

Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 17, Joel

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This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the prophets. This is session 17 on the book of Joel.

I pray as we study scripture we realize that this is a wrestling match. It's an art, not a science. There is so much here to overwhelm us in terms of details. We do thank you that you've made the big plan and the big picture of scripture clear to each of us.

And while we may be at times confused about details, we do thank you that we understand that there is a God who loves his people, who is there and is taking them somewhere. We thank you for the fact that we have come to know you and that your word is important to us as a guide and a tutor to enable us to understand those ways in our lives that can best please you. So, help us to read scripture, not as the Reader's Digest or Time Magazine or other timepieces, many of which go out of existence, but help us to read it as an eternal word, timeless again for our generation as it was for our parents. We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today, I want to deal with Joel and introduce Joel.

If any of you have any names you want to add to the sheet here for the Passover Seder, I'll pass that around. And just a reminder again to bring the money for the very latest, the second class, after we come back from break. Hopefully, the first class with an envelope and whomever you are paying for.

Joel is a literary masterpiece. It's one of those little books tucked among the minor prophets that a lot of Christians don't get to appreciate because a lot of Christians can't relate to locust plagues. That's something for Mr. Spielberg to deal with.

Locust plagues, big things that deal with apocalyptic end time, great things that speak to us of the end of the age. Actually, when I was a middle schooler, I got to get a little bit of a feel for a locust plague. It was a really very strange thing.

My father was going out to visit his sister in Ohio, and we were crossing Ohio on Route 6, and it was the middle of July. And I said to my father, look at those large state trucks sanding the highway. It's the middle of July.

The sanders going on. And, in fact, they were. Just like plowing Route 6 in the middle of winter, they were sanding the roads in the middle of July.

What had happened was that one of these seven-year locust plagues came through Ohio, and the state highway was like a skating rink because the wings of those locusts got matted down as the tires ran over them, and they didn't stop. They just kept coming like an army. And so, there was a section of the highway that was actually slippery, though the temperature was 90 degrees outside.

The locusts were just moving through Ohio, taking everything green in their sight, devastating the land. I don't know, I'm not an entomologist and I don't know about these creatures, how often they come. But in the biblical world they were greatly feared.

There had been, of course, a tradition that had been passed on for hundreds of years about the locusts in Egypt, and that was one of the plagues. The word locust, therefore, is a word annually that's on the lips of every Jewish person when they celebrate the oldest commemorative event in the history of the Jewish people, namely release from Egypt. And you recall the plagues, which we will do together as a class.

As you, in our community, illustrate this by sticking your little finger or possibly your knife into the glass of wine and then placing a drop of that red substance on your plate, you call out the name of the plague. Locusts were greatly feared. They were one of the enemies that helped to do Pharaoh in.

And the book of Joel centers on a locust plague, which appears to have been going on. If you look at one, too, it says, hear this, you elders, listen, all of you who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children.

This is a major event and you're going to be talking about it for generations to come. And so the language seems to be that an actual plague was taking place. Has such a thing happened in your days? That's a rhetorical question and the implication is no.

This is the snowstorm of 1978, which those of us living on campus still talk about with 31 inches. No one could leave campus for two days on the order of the governor. Over 200 cars marooned on Route 128 where people just abandoned them and got rescued by the National Guard.

Some of these great events of nature we still talk about. In this particular case, this prophet is skilled for his literary beauty and for the staccato-like way in which he describes this invasion of locusts. The three little books, the three little chapters in this book, then focus mainly on a locust plague, but it's not just to describe a natural disaster because the locust plague is part of what he develops in this book, which is his key theological term, the Yom Yahweh.

I will come back to this Day of the Lord as we work our way through the book. This is the main theological contribution of the book of Joel, to speak of the Day of the Lord. Of course, because Joel was a book that was studied by people of Second Temple Judaism, like Shimon, one of the disciples of Jesus, he was able, on the Day of Pentecost, when he got up and addressed 3,000 Jewish men who had come from all over the Mediterranean Basin and from points east, as far as the Tigris-Euphrates area and points south from North Africa, he was able to use this little book in speaking about the Day of the Lord, which is tied in with what we as Christians call Pentecost.

But the key here is Pentecost was an agricultural festival, Shavuot, seven weeks after Pesach, the big countdown leading to the major harvest of barley and wheat that happened in Israel in May and June. Why do I mention that? Because all through this book, particularly in the first two of the three chapters, is an emphasis on no more agriculture, no more grain. These things are cut off.

Now, Joel is a very common name. Joel is used by at least 12 different people in the Bible. Most of us know how difficult it is to keep the Jameses straight in the New Testament and the Marys straight.

It's rather difficult to keep other people straight. There are a whole bunch of Jeremias in the Old Testament and three guys named Jeremiah in the prophecy of Jeremiah. So, names get very confusing.

2930 different Bible characters. So, there are a number of these Joel's and I can understand why Joel would be a perfectly good name in the part of a parent to name a child. Like Malachi, Joel, or Micah, combining a divine name or placing a divine name in a name for a child could be indeed considered to be a confession of faith.

So, Joel, Yahweh is God. And that L on his name, as you see in Daniel, Bethel, and Ezekiel, you see that in many proper names. So, his name was like Micah.

Micah's name asks a rhetorical question. And the answer is no one. Micah, who is like Yahweh? Or Michael, there's no book named Michael, but Michael's name is the same thing.

It's a question. Who is like God? Michael. And the answer is nobody.

So, there are people in the Bible whose proper name is a question asking for an answer. And it speaks of this incomparable God of the Hebrew Bible. Joel's name just lays it out there as an affirmation of faith.

Yahweh is God. Joel himself, we don't know too much about him except in 1:1, he's the son of Petheuel. He seemed to have a rather close knowledge of Jerusalem and its environments.

The history and worship of what goes on there. You notice, being a southern kingdom prophet, he says, blow the trumpet in Zion, 2:1. So, he seems to have been one who came from the Jerusalem area. Zion is a beautiful poetic name referring to the city of Jerusalem.

The interpretation of the little book of Joel poses some interesting questions. What is going on in this particular book? Some have tried to make the whole book eschatological or apocalyptic. Predicting future invasions to come upon the land.

But again, I think what we have in the opening half of the book is Joel is describing an actual plague of locusts afflicting the nation. Now, it's possible this, then, the army of locusts coming into the land, could have been a very painful reminder because associated with this was, of course, God's call for repentance. And, of course, natural disaster has a way of tugging at the hearts of people.

People have never had hard times in life. Sometimes, God is unable to reach these people. And so, the nation was much more vulnerable at a time like this.

So, this day of the Lord in history, taking place in the form of a locust plague may have been in some way a harbinger of a future overthrow by surrounding armies. If Israel, and here I'm speaking of all of God's people, did not turn to Him in repentance because repentance becomes a theme here, right in the midst of that locust plague.

So important, as I have said, in 2.13, rend your heart and not your garments. That call to return, shub/shuv, go back, is part of the book of Common Prayer on Ash Wednesday. The day which leads us into the 40 days of Lent.

So, there is, in the midst of the locust plague, the desire to turn people's hearts back to God. And God, indeed, through this disaster, may be softening the hearts of the people up, once again, to turn to Him. Now, the actual outline of the book is quite simple.

Chapters, well, chapter 1, verse 1 to 2.17 is, The day of the Lord at hand, the day of the Lord is imminent. The day of the Lord is taking place now in history in the form of a locust plague. And potentially coming in the form of an actual invasion of an army, a real army.

But, it's now, this judgment is approaching in this locust plague. Which then ends with this call for repentance. In 2.18 through 3.21, the theme is also Yom Yahweh, the day of the Lord.

But, here, he moves to much more the day of the Lord in the future. And, finally, the last chapter, the distant future. The day of the Lord includes spiritual blessings, as well as the promise of judgment upon the enemies of God's people.

And, eventually, of course, the vindication of God's people before the nations of the earth. But, that emphasis on the judgment of nations and the vindication of Israel is the main theme of the final chapter. The description of the locust plague is so vivid in the opening chapter.

He says, tell it to your children and your grandchildren. He comes up here with, in verse 4, a variety of different words for locust. In fact, the Bible has many, many different words used for locust.

And here, he's not talking about different species or varieties of locusts. Although, the King James might give you that impression where it uses words like palm or worm and cankerworm. It's a very strange language of 400 years ago.

The NIV, realizing that he's using four different words for locust, doesn't try to make a distinction. Neither does the Revised Standard Version. How many different ways can you say locust? A locust is a locust.

Now, look. Locust. Literally, the word means burner of the land.

The word holocaust means total or whole burning. So, the idea of naming this critter that comes through the land as a burner of the land, probably behind it, if everything is green and that all they want to do is eat everything green, after they pass through, everything looks brown. There's a dearth; there's death, and everything is destroyed.

So, they burn the land brown. That's what they, in fact, do. Whoever they are taxonomically, RSV says this is what they do actually.

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

So, we got cutting, swarming, hopping, destroying. Those are all words that describe what locusts do in their wake. Now, the NIV, wanting to be a little different, realizes that repeating words is for emphasis, not to make careful distinctions.

A locust is a locust is a locust. So, the NIV says what the locust swarm has left, the great locusts have eaten. What the great locusts have left, the young locusts have eaten.

Now, what the young locusts have left, other locusts have eaten. Well, there again, to say something four times, from the emphasis, you get the point. There's a lot of them and they bring a lot of destruction.

And what do they do? Well, verse five says, if you're a person that drinks a lot, wine or beer, you're in trouble. Beer is made from grain, and wine is made from what we call viticulture, vine tending. And so, the vines are going to be taken care of and the fields will have no grain.

So, you drinkers of wine and drunkards weep. A nation has invaded the land, verse six. That nation is the locusts.

And they come with the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. So, other animals are taken to show how they are predators of the land. They've laid waste to my vines and my fig trees and have the bark stripped off, leaving the branches white.

Despair you farmers, wail you vine growers, grieve for the wheat and the barley. Here's our agricultural trio again. The grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, and the oil fails.

I mention this staccato, the very short sentences. Grain destroyed, wine dried up, oil fails. Telegraphically, it gives the impact of this.

And in Hebrew poetry, if you want to increase the emotional intensity of what you have to say, you shorten your sentences. Make them very, very brief. I'll give you an example of this.

Nahum deals with the destruction of the city of Nineveh. And he moves the meter, so it's moving very quickly. Nahum 3:2. The crack of the whip, the rumble of the wheel, galloping horse, bounding chariot, horsemen charging, flashing sword, glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end.

They stumble over the bodies. And that very quick clipped meter in the poetry reminds me of also the song of Deborah in chapter 5 of Judges. When you build to the climax of this very brave woman, Yael, who nails this Canaanite military general, Sisera, and puts a tent peg through his head, and where it's described poetically, it says, she struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered his temple, he sank, he fell, he lay at her feet, at her feet, he sank, he fell, where he sank, there he fell dead.

The fact that a woman was able to achieve this magnificent overthrow of the Canaanites, who had been oppressing the Israelites at this time in the Jezreel Valley, was worthy of saga and song. So, you set it to music in celebration of Yael. All right, so Joel's language here in describing these critters.

It's hard for us to get our minds around what it would be like to be in an actual locust plague. To help us with that, Van Lennep's work in *The Bible Lands*, is the title of the work, he describes one of these local locust plagues, and I think it's quite effective. He says the young locusts rapidly attain the size of the common grasshopper and proceed in one and the same direction, first crawling and, at a later period, leaping as they go, devouring everything green that lies in their path.

They advance more slowly than a devouring fire, but the ravages they commit are scarcely inferior or less to be dreaded. Fields of standing wheat and barley, vineyards, mulberry orchards, and groves of olive, fig, and other trees are, in a few hours, deprived of every green blade and leaf, the very bark often being destroyed. The ground over which their devastating hordes have passed at once assumes an appearance of sterility and dearth.

Well, did the Romans call them the burners of the land, which is the literal meaning of our word locust? On the move, covering the ground so completely as to hide it from sight and in such numbers that it often takes three or four days for the mighty host to pass by. When seen at a distance, the swarm of advancing locusts resembles a cloud of dust or sand reaching a few feet above the ground as the myriads of insects leap forward.

The only thing that momentarily arrests their progress is the sudden change of the weather, for the cold benumbs them while at last. They also keep quiet at night, swarming like bees in the bushes and hedges until the morning sun warms them up, revives them, and enables them to proceed on their devastating march. They have no king nor leader, yet they fault or not, but press on in series of ranks, urged in the same direction by an irresistible impulse, and turn neither to the right nor to the left for any sort of obstacle.

When a wall or a house lies in their way, they climb straight up, going over the roof to the other side, and blindly rush in at the open doors and windows. When they come to water, be it a mere puddle or a river, a lake or an open sea, they never attempt to go around it but unhesitatingly leap in and are drowned, and their dead bodies, floating on the surface, form a bridge for their companions to pass over. The scourge thus comes to an end, but it as often happens that the decomposition of millions of insects produces pestilence and death.

History records a remarkable instance which occurred in the year 125 BCE. This was just a few decades after the Maccabees cleansed the temple desecrated by the Syrian Greeks. The insects were driven by the wind into the sea in such vast numbers that their bodies, being driven back by the tide upon the land, caused a stench that produced a fearful plague whereby 80,000 persons perished in Libya, which is daily in the news today, the country directly next to Egypt, going west.

Cyrene, or Cyrene, remember the brother who helped Jesus carry the cross? He was from Cyrene and Egypt. So, these countries that had on their north run the Mediterranean Sea lost large numbers of people because of the plague—80,000 people in that particular case.

Alright, so locust plagues were indeed dreaded. Just a few things I want to comment on in regard to the text itself. This nation of locusts that have invaded the land is destroying all of nature and all of agriculture and has really wreaked havoc with the economy.

Now, the reason Baalism was so attractive in ancient Israel the two main reasons, it really appealed because the two strongest drives human beings have are their sex drive and their drive to survive. We saw in the book of Hosea why Israel was vulnerable to sacred prostitution in the northern kingdom. And the whole Baal cult.

But the other is, you've got to survive. You've got to stay alive. Survival.

And nature has a lot to do with that. If nature isn't treating you very well, if the stream beds are dried up, if the land is brown and there are no crops to be had, then Baal's the guy who's in charge of all of this. And so people, of course, in Israel that were attracted to the Baal cult annually, you went through this idea of Baal and Mot.

Mot, the god of death, grappling. Mot kills Baal. The vegetation dies in April or May every year.

The land is brown for five or six months. And then, as the rain begins to come again in the fall, Baal is resurrected to life once again. And so, the cycles of nature, and the land coming to life, and the crops once again bearing what they're intended to bear.

This was so critical. So, the whole land is touched by this. It mentions in verse 7, the fig trees.

The two main sources of sugar in the diet in Old Testament times were figs and dates. Those are your two main sources of sugar. So, the fig trees are ruined in verse 7. Of course, the fig tree has another meaning in prophetic literature.

As you know from reading Micah, if you're able to sit under your fig tree or under your vine, it's symbolic of prosperity and peace and probably the idea that you could live comfortably outside the walls of the city. Dried figs, of course, are eaten. 1 Samuel 25 indicates that.

And a poultice made of figs was once applied to King Hezekiah's boil. And according to Isaiah 38:21, so people were looking for medicinal use of figs. I read Isaiah 38.21, prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover.

We know in ancient Ugaritic literature of the Canaanites that figs were regularly used there for medicinal purposes. So when we're talking about figs, I just am pointing out here that we think of figs as something to eat, or maybe a leafy tree under which you can sit there under the hot Middle Eastern sun for some relief or other purposes. So it says, get out your dark brown black sackcloth, verse 8, and start grieving.

Because your grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off. The wine, the oil, the grain is going to fail you. He also mentions that since this has been so big in the last ten years in American culture, the marketing of pomegranate juice is important.

Pomegranate means an apple with seeds. And the thing that characterizes the pomegranate when you cut it open is the numerous seeds that this fruit has. That's why it's described as an apple with seeds.

In the Arab Middle Eastern culture, it very often was typical to take a pomegranate and break it over the threshold of a new home. It kind of christened the home for a new married couple with the prayer that you have as many children as all of these hundreds of seeds spread over your door. In other words, have a blessed marriage with numerous kids.

It's interesting in the culture of Israel today, where you have both Arabs who seem, the pomegranate symbol seems to make sense because they have, on average, double the number of children that Israeli Jewish people have. Pomegranate was, of course, a refreshing drink. Sometimes, it was used for medicinal purposes.

Pomegranates were used for decorating. As you remember, the high priest, Exodus 28, had pomegranates decorating his robe. And by the way, there were 200 pomegranates decorating the capitals of Solomon's temple.

1 Kings 7. So, this was a very common motif. There's an old tradition in that part of the world that the first sherbet ever produced was the preparation of pomegranate juice mixed with snow. So, the pomegranate is destroyed.

Pomegranates, by the way, were usually harvested at the end of the agricultural year, at the end of the summer. They and the grapes usually came from late August into September. You have other kinds of trees mentioned here.

The palm tree. Now, you may think of palm tree, but that's just because it's nice to wave when the king's coming into town. And you can say Hosanna very gracefully by waving your palms.

But the fruit of the palm was the date, which today, throughout the Middle East, the date palm produces dates eaten by Arabs and they're camels. Camels love those dates. The leaves of the palm, which sometimes can be up to 5 or 6 feet in length, were used for weaving mats.

One of the amazing findings on the top of Masada, when Yadin excavated Masada for several years in the 1960s, was the recovery, so dry there, these things are preserved, are baskets woven with palms. There's an illustration of this because palms were used for the weaving of mats. One of the very popular names in Israel for a girl is Tamar.

T-A-M-A-R She, in fact, gets her name in the first chapter of Matthew because of her link to Judah in the episode in Genesis chapter 38. But Tamar is the word for palm. And probably it typified grace and elegance and uprightness and stood tall, one trunk, no branches, very beautiful form.

Alright, so all of these things that dealt with the world of everyday life and nature were subject to this predator, this locust coming into the land. So he calls the people to put on sackcloth and to declare a holy assembly with fasting. Now, the only required fast day in ancient Israel was Yom Kippur.

Actually, depriving oneself of food is not technically mentioned in regard to Leviticus 16 and Yom Kippur. It does several times say you are to deprive yourself. Now, historically, that has been understood as depriving yourself of food and often drink for that period of time.

But fasting in the Bible was often associated with mourning, collective sorrow, and individual grief. The book of Esther takes on almost a form of prayer when the community comes together and fasts in light of the plans of Haman to destroy the community, so they turn to fasting so they can focus on God. It's interesting how the church has looked at this theme of fasting which is rather prevalent in the prophets.

Often the prophets put down fasting because that became associated with outward parade of religion and outward ways in which people sometimes sought to impress others. A kind of self-righteousness. And so, what did the prophets do? The best chapter in the whole Bible on what true fasting is right in the prophets.

It's Isaiah 58. Isaiah 58:3 Why have we fasted? And you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves? And you haven't noticed? Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please, and you exploit all your workers. You see, this is very prophetic.

I'm doing my fasting. I got the ceremony and the ritual going here. Why should you complain, O Lord? And the Lord says, Hey, you fast all day long, but you're exploiting others.

Your fasting ends in quarreling. Isaiah 58.4 And fighting, striking each other with wicked fists. In your fasting? Fasting does not automatically equal spirituality.

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen? This is God's version of fasting. Isaiah 58.6 To loosen the chains of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and break every yoke. Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter? So, injustice, oppression, helping those that need food, the homeless, when you see the naked, to clothe him.

It sort of sounds like we're reading Matthew 25 and the big round-up judgment of the sheep and the goats, doesn't it? And Matthew must have plagiarized to get the idea of this kind of criteria that deals with the heart of social justice and how we treat our fellow human beings. That's God's version of the fast. There's almost an irony there when you brag about fasting, and yet God says you really understand fasting correctly when you spend yourselves feeding the hungry.

That's real fasting. You're giving the other guy food. One of the interesting things is the church tended to drop fasting as an important spiritual discipline.

We all know there are some within the church that have kept this discipline alive but because of its associations with legalism and self-righteousness and the parade of religion publicly as Jesus attacks fasting in the Matthew 6.16 passage again because of its abuse. So, we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. That's one of the lessons we learn in the prophets.

Just because there's a legitimate spiritual exercise, fasting, we then imbue it with the proper meaning rather than simply discontinuing the practice altogether. Now, I want to end talking a little bit about the Day of the Lord. In 1:15 we have the first of five occurrences of Yom Yahweh, the Day of the Lord.

And you'll observe in 1:15, the Day of the Lord is near. It will come like destruction from the Almighty. The Day of the Lord, then, is associated with judgment.

In 2.1, the second occurrence of the Day of the Lord, let all who live in the land tremble, for the Day of the Lord is coming. It's close at hand. A day of darkness, gloom, day of clouds, and blackness.

And he goes on and talks about like a large and mighty army coming. So again, it speaks of judgment. The third occurrence is found in 2.11. The Day of the Lord is great, and it's awesome or dreadful.

Who can endure it? So, the Day of the Lord isn't something one easily would say. Bring it on by God's definition. Amos had to deal with that popular definition of the Day of the Lord, which basically said, yeah, bring it on, because the other guys out there, the other nations that have thumbed their nose at your covenant people, you will take them down with the Day of the Lord. It will be a disaster for them, but we're going to be vindicated.

We're the goodniks. The fourth occurrence of the Day of the Lord is found in 2.31, which pops up in Peter's Pentecost sermon, which speaks about the coming of the great and dreadful Day of the Lord, associated with celestial signs, sun, moon, and so forth. And then the last Day of the Lord is in 3.14. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision, for the Day of the Lord, is near in the valley of decision.

Now, in each of these contexts, and I'll come back to this after the break, Day of the Lord has reference to God's intervention in history. God sovereignly coming in history to judge. The popular notion was to judge the other guy, not us.

The prophets come along and say, no, judgment starts at the house of God. Don't be so quick. But, this means the judgment on Israel also.

And whether it's by a locust plague, by some natural disaster, or by invading armies, these are only harbingers of what you see around you, are only indicators of an actual great and final Day of the Lord. These are many days of the Lord to deal with a locust plague. It only speaks of a greater intervention in history to come.

And as the Bible unpacks that, that great and climactic, and to use the last words of the Old Testament, the Malachi, in the appearance of Elijah the prophet, Eliyahu HaTishb'i, Elijah the prophet comes before the great and the dreadful or terrible Day of the Lord. He's a precursor to the Messiah. So, in other words, the great Day of the Lord indeed involves God's personal intervention in history, which was inaugurated on Pentecost.

That's what Joel said because he equates whatever was happening in Pentecost with what Joel 2 wrote about. But not the culmination or the consummation or perfect ultimate wrap-up of that concept. The final Day of the Lord yet awaits the vindication of Israel by God Himself.

And that comes at the very end of the age. All right, I will say some more things about this after the break. I hope you all have a good time wherever you're headed and come back in one piece and in health.

This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the prophets. This is session 17 on the book of Joel.