

The Half Hour That Changes the World

Joel

Book 29

Basic Questions behind the book:

How is your heart toward God?

Summary of book:

This is one of the trickier books in the Old Testament. Like many of the prophetic messages it points out human failing, points toward signs of God's judgment and calls for a change in behaviour. In Joel's case the sign of God's judgment is a recent natural disaster in the form of a plague of locusts which had been followed by other catastrophes. Joel is concerned that the people of God are not just interested in living outwardly in the right way. He is looking for a change of heart and indeed the promise is made that on such changed people God will pour out His Spirit in demonstrable ways. This message from this obscure book was to be picked up by the early church and used in their preaching (see Acts 2:17 - 21).

Vital Statistics:

Purpose: To warn Judah of God's impending judgment because of their sins, and to urge them to turn and come back to God.

Author: Joel, the son of Pethuel. That's all we know about him though he shows great knowledge of temple worship (a priest?) and of agricultural realities (a farmer?).

Recipients: To the southern kingdom of Judah at a critical moment in their history after the devastation caused by natural disaster, a swarm of locusts.

Dating: Joel's ministry is difficult to date with scholars offering a variety of dates. Some go for a date as early as 9th century BC while others as late as the 5th century BC. We just don't know and various internal evidences can be argued in different ways.

Setting: Like in Amos and Hosea, the people had become prosperous and complacent. Taking God for granted, they had turned to self-centredness, idolatry, and sin. Joel warned them that this kind of lifestyle would eventually bring down God's judgment. However, repentance would bring about so many great blessings like they'd never seen before.

Other Reflections:

Natural Disasters are not always God's warning shots across errant human bows, but this one was, according to Joel, and perhaps that was no bad thing. It taught them to remember their human frailty. It brought their attention back to God. It gave them an opportunity to start again, and better than before with God. Have you ever noticed how often judgment and mercy go hand in hand in Scripture? Also, we note in Joel a strong message that religion should not just be about outward show, ritual and behaviour, but must be a matter of the heart. It must be authentic and shaping of the whole of life.

*"Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity."
(2:13)*