

“Joel: Only One Thing Is Wrong” // Joel 1–3

(Also could be ‘God’s Unrelenting Love’, to make the connection to Hosea—the same love we saw in Hosea we see again here in Joel)

Happy Mother’s Day... Let me say: To those of you called to serve in this special role, we celebrate and honor you, and we see Jesus in you—*Summit, let’s put our hands together and thank God for our mothers.*

Open your Bibles to the book of Joel. (It’s right after Hosea.)

We’re in a series on the **Minor Prophets**, a set of books most people skip right over in the Bible...

- And that’s first of all because **they are called “minor,”** and so we think, “Well, if they are called ‘minor’, how important could they be?”
- Plus, they can be **hard to understand.**

But **like I told you last week**, they are not called minor because they are unimportant, but because they are short.

- **Which, to be honest, I like**—they get in, state their case, wrap up.
- Some of you say, “Yeah, **I wish your sermons were more minor.**” Fair point.

These 12 books are short, but they are really important because they describe how life in Israel went so wrong, and what they could do to bring about restoration.

Works Consulted:

“Locust Hordes and the Day of the Lord,” John Piper

“Prophet of Judgment,” Joseph Parker

“Joel,” James Montgomery Boice

Joel, Mark Dever

Joel, Paul House

Joel’s book is second in the Minor Prophets.

- **You may not realize this**, but Joel is actually one of the earliest recorded prophets—and most people miss that because his book comes so late in the Old Testament—but your Old Testament is not arranged chronologically.
- Joel **lived and prophesied early** in Israel’s history—after Solomon but before the exile. He probably was a student of **Elisha**.

His book was written during a time when a lot of things had **gone wrong** in Israel. They had some really bad leaders, and they had just suffered through a national plague (which I’ll tell you about in a minute). There was civil unrest and economic problems. Their **stock market** was down, **foreign trade** was low, **national confidence** was non-existent, and their **FBI director** had just gotten fired. Almost everyone believed the country was headed in the wrong direction.

Joel writes to diagnose the problem—and he tells them there’s only one real problem—they think a bunch of things are wrong but he tells them there is really only one thing wrong.

- Joel **reminds me of the story I heard** about the guy who went to the doctor and complained that “everything on his body hurt.” The doctor said, ‘show me,’ and he pointed to his shoulder and says, “It hurts here.” Then he pointed to his head, “It hurts here.” Then he pointed to his stomach and said, “And it hurts here.” And the doctor said, “**You idiot.** You have a dislocated finger.”
- Many times, we feel like a host of things in our lives are going wrong, when it’s actually only one thing that is wrong.

(This **book is short**—only 3 chapters, we’re going through the whole book.)

(I. A Self-Inflicted Plague (Joel 1:4–2:5))

Joel opens his book with a **description of gigantic locust plague**:

“What the cutting locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust has left, the hopping locust has eaten; and what the hopping locust has left, the destroying locust has eaten.”

(Joel 1:4)

- You may have **seen a locust—they are about 3 inches long and look like heavily-armed grasshoppers**), but thankfully we’ve never experienced this kind of plague.
- We have a record of a modern locust plague that occurred in the region in 1915.¹ Observers said one March swarms of locusts just appeared in the sky.
 - They flew down from the northeast in clouds so thick they obscured the sun.
- Immediately they began to dig holes in the soil about 4 inches deep and a half-inch wide, depositing more than **100 eggs** in each hole.
 - The way they lay eggs is pretty creepy—they are neatly formed in cones about one inch long and as thick as a pencil, like something out of the Matrix.
- These holes were **literally everywhere**. About 70,000 eggs would be concentrated in a single square yard of soil, and these patches covered the ground for miles and miles.
- Within a few weeks, **these young locusts hatched, resembling large ants**. They hadn’t formed wings yet, so they hopped along the ground like fleas. They would cover 4- to 600 feet a day, devouring any and all vegetation in their path.
- As they grew, they **developed the ability to jump**, at which point their range got higher and they would scour the trees and vines.

- A few weeks later they’d **develop wings**, and they’d swarm over the areas they had already devoured to destroy any plant with life left in it. **PIC 1**
- The sound of their swarms, they said, was terrifying.
- **Witnesses said that within a few days**, there was literally nothing living—plant-wise—left. **PIC 2**. They even eat the bark off the trees, leaving behind a wasteland what looked like a nuclear holocaust.
- As they get more desperate for food, they swarm into houses eating **food, clothes, fabric, and wood**.
- They are like middle school boys at a pizza party. They leave nothing behind.

Joel uses this locust plague as both an *illustration* of their sin as well as a *warning* of God’s future judgment on their sin.

(Illustration)

Let me talk 1st about the **Illustration aspect**: Like the locust plague, the devastating power of sin is total, gradually destroying everything in its path.

- The **laws God gave us are life**—his commandments and rule in our lives lead to our flourishing.
- We see this **illustrated in the Creation account**. When God created the earth, it began as a dark, shapeless, chaotic mass. Genesis 1:2 says that God’s word then spoke into that chaos and brought life and beauty and order out of it.
 - This **shows what God’s word** does when it enters our lives—it brings order and beauty.

Sin, by contrast, unravels creation and plunges our lives back into darkness, and God’s judgments in Scripture often illustrate that.

¹ James Boice, *The Minor Prophets: Joel*.

- We saw that most clearly in the 10 Plagues... /not magic tricks, but the systematic reversal of Creation. Not just to show off his power, but to illustrate what Pharaoh's rebellion was doing to the world.
- We see that same **kind of picture again** here with the locusts.
- WOLF BLADE: **sin numbs you until it destroys you.** (the pornography, flirtation, doing things your way instead of his—it may feel good in the moment but rots your soul)

So, the **locust plague** is an illustration. It is also a...

(Warning)

...warning of a coming judgment, one much more terrible than the locusts.

Joel says that unless Israel wakes up, God is **going to send the armies of Babylon** into Israel like a horde of locusts.

Listen to how Joel prophesies about the Babylonian invasion in terms of the locust plague: "For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are like lions' teeth. 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... *The land is like the Garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desperate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of mountains, like the crackling of a flame devouring the stubble." (1:5-7; 2:2-5)

What you are seeing in all of this, btw, is an illustration of what theologians call the **passive** and **active** dimensions of the wrath of God, and how they work together.

- Passive wrath of God = God allowing us to suffer the natural consequences of our sin.
- Active wrath of God = the lightning bolt of judgment from heaven.

And here's the thing: The **active wrath** of God—the lightning bolt—is usually just an extension of, and affirmation of, the passive wrath. In his active wrath, he affirms and extends what we have chosen for ourselves. **A few other examples:**

- **Genesis 3:** Adam and Eve sin and God casts them out his presence; but Adam and Eve had already chosen to hide from God's presence, before God banished them from the Garden.
- In the **story of the Plagues**, Scripture says that God's judgment on Pharaoh was to harden his heart so he would not believe, but only after Pharaoh hardened his own heart several times.²
- In fact, the way Jesus **describes hell itself—which is the ultimate display of the wrath of God, shows it to be** an extension of his passive wrath. Sometimes we miss that because the Jewish metaphors Jesus use can be unfamiliar to us:
 - The "worm that does not die" – an image of a conscience continually being eaten away by guilt and regret
 - Outer darkness – the total absence of God and all his goodness.
 - Gnashing of teeth – Jewish image that meant self-condemnation and self-loathing
 - Fire – the agony of God's displeasure
 - **Hell, is the full fruition of telling God to get out of your life. It's like C.S. Lewis said, "In the end, we either say to God, 'Thy will be done" or he says to us, 'Thy will be done.'"**

No one has helped me get my mind around the wrath of God as much as C. S. Lewis. He said,

- Sin is like **cancer**. It never stops growing. And we live forever. There's a lot of things that wouldn't be worth worrying about

² **Romans 1:** God's wrath was to "give them over to their own lusts..."

it they only grew in us for 70 or 80 years. *But what does it look like for that temper and jealousy to grow in you unabated for a million years? Hell is precisely the technical term for what it would be.*³

God doesn't destroy, sin destroys. And when you understand that, you'll start to see any earthly experiences of God's judgment—like this plague of locusts—as expressions of God's mercy.

- God is trying to let you see where sin is taking you before it is too late.
- A lot of **Bible readers wonder** how the threats of judgment we see all through the MP are consistent with God's love.
 - *(Remember, if you were here last week, the **Minor Prophets started with one of the most mind-bending illustrations of God's love—Hosea's faithful, persistent love to a notoriously unfaithful wife.***
 - *And you may wonder **how to reconcile these warnings of judgment with that beautiful picture of love. This is how.***
- **Any experience of the painful consequences of our sin** before it's too late is **God, in mercy, in love, trying to wake you up.**
 - He's not trying to pay you back but bring you back.
- One of the most **gripping illustrations** of that I've heard was from Christian leader I knew of who got exposed in the **Ashley Madison scandal** a couple of years ago... *Losing my ministry was bad, but it kept me from losing things much worse (marriage; my soul)*

Is something like this happening with you right now?

- Maybe you feel like **"locusts" are eating away** at every part of your life.
 - You are **trying to save money**, but God keeps letting stuff break down.
 - You are trying to **be better in your marriage**, but new issues of conflict keep cropping up.

- You keep **trying new strategies to get happy**, but it always feels like only a skin-deep, pseudo-happiness.
 - (If you have to spend money every day to get happy, that means nothing is solid on the inside.)
 - If you are constantly having to find an escape from real life to be happy—shopping, TV, porn, a hobby, drinking—that means something is rotten on the inside.
- **God is trying to wake you up.** No new strategy is going to fix you. And that's because **the source of the problem is not found in the horizontal.** It's a vertical problem.
- **And good news, bad news: God has more locusts** than you have solutions. *Quit looking for solutions!*

In order for God to bring you to your senses, he has to bring you to end of yourself.

- **For some of you, he's been calling out to some of you for years, but** you haven't been **ready to listen** because you haven't come to the end of yourself yet.
- **In order for God to make you new**, he's got to rip out the old. He has to **tear you down**. So, don't be surprised if your world keeps crumbling.
- **God has blessed our church with a lot of growth over the years.** We see a lot of people come here each weekend to re-explore the whole God thing. And here's what I've seen—a lot of people when they come back to church don't want real change, they just want God to fix what's wrong in one little area; to slap a new moral coat of paint on their life and scrub away the rust.
 - **But here's the thing:** God doesn't just want to help you polish up the old, he wants to make you a new person.
 - **Not new leaf;** new life
 - **C.S. Lewis** in *Mere Christianity*: **SUMMARIZE:** Many people come to God because they realize their house has broken down and they need God to fix it. *And "at first you can*

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 74.

understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised.

But then, *“he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense to you.”* And you wonder, *“What on earth is he up to?”*

*“The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—erecting a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.” – C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity**

You might be happy with just little changes... but God has so much more for you. The shag carpet may not bother you. But God doesn't like it. He will rip it up.

God has **so much more for you** than you have for yourself, which is why he allows the locusts to wake you up.

So again: Where is this happening for you? Is there something in your life that maybe you are asking God to take away, but you should realize instead that God is trying to send you a warning through it?

So, what does God say?

(II. What God Wants (Joel 2:12–13))

12 *“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; **13** and rend your hearts and not your garments.”**

The thing to notice here is the kind of repentance he is calling for is the kind that grows out of love. Look at the words: *“All your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning, (tear) your hearts, not your garments...”*

- He's describing **repentance that comes from a broken heart**. Not just a bent will, but a heart that is heartbroken over what its sin did to God.
- Because that's **the only kind of repentance that really works**.
 - **Here's what I've learned about me:** When what bothers me about my sin is that it caused some painful circumstances, or it made me feel guilty or ashamed, then my resolutions to change are short-lived.
 - **Like balloon-smacking.**
- But in those areas **where my heart has been broken over how I hurt God** and drove his presence from my life, those are the areas of repentance that have really changed me.
- **The reason some of us can't repent effectively is that we don't really love God.**
- **Which is the connection to fasting.**
 - Some people **treat fasting like it earns God's favor**. Almost like it's a way of inflicting a mild punishment on yourself. Muslims around the world are about to enter **Ramadan**... ask them why: to earn God's favor and bring them closer to God.
 - But that **goes against everything else the gospel teaches:** Forgiveness is a gift, earned not by our fasting but by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.
 - **Fasting, for the Christian, is not an attempt to earn God's favor, but an expression of longing** for the God who has given us his favor in Christ.
 - **And in a fast you say,** “God, I need more of your power in my life—in my family or in our church and I am heartbroken that I don't have it.
 - **Things are not “OK!”**
 - **And what I need is not a better marriage** or a little more financial help or a new boss or for this person to leave me alone, what I need is your presence and

- power in the center of my life and I want that even more than food!”
- **Or you cry out to God** and say, ‘I’m not ok with my kids not knowing Jesus and I want that more than anything!’
- **Or when we as a church say**, “I’m not ok with the amount of people in our community who don’t know Jesus and the amount of families in our church splitting up and the injustice that still affects people in our community and the tragic amount of people in our world who still haven’t heard about Jesus and I want your presence and power in those things more than food!”
- **(Which is why, in a few weeks, we’re going to have a day** that we set aside, as a church, to fast together. **Not to say**, “God, we need this and that from you, but more of you!”)

God presence and power flow through a repentance that grows out of love for him.

- Which may **make you ask the question**: Well, how do we learn to have those feelings again? You say, “I’ve lost that loving feeling...” How do you fix that?
- **Start with Hosea!** This is **why Hosea comes 1st** in the Bible (**Not accidental**). **Start with his love** for you demonstrated in how he comes for you faithfully again and again!
- Joel says it himself in vs. 13: Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. (2:13)
- **Return to God because of who he is. Think about that love...** Grasping the love of God for us produces love for God in us.
- 1 John 4:19, “We love, because he first loved us.”
- You’ll **learn to repent like this** when we submerge ourselves in the truth of the gospel!
 - It’s **why we say the gospel is not just the beginning of the Christian life**, the diving board off of which. ABC’s.

- **Everything in the Christian life** grows out of your knowledge of God’s love.
- In the words of **Chance the Rapper**—this ain’t no intro, this is the entrée. (To note, he was not talking about the gospel. But it fits.)
- You can only learn to **repent of your sin** the more you immerse yourself in the free and gracious love of God.

Watch now what God promises will happen when they do... Several things:

(III. How God Responds (2:14–29))

[2:14] “Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him,”

- (You may tend to read this as a question, like “Who knows” if God will do this? But, this is really more of a rhetorical question. You can see from vs. 12 that God was the speaker.)

So, here’s what he promises:

- Turn and relent = **mercy**: “leave a blessing.” = **Grace**: Mercy is withholding from us wrath that we do deserve; grace is his pouring out on us goodness that we do not deserve.
 - If you break into my house and steal my stuff and I catch you, and I don’t call the cops, that is mercy. (I am withholding from you the trouble that you deserve.) But if I go on from there to say, “Well, obviously, you are in financial need” and I give you a check for \$10,000 to help get you back on your feet,” that is *grace*. I am **not only withholding from you** what you do deserve, I am **giving to you goodness and privilege** that you don’t deserve.
 - (Don’t actually try this, btw, I’ll just call the cops).
- **God not only wants to shield his wrath from you**, he wants to return blessing and prosperity to your life.

Let's go on: 2:19, "The Lord answered and said to his people, 'Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine and oil, and you will be satisfied."

- That means **new blessings**.
 - He'll actually pour out blessings on you.
 - **I really got serious with God the summer** before my junior year of high school. Up until that time I had been pretty focused on pleasing only myself and doing things my way, and like most people who live that way I was pretty unhappy. But that summer I put God back into the center of my life and shortly thereafter my dad gave me what began to function like a life-verse, one that I have shared with you often—Matthew 6:33. Put him first in everything.
 - I have seen that **play out again and again**: Friends. Family. Financially. Church.
 - He does that! **Actual physical things**
- But this verse points to something else, too: "you will be satisfied." **contentment**.
 - **Which is a greater blessing?** For God to dump stuff on your life, or to enable you to be happy with what he's given you?
 - Contentment is one of the greatest heavenly gifts:
 - Isn't this what we are **always trying to teach our kids**? You don't need every new version of every new toy to be happy. Happiness with your stuff has more to do with your character than your possessions. **Contentment is a character quality, not a condition**.
 - **Sometimes God will bless you with more stuff**, sometimes he'll give you **greater contentment** in the stuff you already have.
 - Sometimes God will **bless you by taking away the pain**, sometimes he'll give you joy and peace within the pain.
 - Or he'll **bless you by fixing the marriage**, or by giving you peace that passes understanding in the midst of a painful marriage.

He goes on, in another of **my favorite verses** in the OT: [2:25] I will *restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.

- This is **retroactive blessing**. God will go back and make up for in your life what sin destroyed.
- Has there ever been **another expression of grace** like this? This how much God **wants** to love and bless us: He will replace, restore, and make up for what sin has destroyed in our lives relationally, financially, emotionally.
- Sometimes, you'll experience that on earth; other aspects you won't experience it until you get to eternity.
 - A **good example of this is Job** who lost everything—fortune, family, health (who wasn't suffering for his sin, just suffering). But in the end, what he lost was restored 7 times... a picture...
- **What has sin destroyed** in your life?
 - Has divorce destroyed your heart or your family?
 - Or have you just made decisions that you think mess up your life beyond repair?
- **Return to me, says the Lord, "and I will restore the years the locusts have eaten."**
 - Your life is not over. **If you return to God**, he promises that all you went through will be swallowed up in goodness.
 - It's a **joy that will never end!** When we've been there 10,000 years... sing of God's grace...
- That will free you from the despair of regret! Or **bitterness**. No one has ever taken from you what God will not restore in abundance in eternity.

A couple other promises here: [2:28] "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

- **A couple of things here**: Peter **cites this verse in Acts 2** as being fulfilled by the coming of the Spirit, saying it is **a new experience**

of God's presence, and the Spirit's presence would better to us than any other earthly blessing. He's more life-giving than money, more secure than good health. More constant than great relationships.

- **If you are a believer, you have the very Spirit of God—that created the world and raised Jesus from the dead, in you.** Look at your neighbor: If they are Christian, they have the actual Spirit of God in them. You say, "They don't look like it!" Well, you don't either. But the Creator of the galaxies loved that person enough to fuse himself into them permanently.

And he's got a job for us: *"...your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...

Peter says this points to the **empowerment** of the Spirit in the church **for mission.**

Jesus had said that when we got the Holy Spirit he would be our power for mission: *"You will receive power, after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses..."*

That's the way you know the **Holy Spirit is in you**: not that you feel serene at night, but you are a **witness**. You can't shut up about it.

- **When you've been through all that Joel promised in chapter 2**, you're going to have something to say!
 - Isn't that what happens when you fall in love? You **annoy the heck** out of everybody talking about your new man... but you can't help it! You have to tell somebody!
 - Or when you are excited about your team winning the championship... Some of you **Carolina fans** have driven your poor Duke-fan co-workers insane. But you have to talk about it!
 - Or **how about this**: Everybody I've ever known who has remodeled their house has people over for dinner. You want

people to see. So people can see how awesome your new addition is.

- **When God restores you, you are going to want to tell somebody.**

God doesn't just revive and restore you so that you feel better on the inside. He wants some witnesses.

- And the Holy Spirit comes on you to help you with that. **The book of Joel opened with God telling Joel: "Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation." (1:3)**
- **Is this happening?** Is God's Spirit on this church?
 - Are you telling your friends—who is your one?
 - Are we busy telling our kids?

These are all the things God wants to give to us—mercy, grace, blessing, restoration, presence, and power for witness:

You say, **"What happened to all that wrath God had against our sin? The hordes of locusts."** That's a great question.

- **Throughout the book, Joel keeps talking about the coming "day of the Lord" where God will pour out his judgment on sin.**
- On that day, Joel says, 2:31, "the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood." (2:31–32)
- And there the **wrath of God will be poured out** for our sin.
- Paul said **this day Joel refers to was fulfilled** at the cross (Romans 10:13).
- **When Jesus died, the sun was darkened.** The locusts of God's wrath devoured the body of Jesus, and he was sent into the exile of God's wrath on our behalf.
- He took our sin in our place so that nothing but the power and blessing of resurrection would remain for us. He took the **judgment dimension of the Day of the Lord** into himself, so that our "Day of the Lord" would only be about resurrection, reunion and power. **Paul quotes Joel in Romans 10** and says, 'God has

taken wrath, so that whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved!’

God wants to give us *all* these things. The first sermon preached after the resurrection, Joel was the text. And the message is, “*Just ask! I’ll give you the power and presence you ask, just ask!*”

The absence of God’s presence and power and blessing from our lives (or our church) has nothing to do with his unwillingness. It’s our sin: **Isa 59:1–2**, [1] Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; [2] but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

Question: How badly do we want the presence of God? In our church? In our nation? **Answer:** As seriously as we take sin and severely as we hunger for God’s presence. These are **shown by our heartbroken repentance** and fasting...

One of the greatest revivals ever in church history happened in Korea in the early 20th century.

It’s beginning always gets traced back to one event, when the Korean church was small, just a **few hundred believers** in the whole country.

At a prayer service one of the Korean church leaders—Mr. Kang—stood up, trembling, and said in barely more than a whisper, “*I have something to confess. I have, for weeks, harbored an intense hatred in my heart for Mr. Lee, our friend and missionary. I confess before God and before you, and I repent.*” **The room fell silent.** Did this man just publicly admit to hating the host of the conference? Every eye turned

to Mr. Lee, to **see how he would respond**. Mr. Lee was taken aback, and **could not hide his own surprise**. But he quickly answered, “Mr. Kang, I forgive you.”

What followed was “*a poignant sense of mental anguish*” (that fell upon the believers) *over their sins*.

Church members began to confess hidden sins, to weep over them, and to pray for forgiveness. The meeting, which was scheduled for a few hours, stretched on until 5 the next morning.⁴

This and other similar events led to a massive outpouring of God’s Spirit, and in 1 year **50,000 Koreans** had come to Christ—this in a country where before there had only been a few hundred. The local college campus in **Pyongyang**, where this started, saw **90% of its students come to faith in Christ. 90%! Today South Korea is one of the most thriving missionary-sending hubs in the world.**

It all went back, Korean believers said, to when we **took sin seriously** and **hungered** for God.

Many things are wrong in our lives—in our church, our community, our nation, but in reality—only one thing is wrong: We have fallen away from God, and no longer love and pursue him.

How badly do we want the presence of God? As seriously as we take sin and severely as we hunger for God’s presence. These are **shown by our heartbroken repentance** and fasting...

⁴ Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2010), 40–41. I have condensed Shaw’s telling of the story.

