into a locked room and showed them the holes in his body left by the nails and the spear that pierced his side. They were there on the day of Pentecost when, finally, the Holy Spirit of God was poured out on God’s remnant people.

For Joel, all that was in the future. It was all part of the ‘great and fearsome day of the Lord’ that was to come, and we will have opportunity to talk more about that in future sermons.

10. Cf. Ezek 11:19.

11. Jer 31:31.

12. Isa 63:5.

But, by the grace of God, for us those events lie in the past. As I conclude, I exhort you to consider what you've heard. If God's priority in Joel's day was the glory of His name as characterized by the joy and abundance of the temple offerings, then where is God's priority today? Is it not still in that place where God has chosen to put His name?¹³

That place is no longer in Jerusalem. We are now free to worship, as Jesus said, "in spirit and in truth."¹⁴ God's temple, the place where God's presence is, is no longer a building. It is us, we who have trusted in Jesus to cleanse us from our sin. When God sent His Holy Spirit to dwell in Christian believers, God took up residence there.

Accordingly, God is now deeply concerned with us: with what we do with our bodies, with how we treat other believers, with how we interact with non-believers. God's reputation is at stake in our individual lives and also in the life of New City Church Toronto, and in the life of the universal Church in every part of the world. And, as you know by now, together with God's reputation the very salvation of the world is on the line.

How will people come to trust in God if we Christians don't rightly display God's character in our lives? How will people be encouraged to love God unless we show them how the love of God fills us with joy?

I want to see a New City Church characterized by holiness, love, and joy. Here, these people, are your new covenant family in Jesus Christ. Show them love in practical ways. Spend time with people who are sad and suffering. Rejoice with those who are happy.

That is why Jesus says in John 13:35 (ESV): "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Our love shows people God's love. It shows them who God is, and it gives them reason to love Him in return.

Let us pray.

4. Prayer that we might become doers of the word and not just hearers

Dear God, merciful Father, thank you. Thank you God for keeping your promises. Thank you for sending your prophet Joel to awaken a sleepy people. Please Lord, do the same for us. Awaken our hearts and minds to your priorities. Give us wisdom to discern what your will is in our lives and give us courage to follow you where you lead.

Thank you Lord Jesus for sacrificing yourself when there was no offering that could save us from our sin in the house of God. Teach us to love one another as you commanded us. May you make your name known in all the world through us.

Thank you Holy Spirit for working faith in us and taking up residence in our fragile bodies. Give us the strength and the confidence to share the truth about Jesus by word and deed. Make us not only hearers of the word of God, but also doers.

Praise and honour and glory be to our God forever and ever. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

13. Cf. Deut 16:11 and similar verses.

14. See John 4:21-24.