



The Coming Spirit and the Call for Salvation (Joel 2:28-32)

Lesson 8

The Holy Spirit is sometimes referred to as “the forgotten member of the Trinity.” We often spend much time studying the work of the Father and the Son, but our attention on the Spirit is often far less than it should be.

Why do you think it is that people often fail to consider the work of the Holy Spirit? What do you think is lost when the Holy Spirit is ignored or forgotten?

Part of the reason for this is the difficulty involved in studying the Holy Spirit. There are only a handful of passages in the New Testament that give an extended discussion of the Spirit (Galatians 5, Romans 8, John 16). Much of the teaching of the Spirit is scattered throughout our Bibles, and in particular the Old Testament descriptions and explanations of the work of the Spirit can be challenging to study and interpret.

For example, the passage that we will be studying this week, Joel 2:28-32, is a critically important passage, as both Peter and Paul allude to it. But there is a lot of debate over *how* exactly they use it. Studying out this passage requires the careful student to have a grasp of many different parts of theology and be able to relate them to one another.¹ But the reward is worth the work! A right understanding of God’s Word, especially concerning the Holy Spirit, is important for our Christian walk.

This lesson will proceed somewhat differently than most lessons. We will take the first part of the lesson and study this passage in its context without considering how the New Testament uses it. Once we have done that work, we will then turn to the New Testament and see how it is that this passage is used by Peter and Paul, and what that means for the church today and for the future of Israel.

¹ For example, in this one lesson we deal with hermeneutics (how to study the Bible properly, in this case particularly how the New Testament uses the Old Testament and the right way to study prophecy), eschatology (the study of end times), pneumatology (the study of the Holy Spirit), and ecclesiology (the study of the church). That’s a lot of theology for one lesson!

A Study of Joel 2:28-32

Beginning in Joel 2:18 and continuing through the end of the book, the prophet describes for Judah what a return to the Lord would look like. He describes the physical result of her repentance, as crops return, her enemies are defeated, and peace and prosperity are once more known in the land. In verse 28, he begins a new section that describes what the Day of the Lord will look like spiritually.

Review: What types of disasters did Joel discuss in chapters 1 and 2? What response did he encourage in light of each of those disasters?

These five verses break up nicely along three distinct themes: Spirit, signs, salvation. 2:28-29 deals with the pouring out of God's ***Spirit***. 2:30-31 describe supernatural ***signs*** that will accompany the Day of the Lord. Finally, 2:32 describes the ***salvation*** available to all in the Day of the Lord. We will look at each of these individually.

I. The day of the Lord will mean the coming of the Spirit (2:28-29).

This coming of the Spirit had been prophesied by other prophets as well. Other OT prophets had built anticipation that when Israel was restored to the land, there would be an outpouring of the Spirit (see Ezekiel 36:26-29; Isaiah 32:14-18; 44:3-5). Joel teaches that this outpouring would be on ***everyone*** and would include ***supernatural revelation***.

A. The Spirit would come upon everyone.

Joel states that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on "all flesh" in the opening part of this section. The phrase "all flesh" is then further broken up into several different categories. This would include both genders (your sons and daughters), all ages (your old men and your young men), and all social classes (sons/daughters, servants/handmaids).

How is this different from the previous work of the Holy Spirit? Who had previously received the power of the Spirit?

There is possibly even a hint of the rest of the nations being included in these verses. The phrase "all flesh" in the OT normally meant everyone on the planet, not just Israel. Although there are some hints that this might be talking about Israel specifically ("your" x4 and the fact that this is in a context all about Israel), the later NT will see this is a prophecy that applies to all. While the first audience of Joel may not have necessarily imagined the gift of the Spirit being poured out on the nations, this was certainly in the mind of the Spirit when he first inspired the passage.

B. The Spirit would empower supernatural revelation.

So what happens when everyone gets the Spirit? Joel describes the Spirit's activity with three phrases: "prophesy," "dream dreams," and "see visions." All three of these are associated with the Spirit's role in revelation. God's people would all be able to receive divine communication directly. One of the great tragedies of the Old Testament was when God remained silent in judgment on his people (Proverbs 29:18, Amos 8:11). However, in this glorious day the prayer of Moses will be answered (Numbers 11:29) and all will have access to God's revelation.

What difference does it make that we have more revelation than the audience of Joel?

II. The day of the Lord will mean the coming of signs (2:30-31).

Joel locates the pouring out of the Spirit during a season of great signs. Joel's descriptions here paint a picture of the end of the world, the great and terrible day of the Lord. We will want to take note of a few key points about these signs.

A. These signs are cataclysmic.

The signs are "in heaven and in earth." In other words, you can't miss them. They will be publicly visible to all. These signs signal to us that what Joel is talking about here is a major work of God in the world. It's not something small or something that some parts of the world will observe and others might miss. No, this is a grand, massive step in God's plan that no one will be able to ignore.

B. These signs point to judgment.

The signs themselves are often symbols of judgment in Scripture. Several of these terms are connected with the exodus.

How might these signs be connected with the exodus (blood = first plague; sun turned to darkness = second to last plague; fire and pillars of smoke = the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night)?

The exodus is a helpful way to think about the day of the Lord, since it too was a time of God's judgment on the wicked and deliverance of his people. These great signs are a warning, then, that as God did in Egypt, God is again going to judge the wicked. This time, however, his judgment is over all the nations.

C. These signs precede the day of the Lord.

In conclusion, Joel tells Judah that all of these signs will precede the Day of the Lord. God's final judgment upon mankind for their rebellion against him will come with a warning, and the nations (and for that matter Judah and Israel) should pay attention to the last verse in this section!

III. The day of the Lord will bring with it the offer of salvation (2:32).

After promising the Spirit to be poured out on all God's people and warning that God will send a great and terrible judgment at that time, Joel finally offers the hope of salvation to all who will turn to God. The deliverance here is deliverance from the wrath of God himself. All those who call upon the Lord will be delivered from God's anger that is poured out on a rebellious world.

Calling upon the name of the Lord implies a loyalty to and belief in God and God alone. These who are saved have recognized that God is the only one who is to be worshipped and have cried out to him, and he has rescued them.

How does this understanding line up with the warnings of the New Testament? In what ways are the New Testament clearer about this teaching?

If we read Joel and just Joel, apart from the revelation of the New Testament, Joel seems to be saying that when Israel turns to the Lord God will restore her blessings, send the Spirit, bring his judgment on the wicked, and save all those who trust in him and him alone. So is this what Joel is saying? That brings up the question of the New Testament.

The New Testament and Joel 2:28-32

Is the event(s) Joel describe(s) future or did it already happen?

This is not an easy question to answer. The opening statement of this passage says "and it will be after thus" (literal translation). Looking at the context "after thus" refers to the preceding verses when God restores the good fortunes of Israel. This would suggest to us a future date for this prophecy in the millennial kingdom. The signs that are given to go along with this (blood, fire, columns of smoke, dark sun, blood moon) also seem to suggest a future time at the end of the world, as well as the fact that we have not seen the prophesying, visions, and dreams done by all people that were supposed to be a part of the Spirit's coming.

But we have just one problem with this: the New Testament seems to state that this prophecy has already been fulfilled! Both Peter and Paul quote from this passage in their gospel preaching in the New Testament era. Peter quotes this prophecy as a whole and states regarding the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost that "this is that" (Acts 2:16-21). Paul quotes Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:13 to say that all who call upon Jesus will be saved from their sins and from eternal destruction.

So how should we think about these passages?

I. Peter and Joel: the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:16-21)

Peter in his message at Pentecost responds to the charge that he and the others were drunk after speaking in tongues by quoting Joel 2. “This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel” Peter would say (2:16). He doesn’t just quote the verse about the pouring out of the Spirit, though. He continues all the way through to the offer of salvation, which then becomes the main point of his message. Joel said to cry on the name of the Lord. Peter would argue that name is Jesus (cf Acts 2:36).

What other passages tie together the name of Jesus and the exalted title of “Lord”?

But what is Peter doing with this passage? There are three ways to understand Peter’s usage of Joel:

1. Peter is saying that Joel is completely and spiritually fulfilled by the events of Pentecost.
2. Peter is saying that Joel is partially fulfilled² by the events of Pentecost.
3. Peter is not saying that Joel is being fulfilled but is simply drawing a parallel to the future expectation of the work of the Holy Spirit and what is happening in his day.

What are the problems with the first position – “Peter is saying that Joel is completely and spiritually fulfilled by the events of Pentecost”?

The first position is problematic because it often ends up saying that Joel didn’t actually mean what he said. The dynamic signs in the heaven and the earth are relegated to Calvary, when the sun went dark even though there was no pillar of smoke or fire or blood moon. The current ministry of the Spirit, although certainly an advance on what the Old Testament faithful enjoyed, hasn’t resulted in all being given the gift of prophecy, visions, and dreams.³ If we take Joel and his words seriously, we must still look for a future fulfillment of this passage in some way.

What are the problems with the third position – “Peter is not saying that Joel is being fulfilled but is simply drawing a parallel to the future expectation of the work of the Holy Spirit and what is happening in his day”?

² Theologians get quite precise here and debate what terminology is best to use here: partial fulfillment, double fulfillment, compenetration, or inaugurated eschatology. While these distinctions are worthwhile for experts in the field, they all carry the same basic idea: what the prophet said applies in different ways to more than one time (their immediate future, Christ’s first coming, the rapture, Christ’s second coming, new heavens and new earth, etc.). For our purposes, then we will simply use the term “partial fulfillment.”

³ Someone might reply that the Spirit did fall on all these groups resulting in their prophetic work, at least for a time during the NT era. The supernatural gifts, when they were operative, were given by the Spirit to all types of people (cf 1 Corinthians 12). Joel does not seem to foresee this gift going away over time, however, and this still doesn’t answer the problem of the unfulfilled signs in heaven and in earth.

Some go to the opposite extreme and say that Peter was in no way saying that this a fulfillment. “This is that” does not mean “this fulfills that,” in fact perhaps Peter is intentionally avoiding the word fulfillment altogether! Rather, Peter was saying “this” was an “(illustration of) that” or an “(application of) that.” The problem with this view is that Peter really does seem to be tying the work of the Spirit on this occasion with the prophecy of Joel.

For these reasons, the best view is that Peter sees Pentecost as at least a taste of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon “all flesh,” even if there is more of the prophecy that remains to be fulfilled. The Holy Spirit has come in a new way after the resurrection of Jesus, but that does not mean that there is not more of the Holy Spirit to come.⁴

This also explains why Peter can zero in on the final verse of this prophecy. God has begun pouring out of the Spirit, but he is holding back on the judgment for now at least. This means that all should call upon the name of the Lord Jesus for salvation, because those who don’t will find themselves facing the wrath of God when the Day of the Lord comes in its fullness. This also means that the Holy Spirit is more than a temporary necessity until we get into the kingdom. Actually, during the millennial kingdom his ministry will expand and become even greater, rather than quietly disappear.

Why does it matter that we think of the ministry of the Holy Spirit as continuing into the millennial kingdom?

Peter’s use of Joel is challenging and has perplexed theologians for good reason. But while the details can get complicated, the big picture is not impossible to grasp. God has begun the work promised in Joel, although that prophecy awaits a more complete fulfillment when God brings judgment and restores Israel. In light of this, we all should call upon the name of the Lord Jesus for salvation while we still can, before it’s too late and we find ourselves on the wrong side of God’s wrath.

II. Paul and Joel: the call for salvation (Romans 10:9-13)

Once we understand how Peter is using Joel, Paul’s use makes sense as well. Paul uses this verse as a way to point to the fact that salvation through Christ is open to all, both Jew and Gentile, if they will call on the Lord. As we have seen, this passage hints at the inclusion of the nations with the phrase “all flesh” and Paul sees implicit in the claim “whoever” a way of salvation that is open to Jew as well as to Gentile. Joel’s free offer of salvation from God’s judgment in Joel 2 is offered to anyone who will call upon Jesus for salvation.

⁴ There is a technical debate over how exactly the ministry of the Holy Spirit changed at Pentecost. Some would argue that the Holy Spirit began his indwelling ministry at Pentecost, whereas others believe that indwelling of the Holy Spirit existed in the Old Testament, and that only the baptism of the Holy Spirit is new. Although I think personally that both indwelling and baptism are new works of the Spirit at Pentecost, the question does not need to be fully discussed to make the point that there was an advance in the ministry of the Spirit after Christ’s death and resurrection, and that there will be a further advance after his return.

When we read the Old Testament prophets, we find ourselves perplexed at times. Their promises of a grand salvation and a beautiful future have in some ways been fulfilled in Jesus, but there is much more that awaits us. We find ourselves longing for the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom, yet today we enjoy the gifts of the Spirit and further revelation. Above all, we have the wonderful gift of a clearer vision of Christ and his purpose. We can have confidence knowing that he has already won the decisive battle, and we are just waiting for the time to run out before he claims his ultimate victory over sin and death.

It is in this in between ground that we come to Joel 2 and realize that what Joel prophesied was for the church but extends far beyond the church. With the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and the offer of salvation to all, we see the first steps in the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. But we realize that there is much more that awaits us. With that knowledge we are called upon, like ancient Israel, to wait for God. To hope in his plan. And in the meantime to trust him and to call out to him for our salvation, for whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.