



Sin Is Devastating (1:2-20)

Lesson 5

The average American's view of God is highly distorted. The god that many are familiar with is not the God of the Bible but rather a god of their own imagination. A god who gives them what they want, when they want it, and who generally avoids being a "downer." The picture of God that meets us in Joel 1 is a very different picture than what many have imagined. Here we see a nation that has faced the judgment of God and are left reeling. We sit in silence as the prophet takes us on a tour through the land that has been made barren by God's righteous response to the people's sinfulness. He calls over and over again for mourning, wailing, and lament. This sobering passage should have a very definite impact on us: we should learn to fear God and to take him and his Word seriously, realizing there is a hefty cost if we do not.

Sin likes to hide its price tag, because the truth is that sin is very, very expensive. Like the slick salesman that signs on a naïve customer to an affordable payment plan with no interest (for the first three months), only for that customer to be in big trouble and lose out big time once the interest kicks in, so sin likes to hide its final outcome at the front end so that we think there will be no serious consequences. Then after a long time, sometimes years, sin comes by to collect payment and people are left with ruined marriages, soiled reputations, wasted money, wasted time, and their life work crumbling before them. Sin is devastating, but too often we doubt that until it is too late.

The solution to this problem, at least in part, is to take a long walk with Joel through a shattered country. To see in our mind's eye the chilling sight of the destitute people of Judah trying to eke out a living after having all of their crops eaten by wild locusts. Hopefully, we can learn by proxy the devastating effects of sin, and in doing so can avoid learning that awful lesson firsthand.

Scripture often encourages us, especially in the wisdom books, to learn from the negative examples of others. Why do you think it is that we so often fail to do just that? Why do many people repeat the same mistakes they see others make?

In this lesson, we will begin by working through these verses and explaining what is going on in them. After this, we will take some concentrated time and ask some penetrating questions about how Joel's message should impact us.

[Teacher's Note: Make sure that you have time left at the end for the final section! This practical application is crucially important for this lesson, as it shows people how a deep study of the prophets can be helpful to them personally.]

I. Introduction: The Tragedy of the Locusts (2-4)¹

After the opening superscription (1:1), Joel leads off by introducing the main topic of the first chapter – the spine-tingling tale of an army of locusts that devoured everything in sight. Locusts were powerful nuisances. They have the ability to eat their entire body weight, and swarms millions strong will be blown across the desert sands of Africa and the Middle East eating every green thing in sight.

Joel opens his book by setting this plague up by discussing the impact that it had made on his generation. This was a once in a century type plague; it was the type of thing you still remembered 75 years later. Joel calls on the leaders of the people (“ye old men” or “you elders”) and the people as a whole to learn the necessary lessons from what had happened so that they didn’t repeat the same mistakes that led them to the place of God’s discipline in the first place.

How can we as a people today learn from the mistakes of previous generations, and pass on the lessons we have learned the hard way to those who follow us?

One interesting thing about the book of Joel is that it never lists the sins that Judah was guilty of. Whereas other prophets will often include long lists of the things that has upset God, Joel tells the people to lament and to turn from their sin, but he never specifies what the sin was. We do know, however, that ruined crops were promised as a punishment for the people if they turned away from God (Deuteronomy 28). Therefore, whatever it was, Judah had rejected God’s covenant at some point and were paying a price for it.

This price came especially through this locust invasion. Theologians debate what exactly is meant by the four Hebrew words which all generally mean locust in verse four. Some argue that they are different phases in the locust’s growth, others that they are different types of locusts, still others that they are all synonyms that are simply being used for effect. In any case, Joel’s point in using four words that all mean roughly the same thing creates a powerful message and pictures the swarms coming in layer after layer. The result at the end is that there is nothing left over, all has been eaten.

What might be a similar tragedy today that would have a similar devastating effect?

¹ In the previous lesson, it was suggested to show a video with the locust plague, or perhaps to save it for this lesson. One such video can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bx5JUGVahk>.

II. Calls for Mourning (5-14)

In this second unit in the first chapter, different groups are called upon to lament, mourn, and repent in light of the devastating effects of the locust plague. The typical pattern is a call to mourn followed by the reasons for the mourning. This section has a lot of overlap and uses a variety of descriptions to pound home over and over the impact that God's judgment on Judah has had and to call on them to take the consequences of their sin very seriously.

A. Call for the drunks to mourn (5-7)

God's blessings can sadly lead to indulgence and abuse, here being pictured by drunks who in their ancient context took a good gift of God – wine – and used it to excess.² Drunkenness can also lead to a drowsy state, which seems to be part of what Joel had in mind when he called on them to wake up. Here we have a biting picture of the land as apathetic and lazy, enjoying God's blessing but become lethargic and dull spiritually. Joel's message is like someone clapping loudly in the ear of a sleepy drunk and shouting "Hey, wake up buddy! Guess what? You're all out of alcohol!"

Why is it that God's blessings often cause us to become lethargic and apathetic? How do we avoid allowing our hearts to become dulled by pleasure while living in one of the most affluent cultures in history?

The locusts plague here is described as a nation and as a wild, dangerous animal. The devastating effect that it had is then briefly recounted: they wasted the vines (from which the wine came), and they ripped all the bark off the fig trees. These agricultural products were worse than simply losing this year's barley or wheat harvest. Vines and figs would take some time to come back and wouldn't grow up in a year.

B. Call for the people to mourn (8-10)

This section calls for the whole land to mourn.³ Whereas the previous concern had been for some of the more reckless members of society, here the scope broadens and includes everyone because everyone will feel the effects of this. The imagery that Joel uses is gut punching. He instructs the people to mourn as a fiancée would mourn over the loss of her

² Culturally, at a time when the alcohol content of wine was much lower and most of the wine that was drunk would have been diluted, wine was a wonderful gift from God, especially when other beverage options were few or absent entirely. This should not be taken as license for moderns to partake in beverage alcohol. For more information, see Pastor Phelps pamphlet in the church lobby.

³ This section is unusual in that there is no group identified (no drunks, farmers, or priests), and the Hebrew verb expects the subject to be a feminine singular noun. Some have taken this as a reference to the land (which in Hebrew is a feminine noun), but probably the verb is matching the word "virgin" and refers to the city of Jerusalem (sometimes called a daughter, Isa 1:8; 62:11) and by extension the whole country. In either case, this is a general call for all to weep and wail as a result of the destruction.

groom. It's hard to think of a more tragic scenario. Again, the reason for this mourning follows closely. The people are not even able to worship God through the regular sacrificial system that has been set up, because the land has been absolutely devastated. The grain ("corn"), wine, and oil is gone. God's blessings have been removed.

Why is it that God highlights the loss of physical blessings so much in these verses?

How can we appropriately apply this message today without falling into the trap of the health and wealth gospel?

C. Call for farmers to mourn (11-12)

In this next section, the call is narrowed to those most affected by the problematic harvest: the farmers. Here those who plant and those who care for the vineyards are addressed. They should be ashamed and wail because the crops that they oversee are gone. Joel repeats here what he has said elsewhere: that the people should mourn because the produce of the land is gone.

D. Call for the priests to mourn (13-14)

The final call is climatic and is directed toward the priests, those responsible for the spiritual leadership of the nation. Here the call is not just to sorrow over the great loss, but to rally the nation to come and repent of their wrongdoing. The priests are told to put on sackcloth and consecrate a fast so that the people, both leaders and the nation as a whole, can come together and cry out to God. It is not just enough for the people to feel bad, their sorrow must lead to actual repentance.

Why is it that many feel bad but never go on to repent? What is the connection between true, genuine sorrow and repentance?

III. The Day of the Lord (15-20)

The final section of chapter one is a cry of sorrow because the Day of the Lord is near. The prophet ends this section by discussing how joy has been cut off, how the storehouses are empty, and how the food is gone. This devastation impacts even the animals who have no food now, as they too must share in Judah's punishment.

Finally, Joel ends with a personal cry to the Lord as he mourns over the loss of produce, describing the locust invasion as being like a fire that has burnt the vegetation to the ground. This chapter ends on a pretty depressing note. The water is gone. The pastures have been devoured. The animals are even crying out. All of this is the result of Israel's sin, and Joel leaves this first section of his book with sad picture of the current state of the country. Although the book of Joel will eventually end on a high note, right now the prophet simply

recounts the sorrow the nation should be feeling as it reeled from this powerful judgment God had sent their way.

Why do you think this section ends on a note of sorrow? What value is there for us in sorrowing over sin?

Application

I. The Devastation of Disobedience

Sin is devastating. Especially for believers who have grown up as second generation Christians, the temptation is always to look over at the world on the other side of the fence and wonder “Is it really that bad over there?” Yes, and it’s actually far worse.

Why do we tend to minimize the consequences of sin?

How do we take seriously the cost of sin yet also rejoice in the fullness of God’s forgiveness?

In what ways does sin cost us without us even realizing it, at least at first?

II. The Proper Response to Discipline

Studying Joel can help us understand how we should react when we find ourselves in the middle of God’s discipline. The two responses in chapter that the prophet calls for the people to engage in are sorrow and repentance. These ideas are related, but different.

A. Sorrow over the loss of God’s blessings.

When sin costs us, it is right and proper to mourn what has been lost. Sorrow is not an unbiblical emotion. God expects us to sorrow over loss, when we have done nothing wrong but also when we have sinned and have experienced loss as a result.

What is the difference between sorrowing over sin and becoming sinfully depressed over the consequences of our sin? How do we strike that balance?

How do we balance weeping and mourning and yet also letting “the joy of the Lord” be our strength?

B. Repentance over wrongdoing.

Being sad is appropriate, but being sad isn’t enough. Our sorrow should result in repentance, a turning away from sin and a turning toward God. This should involve crying out to God and asking for mercy and forgiveness as we realize the sad end of our choices and turn to God for forgiveness and healing.

What is the difference between repentance that is focused only on the loss of blessings with repentance that is focused on God and also with the sorrowful consequences of our sin?

Many today laugh off sin and the consequence of sin. But sin is devastating. It brings ruin and destruction as was graphicly demonstrated in the locust plague that attacked Judah, and as is often true in our lives in subtle ways that we sadly miss at times until it is too late. Taking time to mourn over our sin and the grief that it has caused can be a wonderful tool when it leads to genuine repentance. As the author of Hebrews puts it: "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." (Hebrews 12:11)