

Major Messages from the Minor Prophets
What Do We Learn from Disaster?
The Book of Joel

September 14, 2014

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Text Introduction: The Prophets of the Old Testament are divided by scholars into the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. More precisely, we call Isaiah, along with Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel, Major Prophets. The remaining books of the Old Testament are called Minor Prophets. The terms major and minor refer to the size of these books, not the degree of their importance.¹

There are 12 Minor Prophets. Last week we began preaching through the Minor Prophets. We will devote one Sunday (one message) to each of the 12 Minor Prophets. Our goal is going to be to discover that central core message of the book.

Today, we are examining the Book of Joel.

Text: Joel 1:1-4--The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel:

²Hear this, you elders;

listen, all you inhabitants of the land.

Has anything like this ever happened in your days

or in the days of your ancestors?

³Tell your children about it,

and let your children tell their children,

and their children the next generation.

⁴What the devouring locust has left,

the swarming locust has eaten;

what the swarming locust has left,

the young locust has eaten;

and what the young locust has left,

the destroying locust has eaten.

Joel 3:14--Multitudes, multitudes

in the valley of decision!

For the Day of the LORD is near

in the valley of decision.

Introduction: Joel is one of those books that is difficult to put into its historical setting. Unlike most other prophetic books, Joel did not record the king when he prophesied. Commentators are not in agreement as to when Joel prophesied. Some put his ministry before the exile began, but others put him after the exile.

The second problem in Joel is whether the locust army is figurative of an invading army or if this is descriptive of literal locusts. Jewish commentators saw Joel's prophecy as figurative of an army.

¹ Lamentations is considered with these books as a major prophet because it is written by Jeremiah.

However, the prevailing current view of this prophecy is that this is a literal army of locusts. Joel wrote in the past tense in chapter 1 seeming to indicate that he has been an eyewitness to these events. The point of Joel's writing is to compare this event to the "day of the Lord."

Incidentally, a devastating locust plague took place in Africa in 1978. Eyewitness reports indicated that 40 swarms of locusts were in Ethiopia and 70 swarms were in Somalia with each swarm containing millions of locusts. Locusts are said to eat up to twice their weight each day. One can easily see how devastating such a locust plague could be. The description of total devastation in Joel 1:4 is easy to see.

I think it is here in this scene of absolute total devastation that we begin to make our application. We would be fools to do as some have done and say that specific natural disasters are the judgment of God. We would also be fools to not acknowledge that God is sovereign (in control) and uses natural disaster and other devastating experiences to get our attention. Remember last week, we said that God uses the pain in our life to pursue us.

So, what do we learn from disaster?

We learn what it means to feel hopeless.

The scene is one of total destruction. Joel 1:4 generally speaks of this devastation. Much of the rest of chapter 1 details that destruction. (See Joel 1:9-12, highlighting verse 12, where "all human joy has dried up.")

- The Question of Hopelessness—"Has anything like this ever happened?" (1:2) We have asked this question before haven't we?
- The Proclamation of Hopelessness—(1:3)—We need to repeat the stories of despair, because there are lessons in that despair. That is true even in our own personal lives.
- The Conclusion of Hopelessness—Yahweh is God! In all of our hopelessness, God is still God. Here is another truth we must nail down. Last week we said, God loves you. Today, we say God is God and there is no other. Incidentally, this is what Joel's name means—Yahweh is God.

We learn what it means to feel hope.

A few weeks ago I said to you: "The road to contentment is found on the road to discontentment." In order to feel contentment, you have to know personally what it means to be discontent. Similarly, to know hope, you have to know hopelessness. In the midst of hopelessness, Joel gives us reason to hope.

- God promises to be compassionate. (2:13)
- God promises to help. (2:20)
- God promises to restore. (2:24-26)
- God promises His presence. (2:27)

- God promises His Spirit. (2:28-29)
- God promises to save. (2:32)

Back a few years ago, the Northrop-Grumman's New Orleans Shipyards dedicated the "New York," the one billion dollar amphibious transport ship that belongs to the Marines. The front of the ship, the bow, the section that parts the waters and leads the way, is made up of 65 tons of steel salvaged from the World Trade Center. Don't you love the symbolism there of taking steel from the twisted ruins of the collapsed skyscrapers and recycling them into a mighty vessel that will defend this nation against the Osama bin-Ladens of this world? On the side of the ship the message is loud and clear—"Never Forget."²

I think that is what God wants to do with some of the shattered ruins of your life. He wants to take those remains and fashion them into something meaningful in your life. Let Him do that.

Major Message of Joel:

We move from hopelessness to hope by humility.

Several passages mark the kind of humility that we should have as we cry out to God. Note these:

- 1:14—A Fast
- 2:12—Fasting, Weeping, and Mourning
- 2:13—Tearing of clothes—But notice the tearing of the heart
- 2:15-16—A Fast gathering all.

The humility is a complete humbling before the Lord signified by internal and external, by young and old, by the farmer and by the priest.

Our humility will be a sign of our hunger for God to move. Our desperation shows our dependence upon the Lord. In this sense, Joel says the same thing that all of the prophets of God say, "Unless there is repentance, there will be perishing.

So What?

Don't get stuck in the Valley of Decision.

² Joe McKeever Blog, March 2, 2008.