

THE DAY OF THE LORD, PART 1: "THE DEVASTATION OF LOCUSTS"

JOEL 1:1-20

Ps. Eric Yee

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

Last week, after 89 sermons through the Gospel of Luke together, we finished our "Rediscover Jesus" sermon series.

And so, today, we're beginning a new sermon series called "The Day of the Lord," where we'll be going through the Book of Joel together.

Now, the reason we chose to preach through Joel after Luke is threefold.

First, after preaching through a *New Testament* book, we wanted to preach through a book in the *Old Testament*.

Second, after preaching through a *narrative* book, we wanted to preach through a different *genre*, so we chose a *prophetic* book.

Third, after preaching such a *long* sermon series through the Gospel of Luke, we wanted to preach a *shorter* sermon series, and Joel is a "minor prophet" as opposed to a "major prophet."

All "*minor prophet*" means is that Joel is a much *shorter* prophetic book than the "major prophets," which are much *longer* prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

And so, that's why we're starting a sermon series on the book of Joel today.

And as we go through a shorter, Old Testament, prophetic book, we hope that we would learn to understand and apply God's Word from the *whole* counsel of God and from different *genres* of Scripture.

Our sermon series through Joel is titled "The Day of the Lord" because that is a major theme throughout the book that we'll be unpacking over the next four weeks.

And today's sermon is Part 1, titled, "The Devastation of Locusts."

Prayer of Invocation

I'll pray for us again before we jump in.

Sermon Introduction

In 1666, the Great Fire of London left tens of thousands homeless. In 1755, the Lisbon Earthquake was quickly followed by a tsunami and fires. And in 1986, the Chernobyl Disaster was a nuclear accident that had devastating environmental and health consequences.

But the Great Fire of London led to the building of many new churches,¹ and as one eyewitness reported, “the church infinitely thronged with strangers since the fire.”² The Lisbon Earthquake sparked a period of soul-searching and philosophical questioning about the nature of God and the existence of evil, leading some to turn to faith for answers.³ And the Chernobyl Disaster also led to a spiritual awakening for many affected by the tragedy.⁴

These were terrible disasters that caused widespread devastation, Yet, in these times of great crises, many people turned to the Lord as a source of hope, comfort, and meaning in the midst of their suffering.

These events were undoubtedly more nuanced and complex than simply devastation leading to spiritual awakening, but it is not uncommon for many to *turn to God* in the midst of great pain and suffering.⁵

So whether you’re going through a crisis right now—or whether you will face one later—it is always right to *turn to God* in the midst of our devastation.

And that’s what we’ll look at more in today’s passage.

The One Thing

When the Lord brings us devastation, he calls us to turn to him.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Joel 1:1-20.

This passage is probably more poetic than we may be used to, so as we read this passage, it might be helpful to know from the *beginning* that the prophet Joel will be describing a major locust plague that has completely *destroyed* all the agriculture of the land and has completely *devastated* the lives of the people of Judah.

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica (“Great Fire of London,” updated March 8, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Fire-of-London>) states that “[Christopher] Wren’s great work was the erection of St. Paul’s Cathedral and the many churches ranged around it as satellites.”

² Samuel Pepys, diary entry on September 30, 1666, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/09>.

³ L. John Van Til, “The Great Lisbon Earthquake: Thinking Theology and Natural Disasters,” March 18, 2011, <https://www.faithandfreedom.com/the-great-lisbon-earthquake-thinking-theology-and-natural-disasters>.

⁴ Gary L. Welton, “Lessons of Faith Radiating from Chernobyl,” January 20, 2016, <https://www.faithandfreedom.com/lessons-of-faith-radiating-from-chernobyl>. See also Clare Bruce, “30 Years After Chernobyl, Faith Is On The Rise In Ukraine,” April 27, 2016, <https://hope1032.com.au/stories/faith/2016/chernobyl-30-years-christian-faith-rise-ukraine>.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

Scripture Reading

So let's read Joel 1:1-20 (ESV)

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

² Hear this, you elders;
give ear, all inhabitants of the land!

Has such a thing happened in your days,
or in the days of your fathers?

³ Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children to another generation.

⁴ What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.

⁵ Awake, you drunkards, and weep,
and wail, all you drinkers of wine,
because of the sweet wine,
for it is cut off from your mouth.

⁶ For a nation has come up against my land,
powerful and beyond number;
its teeth are lions' teeth,
and it has the fangs of a lioness.

⁷ It has laid waste my vine
and splintered my fig tree;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches are made white.

⁸ Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth
for the bridegroom of her youth.

⁹ The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off
from the house of the LORD.

The priests mourn,
the ministers of the LORD.

¹⁰ The fields are destroyed,
the ground mourns,
because the grain is destroyed,
the wine dries up,
the oil languishes.

¹¹ Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil;
wail, O vinedressers,
for the wheat and the barley,

because the harvest of the field has perished.
¹² The vine dries up;
the fig tree languishes.
Pomegranate, palm, and apple,
all the trees of the field are dried up,
and gladness dries up
from the children of man.

¹³ Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests;
wail, O ministers of the altar.
Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,
O ministers of my God!
Because grain offering and drink offering
are withheld from the house of your God.

¹⁴ Consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the LORD your God,
and cry out to the LORD.

¹⁵ Alas for the day!
For the day of the LORD is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.
¹⁶ Is not the food cut off
before our eyes,
joy and gladness
from the house of our God?

¹⁷ The seed shrivels under the clods;
the storehouses are desolate;
the granaries are torn down
because the grain has dried up.

¹⁸ How the beasts groan!
The herds of cattle are perplexed
because there is no pasture for them;
even the flocks of sheep suffer.

¹⁹ To you, O LORD, I call.
For fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness,
and flame has burned
all the trees of the field.

²⁰ Even the beasts of the field pant for you
because the water brooks are dried up,
and fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness.

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in two parts.

- I. The Lord brings his people devastation (1-12)
- II. The Lord calls his people to turn to him (13-20)

I. The Lord brings his people devastation (1-12)

Look at verse 1.

[¹ The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:]

The phrase “The word of the LORD that came to <blank>” is common for how many prophetic books start (Hos. 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Zech. 1:1). It means to say that, even though *Joel* is delivering this message, it is *God’s Word* that he is communicating, and it carries the *authority* of God’s Word to its hearers.

Now what’s interesting about Joel is that we don’t know anything about him except from this book.⁶ We *don’t* know who his father Pethuel is. Joel also *doesn’t* give any definitive historical reference points like the names of kings, so it’s impossible to date his ministry with complete certainty.

But the message of Joel, although rooted in an actual *historical* event, is *not* dependent on a particular time period. So perhaps even by *design*, the message of Joel has a “timeless quality” and is meant to be understood and applied in a *variety* of situations.⁷

Now keep that in mind as we begin to dive into the particular *historical* event that was the occasion for Joel writing this book.

Look at verses 2-3.

[² Hear this, you elders;
give ear, all inhabitants of the land!
Has such a thing happened in your days,
or in the days of your fathers?
³ Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children to another generation.]

Joel calls the attention of the “elders” and “all inhabitants of the land [of Judah],” and he asks them to consider if “such a thing” has “happened in [their] days, or in the days of [their] fathers.”

⁶ “Introduction to Joel” (in ESV Study Bible [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014]) states: “His references to Judah (3:1, 6, 8, 18, 19, 20) and Jerusalem (2:32; 3:1, 6, 16, 17, 20), along with his knowledge of the activities of priest and temple (1:9, 13–14, 16; 2:14–17), suggest that he was from Judah or perhaps even Jerusalem. His address to priests (1:9, 13; 2:17) and elders (1:2, 14; 2:16) likely eliminates him as a member of either group.”

⁷ Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, *Joel and Amos*, TOTC 25 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 19. John Calvin (“Preface” to Joel, in *Joel, Amos & Obadiah: A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986], 2:xv, quoted in Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990], 120) also notes: “As there is no certainty it is better to leave the time in which he taught undecided; and as we shall see, this is of no great importance. Not to know the time of Hosea would be to readers a great loss, for there are many parts which would not be explained without a knowledge of history; but as to Joel there is, as I have said, less need of this; for the import of his doctrine is evident, though his time be obscure and uncertain.”

“Elders” here are probably *not* in reference to the *official* leadership role of elder among the people, but rather more *generally* in reference to the *older* people among them. Joel wants them to think *back* throughout *their* lifetime and even throughout their *fathers’* lifetime to see if such devastation has *ever* happened before.

And it’s a *rhetorical* question because the answer is obviously “No.”

And then he tells the “elders” (or the older generation) and all the people to “tell” of this great devastation to future generations.

But what *is* this great devastation?

Look at verse 4.

[⁴ What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.]

It was a devastating *locust* plague. Joel uses four different terms for locusts to dramatically picture how swarm after swarm, the locusts came in waves to make their situation more and more hopeless as each successive wave of locusts ate up anything and everything left.⁸

If there was any hope of food being left over after the first wave of locusts, the second wave destroyed that hope; if there was any hope after the second wave, the third wave destroyed that hope; if there was any hope after the third wave, the fourth wave destroyed that hope.

Their potential harvest was reduced to absolutely nothing.

So here, Joel dramatically *describes* the devastating *event*, but he then calls out different *groups* to make them *feel* the devastating *effect* of everything that has happened.

⁸ A 16th century observer gave a similar description of such successive waves in a locust plague: “They began to arrive there one day about the hour of terce [nine], and till night they did not cease.... Next day at the hour of prime [six] they began to depart, and at midday there was not one there; and not a leaf remained upon a tree. At that moment others began to arrive, and they remained like the others till the next day at the same hour; and these did not leave any corn with a husk nor a green blade. In this way they did for five days one after the other” (Quoted in Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, NICOT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976]).

Look at verses 5-7.

[⁵ Awake, you drunkards, and weep,
and wail, all you drinkers of wine,
because of the sweet wine,
for it is cut off from your mouth.
⁶ For a nation has come up against my land,
powerful and beyond number;
its teeth are lions' teeth,
and it has the fangs of a lioness.
⁷ It has laid waste my vine
and splintered my fig tree;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches are made white.]

Of *all* people that Joel could call out, he chooses to first call out the “drunkards” to “awake” from their drunken stupor. And his focus is *not* to condemn them for drunkenness (though God’s Word clearly states drunkenness as sin), but his point is “to indicate that they would be the first to suffer because their happiness is dependent on the fruit of the vine.”⁹

The “sweet wine . . . is cut off from [their] mouth.” It’s as if the drunkard is “in the very act of raising the cup to his mouth only to have it yanked from his hand.”¹⁰ What brought the drunkards happiness has been suddenly and severely taken away from them.

Also, even *drunkards* who are known to be “self-indulgent and unconcerned for the things of God” are now given a huge wake-up call by God.¹¹ They can no longer escape to their drink, but they are now confronted with the brutal realities of their situation.

<pause>

Now, this doesn’t just apply to *drunkards*, but perhaps some of us live in a constant state of self-indulgence or distraction, filling ourselves with fragile sources of happiness and ignoring the brutal realities of our situation and the eternal things of God.

But as the COVID-19 pandemic showed us, those things can be suddenly and severely taken away from us, leaving us just as distraught as these drunkards were amidst the locust plague.

According to the World Health Organization, in the first year of the pandemic, there was a 25% *increase* in anxiety and depression worldwide.¹² And according to the National Institutes of Health in the US, in a 2021 study, nearly *half* of Americans surveyed reported recent symptoms of an anxiety or depressive disorder.¹³

This is *not* to say that anxiety and depression can be so simply explained, but when COVID-19 unexpectedly hit our world, those who found happiness in travel, restaurants, and hangouts suddenly and severely had those things taken from them—and the crushing effect *that* had was seen on a global scale.

⁹ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, TOTC 25 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989), 46-47.

¹⁰ Duane A. Garrett and Paul Ferris, *Hosea, Joel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Holman, 1997).

¹¹ Duane A. Garrett and Paul Ferris, *Hosea, Joel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Holman, 1997).

¹² “COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide,” March 2, 2022,

<https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>.

¹³ “Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” updated September 28, 2023, <https://covid19.nih.gov/covid-19-topics/mental-health>.

And as loved ones and people all over the world were in hospitals and dying, those who never gave much thought about death and God began to think about those things.

Like the drunkards here that Joel addresses, for many of us and those around the world, the pandemic was a huge wake-up call from a life of self-indulgence and distraction, making us ask bigger questions about where we find our happiness, what happens to us after death, and whether it matters or not if we believe and follow God.

<pause>

Going back to the locust plague, in verse 6, they're described as a "nation" because of the sheer *massive* number of locusts that invaded their land.

<Show locustswarm.jpeg>



Many reports of locust swarms throughout history in that region have been cited, but to give us an idea of *how many* locusts we're talking about, one report cited a locust swarm covering 2,000 square miles (or almost 5,200 square kilometers) and comprising an estimated 24,420 *billion* locusts.¹⁴ My mind can't even begin to comprehend that many number of locusts.

And they are described as having "lions' teeth" and "fangs of a lioness." This is clearly a metaphor to describe the *ferocity* of the locust swarms,¹⁵ for there are even reports of locusts gnawing through *doors*.¹⁶ "So voracious is the locusts' appetite and so strong their jaws that no fruit, leaf, twig or bark can survive their attack."¹⁷

<Show locustsontree.webp>



Everything is stripped off, even the *bark*, so that "their branches are made white." I can't think of any tree that *naturally* has *white* branches. The only way to do that is to *shave* the branch down so that the *white* is exposed—and *that's* exactly what the locusts have done.

¹⁴ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, TOTC 25 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989), 47.

¹⁵ Duane A. Garrett and Paul Ferris, *Hosea, Joel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Holman, 1997).

¹⁶ Richard D. Patterson, Carl E. Armerding, and Eugene H. Merrill, *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi*, rev. ed., EBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

¹⁷ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, TOTC 25 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989), 48.

Now, look at verses 8-10.

[⁸ Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth
for the bridegroom of her youth.
⁹ The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off
from the house of the LORD.
The priests mourn,
the ministers of the LORD.
¹⁰ The fields are destroyed,
the ground mourns,
because the grain is destroyed,
the wine dries up,
the oil languishes.]

Here, the *people* are called to “lament *like* a virgin” who is mourning the death of her “bridegroom” before their wedding.¹⁸

In that society, a betrothed virgin would have been considered the *wife* of the bridegroom, even though the marriage had not yet been consummated. So rather than the wonderful joy of a young *bride* wearing her *wedding dress*, this is the terrible grief of a young *widow* wearing *sackcloth* made from *black goat’s hair*.¹⁹

But notice what Joel highlights as the *reason* for the people’s terrible grief—it’s not *just* that the grain and wine and oil are all gone (v. 10), but it’s that there is no grain and oil to be used in the “grain offering” and no wine to be used in the “drink offering” in “the house of the LORD” (v. 9).

The grain offering and drink offering were presented alongside the *burnt* offering each morning and evening as part of the daily sacrifice and worship in the temple (Exod. 29:38-42; Num. 28:1-8).

Now, when God first instituted these daily sacrifices for his people, listen to what he said in . . .

Exodus 29:41-43, 45-46 = The other lamb you shall offer at twilight, and shall offer with it a **grain offering** and its **drink offering**, as in the morning, for a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD. It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. **There I will meet with the people of Israel**, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. . . . **I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God**, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. **I am the LORD their God.**

So these daily grain offerings and drink offerings were part of how God’s people *related* with the LORD their God, and part of how they knew that the LORD *dwelled* among them as his people.

But by a divine act of God, they no longer had any grain or oil or wine to present these sacrifices to him. Joel describes the “priests” mourning and even the “ground” mourning, but this really calls for *all* the people to mourn.

¹⁸ Duane A. Garrett and Paul Ferris (*Hosea, Joel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC [Nashville, TN: Holman, 1997]) note: “the real subject is Jerusalem or the ‘daughter of Zion.’ The prophets frequently used the latter term in texts of eschatological judgment or salvation (e.g., Isa 1:8; 62:11; Lam 2:1–18; Mic 4:10; Zech 9:9). In short, this section seems to be directed at the people of Jerusalem in general rather than to a specific group.”

¹⁹ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, TOTC 25 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989), 49.

Like the betrothed virgin who was cut off from her bridegroom, as if their *marriage* covenant was *annulled*, all the people here are called to lament as if their covenant with *God* has been *annulled*.²⁰

To be unable to *relate* with their God in the daily sacrifices of the temple—*this* was the greatest calamity that they, as the people of God, could experience. And this is what the prophet Joel is calling the people's attention to.

Now, look at verses 11-12.

[¹¹ Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil;
wail, O vinedressers,
for the wheat and the barley,
because the harvest of the field has perished.
¹² The vine dries up;
the fig tree languishes.
Pomegranate, palm, and apple,
all the trees of the field are dried up,
and gladness dries up
from the children of man.]

The farmers, who would normally have had great pride and joy in the fruitfulness of their harvest, now they are called to “be ashamed” and “wail” because “the harvest of the field has perished.”

“Wheat” and “barley”—the staple grains of the people—were all gone.

“The vine” and “fig tree”—symbols of God's blessing on his people (Hos. 2:12; Amos 4:9; Mic. 4:4 with 1 Kings 4:25; 2 Kings 18:31; cf. also Ps. 105:33; Isa. 36:16; Jer. 5:17; 8:13; Hag. 2:19; Zec. 3:10)—were all dried up.²¹

Pomegranate, palm, and apple trees are given as *examples*, but really “*all* the trees of the field are dried up.”

Still, it's not *just* all the grain and all the fruit that are dried up, but all the “gladness” itself “dries up from the children of man.”

And with that, from every segment of society—from drunkards to priests, from farmers to the ground itself—all the people are to soak in the utter devastation of the locust plague and to mourn and moan, to weep and wail.

Joel gives a vivid picture of the bleakness of the devastation. By all human standards, this seems to be a hopeless situation.

<pause>

Now, the question that inevitably comes to mind when faced with such devastation is “Why?” *Why* were the people of God experiencing this?

²⁰ Duane A. Garrett and Paul Ferris, *Hosea, Joel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Holman, 1997).

²¹ Richard D. Patterson, Carl E. Armerding, and Eugene H. Merrill, *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi*, rev. ed., EBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

Although *other* prophets directly relate God’s judgment with his people’s specific *sin* (e.g., Hos. 4:1-3; cf. Hos. 2:9, 12-13), interestingly, the prophet “Joel does *not* focus on the people’s sin but uses the crisis of the locust plague as a *basis* for his message.”²²

Still, the people of God would have undoubtedly related what the locust plague they were experiencing with their nation-wide sin against God for at least *three* reasons.

First, as they were experiencing this unprecedented locust plague, it would have brought to mind the eighth plague that the LORD brought upon Egypt in bringing his people out of slavery (Exod. 10:1-20). But now, the LORD was treating his *own* people as if they were a *pagan* nation.

Second, when the LORD entered into a covenant with his people *as a nation*, he stated clear nation-wide covenant *blessings* they would experience if they remained faithful to him, but also clear nation-wide covenant *curses* if they turned away from him in idolatry, rebellion, and sin. And *part* of those covenant curses that was specified was that “Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land” (Deut. 28:42 NIV).

Keep in mind that these were *nation-wide* covenant blessings and curses that were connected to the obedience or disobedience of the nation of Israel *as a whole*. This is important because the *prophets*, who did *not* turn away from the LORD, were *included* in experiencing the devastation of the covenant curses due to the sin of the *nation as a whole*—*not* because of their *personal* sin.

Third, *other* prophets also prophesied that these nation-wide covenant curses were coming upon the people of God unless they repented. For example, through the prophet Amos, the LORD threatened a locust plague upon his people, but Amos interceded for his people and the threat was averted (Amos 7:1-3).

So, in the minds of the Israelites who were experiencing this devastating locust plague, they would have undoubtedly connected it to the nation-wide covenant curses that God had warned them of—and their nation-wide idolatry, rebellion, and sin against the LORD their God.

<pause>

Now, for us on the other side of redemptive history, *because* of Christ, this does *not* apply to us in a one-to-one manner.

For one, God’s people are no longer a theocratic nation like Israel that can experience *nation-wide* covenant blessings and curses. Rather, the people of God are peoples from *every nation* who gather together in local “embassies” of the kingdom of God—or local *churches*—around the world.

But more importantly, if our faith is in Christ, then Christ has *already* taken upon himself all the covenant curses that his people deserved when he suffered and died in our place on the cross. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). Therefore, there are no more covenant curses for his people to bear, no more punishment for sin for us to experience, but Christ has drunk the cup of God’s wrath for us to the dregs.

So in the big picture, we know that the devastation God brings us are *not* nation-wide covenant curses. But many of us *still* experience devastation in our lives nonetheless.

²² Joseph Too Shao and Rosa Ching Shao, *Joel, Nahum, and Malachi*, Asia Bible Commentary (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2021).

So how should we understand it? How should we understand great suffering or devastation in our lives or in the world?

The Bible doesn't give a *simplistic* or *dismissive* answer, but a much more *nuanced* perspective. So at this time, let's do a quick survey of the Bible—Genesis to Revelation—and let's see what the Bible has to say about suffering.

- In Genesis 1-2, God created everything good; therefore, evil and suffering were *not* part of his good creation.
- But in Genesis 3, man *disobeyed* God, and as *judgment*, man and all of creation were subjected to the *consequences* of sin, including pain and suffering.
- But in Job 1-2, the *reason* for Job's suffering was *not* his own sin but for showing his *trust* in God and showing *God's* worthiness to be trusted in and of himself.
- Then, in Job 42, we see that God is *not* indebted to anyone, but he gives *far more* than he takes away.
- In Luke 13, we see that suffering and death cannot always be directly connected to *personal* sin, but they are *warnings* of God's judgment that ought to lead people to *repentance* (Luke 13:1-5).
- In John 9, we see that a man was blind *not* because of *his* sin or his *parents'* sin, but that the works of God would be *displayed* in him (John 9:1-3)
- In Romans 5 and James 1, we see that, for Christians, *suffering* produces good *character* and *completes* them in terms of spiritual maturity (Rom. 5:3-5; James 1:2-4).
- In Romans 8, we see that it was the *Lord* that subjected his creation to suffering, and that the sufferings that are endured now are *small* compared to the *glory* that is to come, which will *far outweigh* the sufferings that we experience now (Rom. 8:18-23).
- Again, in Romans 8, we see that God is *sovereign* over the suffering of his people and he means it for their *good*, which includes *conforming* them into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:28-30).
- In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul speaks about *sharing* in Christ's *sufferings* so that we *share* in his *comfort* as well; and when *we* are comforted in our sufferings, we can then comfort *others* (2 Cor. 1:5-7).
- In 1 Peter 4, we see that one of the reasons Christians suffer is *solidarity*—that is, to be united with *Christ* in his sufferings, so that we may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (1 Pet. 4:12-13).
- And in Revelation 21-22, we see that Christ will *return*, there will be final *judgment*, and believers will enter into perfect *communion* with God for eternity in the new creation, where there will be no more sin, death, pain, or suffering. In other words, evil and suffering will *not* persist forever, but God is going to make *all* things right in a way where *we* will be eternally *happy* and *God* will be eternally *glorified*.

In all this, we can see that the biblical worldview gives a *comprehensive* and *nuanced* theology of evil and suffering.

Still, since God is *vastly* different than we are—and thus there is a *vast* difference between *God's* knowledge and *our* knowledge (cf. Job 38-41; Isa. 55:8-9)—we ought *not* to think that we would be able to figure out what God's good purposes are for allowing evil and suffering in *every* particular case.

Yet, because of what we *know* about our God—that he himself would become a man to endure the *worst* evil and suffering on the cross for sinners like us—we can confidently say that, no matter what suffering or devastation we're going through, he is the sovereign God who *always* works for the *good* of his people—and even what others may mean for evil, God means it for our good (Gen. 50:20).

And one day, if our faith is in Christ, when we stand in glory before our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord and Savior in the new heavens and new earth for all eternity, we will *truly* and *fully* know just how good he really is, even amidst the temporal sufferings and devastations we experience in this life.

<pause>

So first, the Lord brings his people devastation; and second...

II. The Lord calls his people to turn to him (13-20)

Look at verses 13-14.

[¹³ Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests;
wail, O ministers of the altar.
Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,
O ministers of my God!
Because grain offering and drink offering
are withheld from the house of your God.

¹⁴ Consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the LORD your God,
and cry out to the LORD.]

The next group that God calls out through the prophet Joel are the “priests.” They are *also* to “put on sackcloth and lament... [and] wail.”

Putting on sackcloth was an outward expression of repentance and grief (1 Kings 21:27; Neh. 9:1-2), and it expressed humility and helplessness.²³

But what’s *different* about God’s call to the priests is that, in addition to lamenting in sackcloth, he calls them to “consecrate a *fast*” and to “call a solemn *assembly*,” where they are to “gather the elders and *all* the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.”

God had appointed the *priests* to be spiritual *leaders* of his people, and so he expects them to *model* and *lead* all the people in repentance, fasting, and prayer before him in his temple.

<pause>

Although there is no more formal office of *priest* in the New Testament church, God has appointed *elders* (or *pastors*) to be spiritual *leaders* of his people in local churches, and so he expects them to *model* and *lead* the members in such appropriate responses to the Lord as well (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-25; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-5).

I pray that as you interact with **me or Pastor Jeff / Pastor John**, or any other future elder in our church, that you would see men who are faithfully preaching and living out God’s Word, who are quick to confess our sins and turn from them, and who are regularly fasting for God to work in our church and praying for members in our church.

²³ Joseph Too Shao and Rosa Ching Shao, *Joel, Nahum, and Malachi*, Asia Bible Commentary (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2021).

And so, church *members* are called to *submit* to and *imitate* the faith of their elders, and elders are called to *keep watch* over the souls of their members, for we will have to give an account to God one day for how we shepherded his people (Heb. 13:7, 17).

<pause>

Likewise, *parents* are also to *model* and *lead* their children in appropriate responses to the Lord. And in the context here, this includes modeling confession of sin and repentance.

Parents, in the way that you *model* the Christian life and *lead* your children, do *they* know that *you* know that you're really a sinner who deserves God's wrath and that without God's mercy and grace would be without hope? If you're a member of our church, that's what you affirm to believe each time you take of the Lord's Supper. But then, do you apologize to your kids when you sin against them? Or do you only have your kids apologize when they do wrong?

Do you give the impression to your kids that *you're* a perfect law-keeper and *they're* the ones who are disobedient and need to apologize and ask for forgiveness?

<pause>

And this is not just for church pastors and parents, but in the New Testament church, there is the *priesthood of all* believers (1 Pet. 2:9). In that sense, if you're a Christian, then we *all* bear this responsibility in some way to *model* and *lead* one another in appropriate responses to the Lord.

Do you share vaguely with one another that you're a sinner, or have you shared with a few trustworthy, Christ-centered, and understanding brothers and sisters at appropriate times about the *specific* sins that you're struggling with, and asked for their help when appropriate?

Or even more broadly, do you share with others about your *suffering*, or are you presenting yourself as someone who is largely *unaffected* by life's troubles?

In your pride, if you only ever share your successes, and rarely your failings or sorrows, then you're giving others the impression that you don't really struggle or suffer. And if people don't know that you struggle and suffer, then they will be more prone to put you on a pedestal—and that will *ruin* them in the end, because they'll be more prone to look at you and try to be like *you*, rather than looking to *Christ* as the one they see you crying out to in repentance and prayers of lament amidst your own struggles and sorrows.

If we really want to help one another to follow the Lord Jesus and respond appropriately to him, then we need to be willing to be honest and transparent about our struggles with sin and our sorrows in suffering.

<pause>

Also, notice in verse 14 that "a solemn *assembly*" is called where "all" the people of God gather in "the house of the LORD" to "cry out" to him *together*.

Here, we see that we're called to suffer and turn to the Lord *together*.

For many of us, this is *counterintuitive*. When we're going through a difficult time of suffering, our natural tendency is to *isolate*. We stop gathering with God's people each week. We don't respond to calls or messages.

We get lost in our own thoughts and emotions, allowing ourselves to spiral further and further down into a pit that feels only more and more impossible to get out of.

For some of the members that we haven't seen in a while, perhaps they're suffering right now and feel that it's best to struggle alone. We don't know for sure, but as you're praying through the names and faces of different members each week, can I just encourage us to reach out to those members that haven't gathered with our church family for some time now?

And if and when *you* suffer—and we *all* will—please do not cut yourself off from the church community that cares for you and is committed to you. Please don't think that you need to be all put together to gather with God's people, but we want you to *know* that we are *all* just sufferers and sinners whom the Lord loves and has redeemed, and he has called us to regularly gather together to receive grace and encouragement and strengthening from him and from one another.

Now, if you're *not* someone who is suffering right now, this is not a time to just live comfortably and passively, but you have the ministry of “weep[ing] with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). Don't just ask people how they're doing as a token greeting, but ask one another, “How are you *really* doing?” And give them your attention, your time, your prayers, and perhaps even your tears. Learn to practice the ministry of *presence*.

If you don't know what to say or do when they've shared some suffering with you, please don't change the subject, don't start relating with your own personal experience, don't start giving them some uncalled-for advice, but thank them for trusting you enough to share with you, ask them questions to better understand, read Scripture, and pray together—and perhaps see if they might be willing to share with others to enlarge their community of support during this difficult time.

And please do *not* share what they shared with you with others, if they have not given you permission to do so. That's *their* story to tell—not yours. One of the fastest ways to *destroy* trust and relationships and overall unity in the church is to break confidentiality when someone speaks personally and vulnerably to you.

But one of the best ways to *build* trust and relationships and overall unity in the church is to be that trustworthy, Christ-centered, and understanding friend to fellow brothers and sisters who are struggling or suffering.

We're not called to suffer alone, but we're called to suffer and turn to the Lord *together*.

<pause>

Now, look at verses 15-18.

[¹⁵ Alas for the day!
For the day of the LORD is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

¹⁶ Is not the food cut off
before our eyes,
joy and gladness
from the house of our God?

¹⁷ The seed shrivels under the clods;
the storehouses are desolate;
the granaries are torn down
because the grain has dried up.

¹⁸ How the beasts groan!
The herds of cattle are perplexed
because there is no pasture for them;
even the flocks of sheep suffer.]

Here, the prophet Joel introduces the concept of “the day of the LORD.”

The Day of the Lord is a *broad* concept in the prophets that refers to the coming judgment of God. The invasion of Jerusalem (Zeph. 1:7, 14), the destruction of Babylon (Isa. 13:6), the judgment on Egypt (Ezek. 30:2-3), and the judgment on all nations (Obad. 15) are *all* called “the day of the Lord.”

So the “day of the Lord” is not only in reference to *one* particular day, but it manifests itself in many *mini* days of the Lord, which all *foreshadow* (or *point to*) *the* great and *final* day of the Lord, where the Lord will execute *final* judgment upon all people.

So as the prophet Joel is soaking in the utter devastation of the *present* locust plague, he considers it a *mini* day of the Lord, which serves as a *warning* of the *future final* day of the Lord,²⁴ which he will describe more in the rest of his book—both the terrible *judgment* upon the *wicked* and the wonderful *blessings* upon the *repentant*.

But for now, he begins to consider (and he calls *all* the gathered people to consider), “If *this* is how bad this *mini* day of the Lord is—where all our food and joy and gladness are gone, and even the *animals* are groaning and suffering—how much worse will that *final* day of the Lord be!”

For us, consider that *final* day of the Lord for a moment. Consider the eternal condemnation in hell that we all deserve for sinning against the Lord.

²⁴ Tchavdar S. Hadjiev (*Joel and Amos*, TOTC 25 [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020], 26) writes: “The key question is whether the Day of the Lord refers to the agricultural disaster lamented in 1:4–14 or points to a separate, future event. Since Joel proclaims that the day is *near*, it is possible to see a distinction between it and the current crisis. The locust plague would then be a harbinger of the impending eschatological judgment (Cook 1995: 183; Barker 2014: 99). It is better, however, to take the expression *the day of the Lord* as a reference to the disaster that is in view in chapter 1 (Barton 2001: 58–62; Seitz 2016: 142).” He also notes: “The Hebrew could be translated to support either interpretation. NJPS has: ‘Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near; it shall come like havoc from Shaddai.’ On the other hand, Barton (2001: 57–58, 62) suggests: ‘Alas for the day! For a day of YHWH has drawn near, and as destruction from Shaddai it is coming.’ The imperfect *yābōʿ* could refer to the future (‘will come’), or convey a present continuous action, like the imperfections in 1:19 (*I cry*) and 1:20 (*[the animals] cry*).” I believe both interpretations are valid, and both are present throughout his book; that is, he considers the devastation of the locust plague as a “mini day of the Lord,” which inevitably leads him to consider “the great and final day of the Lord,” which he describes in greater detail in the rest of his book, using imagery from the current locust plague. He constantly has one foot in the present “mini day of the Lord” and one foot in the future “final day of the Lord” (so to speak).

Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century pastor, in his sermon titled *The Eternity of Hell Torments*, writes this:

Consider what it is to suffer extreme torment for ever and ever; and to suffer it day and night, from one year to another, from one age to another, and from one thousand ages to another, and so adding age to age, and thousands to thousands, in pain, in wailing and lamenting, groaning and shrieking, and gnashing your teeth; with your souls full of dreadful grief and amazement, your bodies full of racking torture, without any possibility of getting ease; without any possibility of moving God to pity by your cries; without any possibility of hiding yourselves from him; without any possibility of diverting your thoughts from your pain. Consider how dreadful despair will be in such torment; to know assuredly that you never, never shall be delivered from them; to have no hope: when you shall wish that you might be turned into nothing but shall have no hope of it... when you would rejoice, if you might but have any relief, after you have endured these torments millions of ages, but shall have no hope of it. After you shall have worn out the age of the sun, moon and stars... without rest day and night, or one minute's ease, yet you shall have no hope of ever being delivered; after you shall have worn out a thousand more such ages you shall have no hope... but that still there are the same groans, the same shrieks, the same doleful cries, incessantly to be made by you, and that the smoke of your torment shall still ascend up for ever and ever.²⁵

Wow, let that sink in for a moment. It is very sobering.²⁶

When we consider the *final* day of the Lord and the eternal condemnation of hell that we deserve for our sins against the holy God, every *mini* day of the Lord—every devastation we face in this life—pales in comparison.

Nobody enjoys thinking about hell, but we cannot ignore the fact that nobody spoke more about hell than the Lord Jesus himself, so he obviously wanted us to think about it. “We must face up to the horror of hell’s sufferings, for the Bible reveals them to us, vividly and at length.”²⁷

And the Lord Jesus and all of Scripture speak so much about hell *because* hell is *avoidable*.

The gospel (or good news) of Jesus Christ is that though all of us have rebelled against our Creator and rightfully deserve hell for our sins against him, God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ to be our substitute—to live the perfect life of obedience in our place, to die on the cross to endure the hellish punishment that we deserved, and to resurrect to give us eternal life. So now, for all who turn away from our sins in repentance and turn towards Jesus Christ in faith as their only Lord and Savior are saved from the hell we deserve on that great and *final* day of the Lord.

2 Peter 3:9, **which was read in the Scripture reading earlier in our service**, says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is *patient* toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach *repentance*.”

²⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:88, quoted in Edward Donnelly, *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 43.

²⁶ If you're interested in some helpful resources to learn more about the doctrine of hell, I'd recommend the following books: (1) *Is Hell Real?* by Dane Ortlund. This is a short booklet (about 40 pages) that we have in our digital library that gives a very concise overview of the doctrine of hell. (2) *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* by Edward Donnelly is a short book (about 125 pages) that is one of the best consolidated treatments I've found on both the doctrines of heaven and hell. (3) *The Most Encouraging Book on Hell Ever* by Thor Ramsey is also a short book (about 110 pages) that helps us to think about the importance of the doctrine of hell and asks the question, “What do we lose if there is no hell?”

²⁷ Edward Donnelly, *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 33.

And so, God is gracious and patient and loving to bring us *mini* days of the Lord (so to speak), so that we might *repent* and turn to him in faith—and so that we may *avoid* the eternal judgment in hell that we deserve on that *final* day of the Lord.

So don't *waste* your suffering. Whatever we've gone through *before*, whatever we're going through *right now*, or whatever we may go through in the *future*—and as painful and devastating as it may be—we must know that we deserve *far worse* as guilty sinners before a holy God.

As believers in Jesus Christ, no matter how great our suffering is in this lifetime, it does not even begin to compare to the hell that our Lord took upon himself in our place.

Let your current suffering *point* you to the eternal suffering that *Christ* took for you, so that the *final* day of the Lord will not be one of eternal judgment in hell for you, but *the* day where you will forever enjoy the new heavens and new earth without sin and tears and suffering anymore. And keep turning to your Lord again and again in repentance and faith as you fix your eyes on that *final* day of the Lord.

<pause>

Now, going back to the prophet Joel, as *he* considers the “day of the Lord,” he begins to *personally* cry out to the LORD.

Look at verses 19-20.

[¹⁹ To you, O LORD, I call.
For fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness,
and flame has burned
all the trees of the field.
²⁰ Even the beasts of the field pant for you
because the water brooks are dried up,
and fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness.]

And here, we begin to see that the devastation of the locust plague wasn't all there was, but there was also “fire” and drought (“the water brooks are dried up”). “What the locusts have not destroyed, a severe summer's heat and drought have ruined.”²⁸

It's even *more* hopeless than Joel originally described.

But remember, the people of Judah undoubtedly *knew* the utter devastation of the locust plague—they were suffering *through* it even as Joel spoke.

²⁸ Richard D. Patterson, Carl E. Armerding, and Eugene H. Merrill, *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi*, rev. ed., EBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). David Allan Hubbard (*Joel and Amos*, TOTC 25 [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989], 55-56) notes: “Many observers have noted that locust invasions are worse in unusually hot summers (Bewer, p. 89). The fire, then, must be either the intense heat of the sun producing a drought, or an actual fire kindled among the parched herbage. The former possibility seems more likely in view of the entire context which has stressed the complete devastation of all verdure, with the result that there would be little herbage left to burn (cf. Amos 7:4, for judgment by drought).” Still, Duane A. Garrett and Paul Ferris (*Hosea, Joel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC [Nashville, TN: Holman, 1997]) note: “The ‘fire’ here is ambiguous (cf. Amos 1:4,7,10,12,14; 2:2,5; 5:6; 7:4). It could be metaphor for the locusts, or describe the wilting effects of drought, or refer to a literal forest fire that swept over the barren, dried trees. This ambiguity allows it to serve as a symbol for all the disasters that have overtaken the land.”

So why in the world is Joel vividly describing the utter despair of their situation?

Was he just rubbing salt in their wounds? Was he being cruel?

No, the *reason* that the prophet Joel was doing this was to direct them to *God*.

He shows them the utter *hopelessness* of their situation, and how there is no hope to be found in *themselves* or in their *situation*. And then, he points them to the *only* source of true hope for them; he calls them to turn to the *Lord God*.

And at the end of the chapter, in verse 20, Joel says “even the *beasts* of the field *pant* for [the LORD].”

The *animals* have always known that they have never been in control of their lives—and so they do not try to find hope in *themselves*, in *others*, or in their *situation*, but their only source of true hope is found in their Creator and Sustainer.

And if that’s the response of the *beasts*, how much *more* should God’s *people* “pant” and “cry out to the LORD”—their Creator and Sustainer?

Conclusion

Now, as we close, it’s interesting to note that, ever since the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, *Sunday* has been called “the Lord’s Day” in the New Testament and by Christians throughout history (Rev. 1:10; cf. Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2).

But “the Lord’s Day” is just another way of saying “the Day of the Lord.”

Every Sunday, when we gather as a church, is also a *mini* day of the Lord, for it is a regular opportunity to hear and be convicted by God’s Word, to consider the *final* day of the Lord, and to turn away from sin in repentance and turn toward him in faith.

It is a regular opportunity, as God’s people, to consider the horrors of *hell* that Christ bore on our behalf and to consider the blessings of *heaven* that Christ has won for us.

And so, as “sojourners and exiles” of this world (1 Pet. 2:11), as pilgrims just making our way through this passing world of suffering, we continue to fix our eyes on and look forward to our Lord’s returning. And even when devastation comes, we continue to turn to him—*together* as his people.

The One Thing

When the Lord brings us devastation, he calls us to turn to him.

Let’s pray.