

Sermon Notes
by Jacques Boulet

“Return to Me with All Your Heart”

Joel Series: The Day of the LORD is Coming

Sermon 2: Joel 2:1-17

February 25, 2018

“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 and welcome to New City Church Toronto. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Jacques. I am one of the elders here and I support our pastor, Brian, by preaching occasionally. Those of you with a long memory will remember that in October I began a series on the book of Joel and we covered Joel chapter 1. Today we continue that series with Joel chapter 2, verses 1 to 17. But first, 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) Two Themes: Locust Plague and the Day of the Lord

The book of Joel is short. It is dominated by two intersecting themes: a real, historical locust plague happening in Joel's present and a future day of reckoning, 'the great and fearsome day of the LORD.'¹

In the last sermon I explained that the book of Joel likely pertains to the early post-exilic period around 500 years before Jesus Christ. Joel's audience appears to be the people of Judah, and probably specifically the remnant community that had rebuilt Jerusalem and

1. See Joel 1:15; 2:11, 31; 3:14. Small caps is used in LORD when the Hebrew prints YHWH, the name of God (often pronounced Yahweh). The word 'Lord' is used to translate the Hebrew word *adonai*.

its temple. We took time in that sermon to review the history of God's covenant with Israel, and we saw how the locust plague and the drought afflicting Israel in Joel 1 can best be understood as the consequence of Israel's failure to keep covenant. God promised to bless Israel with comfort and peace if they obeyed His holy law, and He promised to bring discipline if they did not.²

And why should God want to bring suffering upon His people? The prophet Joel says that it is because God knows what is coming; God knows that there will be a day in the future, an inescapable day, when God will sit for the last judgment. On that day the enemies of God, those who hate God and prove it by ignoring what He says, will be destroyed. But the friends of God, those who cry out to God for mercy and who love to do what He says, will be placed beyond suffering forever.

Through Joel, his messenger, God is warning the people that this day is coming. God loves His people. He has no desire to see them destroyed. And for that reason He sends them a strong message: "See what I can do; repent now, and live later!"

As God says through Ezekiel, "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live" (Ezek 18:32).

(b) The Locust Plague

Before we start chapter 2, let us refresh our memories a little. Turn to chapter 1, verse 1. (READ Joel 1-7)

I did a little reading about locusts this week. What we call locusts are actually certain species of grasshoppers, but grasshoppers that have gone berserk. On their own these grasshoppers are inoffensive. But, if too many of them get together in one place, then things go wrong. The more they rub up against each other, the more serotonin is released until they change, chemically, into the locust phase. In the locust phase, the grasshoppers change colour, they begin to breed more quickly, and they start to clump together in swarms. They begin to fly together and eat together, requiring more and more food to sustain the swarm. According to a BBC article, a locust swarm "can contain billions of insects and eat tens of thousands of tonnes of vegetation in a single day."³

When a swarm is on the move they darken the sky. When they are feeding, they turn the ground black. And they eat, and they eat, and there is nothing you can do. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that Joel casts the swarm metaphorically as a mighty army. Read with me starting at chapter 2, verse 1. (READ Joel 2:1-10)

What can the people do? The army ahead of them is no army. The people attacking them are no people. There is no defense. Judah, the remnant of Israel has found itself in the position of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Some of you will remember our Exodus series and how Pharaoh opposed God and found himself besieged by plagues of devastating proportion.

2. E.g. Lev 26:2-4, 14-16. Cf. Lev 26; Deut 28.

3. Cited from Ben Lowings, "Canibal theory for locust swarms," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7395356.stm> (accessed February 19, 2018).

One of those plagues was a locust plague, and I assure you that this fact would not have escaped Joel's audience. Hear what happened in Exodus 10 when Pharaoh refused to let Israel go and worship God:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, so that they may come upon the land of Egypt and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left.” So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the LORD brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind had brought the locusts. The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh hastily called Moses and Aaron and said, “I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this death from me.” So he went out from Pharaoh and pleaded with the LORD. And the LORD turned the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea. Not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt. But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.” (Exodus 10:12–20 ESV)

We should learn two things from this reading. First, God does not have favourites. Pharaoh was disobedient to God's will and he and all Egypt suffered for it. Now here, Judah is disobedient, and they too suffer discipline. Second, the only option in the face of God's judgment is to repent and ask for forgiveness. Pharaoh admitted his fault and asked Moses to pray for him. You, and Judah, should be thinking: “Well, if it worked for Pharaoh, maybe it will work for me too.” And, I believe, this is exactly what Joel's message is for us today.

(c) The Prophet as Watchman

Do you know what a prophet is? A prophet is a messenger, someone who communicates God's own words. In the Old Testament God's prophets spent most of their time warning people that if they didn't hurry up and change their lives, then they would get what was coming to them. In the book of Ezekiel, the role of the prophet is described as that of a watchman. Ancient cities were surrounded by walls and on those walls they would post guards to watch for danger. At the first sign of trouble, it was their job to warn the people by blowing a horn. This is what God says to Ezekiel:

“Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound

of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life.

“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.” (Ezekiel 33:1–5, 7 ESV)

Now, turn back to Joel 2:1 (READ Joel 2:1). And then Joel 2:15 (READ Joel 2:15-17)

Joel is our watchman standing on the city wall. He sees not only the locusts, but he also sees the future Day of the Lord. He has been given eyes to see that it is God Himself that brings the locust plague, as it says in chapter 2, verse 11 (READ Joel 2:11).

He has also been given eyes to see that when the locust plague is all done and over with, still there will remain a day of the Lord, as is made clear from Joel 2:28 onward.

In either situation, there is only one safe response: turn to God, and live.

(d) The Day of the Lord

By the time of Joel, the theology behind the Day of the Lord was already well developed. Already for hundreds of years, people had been putting their hope in a future time when God would make all wrongs right, when God would usher in a new age of justice and peace.

It was the job of the prophet Amos, about 250 years⁴ before Joel to put terror into that hope. Amos was speaking to the northern kingdom of Israel before it was ravaged by the Assyrians. Israel flaunted God’s covenant and Amos brought them their last chance. Hear a selection from Amos 4 and 5:⁵

“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

“I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest... yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

“I struck you with blight and mildew; your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured; yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

“I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword, and carried away your horses, and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils; yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

“I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning; yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

4. Amos was active around 750 B.C.

5. See also selections from Isaiah (active approx. 740-700 B.C.) and Zephaniah (active approx. 640-610 B.C.): Isa 2:12; 3:8-11; 4:2-4; Zeph 1:12; 1:14-2:3.

“Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”

For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth— the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: “Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing.”

Seek the LORD and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, O you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” (Amos 4:6–13; 5:4–7, 18–20 ESV)

The same emphasis on darkness is present in Zephaniah 1:15 and here in Joel 2:2. It doesn't mean that there is no hope after all. No, it means don't be smug; don't be complacent. As Isaiah puts it:

“For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low;” (Isaiah 2:12 ESV)

And as Zephaniah says:

“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.’” (Zephaniah 1:12 ESV)

Don't be deceived. Don't be like those foolish people who tell their children that everyone goes to heaven. It isn't true. The way to salvation is free, but Jesus Himself said: “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matt 7:13)

By the love of God, be among the few. What is stopping you today from pursuing life?

(e) Turn and Live

I want you to think about your own locust plagues. Our troubles in this life are like mini practice days of the Lord. When suffering strikes you, there are two possible responses. Either we become bitter or we become humble. Either we begin to hate God, or else our love for God grows. For you, let it be love.

I don't pretend to know what kind of pain you might be holding onto today. Perhaps like me, you might have severe illness in your family. My mom has been suffering with untreated schizophrenia for twenty years. And there is nothing I can do. Or maybe you've

struggled to find satisfying work; or perhaps you feel alone, even deserted. Or, maybe, everything is fine with you and you are staring the real Day of the Lord in the face.

READ Joel 2:12-14

Take courage. God is sovereign; God is king over all creation. And that means you can pray and hope for the best.

Our God is not cold and unfeeling. No, God's very being is mercy. Remember Exodus 33. When Moses asked to see God's glory, this is what God did

“The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:5-7 ESV)

This passage is stunning if you pay attention. Remember that Moses asked to see God's glory. A human might have shown off wealth or strength or intelligence. But what does God reveal to Moses instead? God's goodness and glory is His own name and person. God passes by and proclaims His name, “Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

These are among the most precious words in all of Scripture. The prophets and song writers took them to heart. Joel uses them again here.

Joel's basic message is this: “it is not too late to seek forgiveness.” God is ready to forgive you today. Are you ready to confess your sinfulness?

Look at how before the blessing of verse 13 you have to go through the contrition of verses 12 and 13. (READ Joel 2:12-13a)

This word in verse 12 translated ‘return’ is the same word they use in Hebrew for repentance. The life of faith is imagined like this line on the floor. Where God goes, this narrow line marks His path. And it is up to us to follow after God with our whole heart. We should turn neither to the right, nor to the left, because then we'll fall off the path and get lost. No, we should keep steady on the line. Can you do it? Have you tried?

The Israelites couldn't do it. They were constantly trying different paths, following after the pretend gods of the other nations. Some would go this way after Baal. Others this way after Asherah. Some others would go after Milcom, or Molech, or Hadad.

You might wonder why they would bother. They suffered the same temptations you do. You see, Baal and Asherah – being of course made up for convenience – were not as demanding as Yahweh. You could follow them and feel good about yourself for being religious, all the while living however you wanted to live; sleeping around, letting your inconvenient infants die of exposure, lending money at exorbitant cost, taking bribes, telling lies in court. Those little gods didn't care. But as a result, the people suffered the worst fate of all. Hear what it says in 2 Kings 17:14-15: “they did not listen [to the prophets], but stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their

God. They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. And they followed vanity and became vain.” (NASB)

And what about you, and me. Can we walk this line? I can't do it. I know you can't do it. Maybe you think that is presumptuous, but I believe Scripture. Romans 3:23 says “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We, on a daily basis, follow vanity.

We too follow our little gods that are not gods. Some leave the path to follow the god Sex. Others fall away to lay hold of Money, or Career, or Status. Yet others are so full of Anger and Hatred and Pride that they mistreat people, and look down on others, and fail to pick up the weak and the poor and the needy. Some love themselves too much. It is always ‘me time’ and they waste away their time and talent filling themselves up with Food, More Stuff, and Entertainment.

About two months ago someone I have known for about three and a half years let me down. I was angry and frustrated, and as I thought about it I counted all the times in the past that he has let me down, and I became angry about those times as well. But, with time, my anger subsided and I thought that I had successfully forgiven him. But then not long ago I met with him again and found out afterward to what extent I am still angry.

In everything, I found that even though I know what I am supposed to do, still something deep inside me wants to do the opposite. I struggled to forgive him even though I know that the Bible says, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”⁶ I would think about petty ways to get back at him even though I know God says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁷ I took a strange and sordid delight in my anger even though I know it says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”⁸ and “See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.”⁹

Finally, realizing that I just need to focus my attention on Jesus and away from my own thoughts, I picked up a Bible and opened it, not yet knowing which gospel passage I should read. As it happened, my thumb opened to John 8 and these are the first three verses I read:

“Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:34–36 ESV)

What vain thing are you following? How would you like to be free of it?¹⁰

6. Matt 6:14-15.

7. Lev 19:8; cf. Rom 12:19.

8. Luke 6:27.

9. 1 Thess 5:15; cf. Prov 20:22; Rom 12:17; 1 Pet 3:9.

10. See John 8:34-36.

We can be thankful that there is one man who has walked this path all the way without stumbling. It turns out that this path leads to a hill called Golgotha just outside Jerusalem. At Golgotha, the sinless Son of God was nailed to some dirty pieces of wood and hoisted up into the air and left to die.¹¹

But Jesus knew from the moment He began His preaching ministry that the cross was the only possible end point.¹² He knew that before He gave up full transcendence and became a man.¹³ Jesus gave up His dignity willingly for you. He gave up His life willingly for you.

Pay close attention to what I am about to read. This is from Matthew 27:

“Now [starting at noon] there was darkness over all the land until [3 pm]. And about [3 o’clock] Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:45–54 ESV)

I hope you didn’t miss it. Darkness at midday; the earth shaking before God’s fury; and life where there was none.

We have hope today because on that momentous Day of the Lord, Jesus made a way for us to get back on this path and follow it home. We can’t get home without forgiveness. Hebrews 9:22 says that there is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood.

You can be glad that Jesus, the divine Son of God, volunteered His own blood for you. That is how much He loves you. Hear the words of John 3:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (John 3:16–18 ESV)

11. Cf. John 3:14.

12. See Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22.

13. See Phil 2:5-11.

And again, the words of 1 John 4:

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 ESV)

In Jesus, God has done all the heavy lifting for you. What it cost Him, I don't think we will ever fully understand. But He considered that sacrifice to be worth it; you are worth it to Him.

And what's more, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit so that you might have, not only forgiveness, but eternal life. But before life, we have to die. That is, we have to die to ourselves. As Paul writes in Romans 6:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:3–5 ESV)

(f) Three Kinds of People

In ancient Israel there were three kinds of people. There were the descendants of Jacob who had full right of citizenship in the community. Then there were the sojourners, people from other places and nations living in Israel longterm. Finally, there were those who were just passing through, maybe on business. God treated them all the same. They were all invited to know God and receive His blessing.

I'd bet that here today we have the same three kinds of people. We have those who have already put their trust in Jesus and have been following Him for some time. We also have those who have sojourned with us, who keep coming back because something about this community and something about our God keeps them coming, but they haven't yet committed themselves to Jesus. And, we have those who stop by out of curiosity and we don't see them again. You know who you are.

For all of you Jesus has one message:

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:23–25 ESV)

Every day we have to look around us to find the path. Picking up our cross means willingly getting on the road to Golgotha. It means repenting – that is, really and genuinely regretting the wrong that we do and being sorry for it. That is why Joel writes “return to me with all your heart... and rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:12-13).

In those days tearing your clothes was a way to show distress or sadness. You could add fasting and public mourning to it if you wanted. Do what you need to do, but be genuine. Turn your back on your little gods and follow the only real God.

Hear God's command to you today:

READ Joel 2:12-13

Please pray with me.

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.