

The Great Day of the Lord



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A Study of the Book of Joel

Introduction

In three short chapters the book of Joel takes us from an ancient locust plague to the eschatological day of the Lord. How can two events so far apart in time and so different in content be related? For the prophet Joel, who apparently witnessed the devastation wrought by the invading insects, the connection was easily established. Knowing the promised blessings and curses contained in the Covenant God had established with Israel, the prophet's divinely inspired insight enabled him to see in the locust plague a sign of a greater day of destruction in his people's future. The bad news is that the future day of visitation—called “the great and terrible day of the Lord”—will bring far worse devastation than any locust plague could. But the day of the Lord is not all bad news. It's a time of judgment, to be sure; but it's also a time of repentance and restoration, a time of revival and spiritual renewal. In fact, the prophet describes it as a time when God will pour His Spirit upon the young and the old, the sons and the daughters, and the male and female servants.

But God's promise of the outpouring of the Spirit is not restricted to the future day of the Lord. In the New Testament, Peter cites Joel's prophecy of this wondrous event and applies it directly to what was happening then and there. A careful study of Joel's chronology of prophesied events reveals that Peter was on target. Contrary to the claims of a few skeptics, the apostle did not lift Joel's prediction out of context; nor did he misapply it.

Joel prophesied during a time when the Temple was standing and the priesthood was in place. But it is difficult to pinpoint a precise date for the book. Evidence within the text has led many scholars to believe that this work belongs to the ninth century B.C. This date is partly based on Joel's references to an anticipated invasion of the promised land, though the prophet's description of this approaching event easily matches at least three known invasions: the Assyrian invasion of 701 BC., the Babylonian invasion of 598, and the Babylonian invasion of 588. This study does not require an opinion on the date of the book.

As for Joel himself, we know little about him. He is mentioned in no other book of the Old Testament, and the book bearing his name tells us only his name and the name of his father. But was he a priest? A farmer? His references to both occupations might lead us to suspect that he was one or the other, but we cannot be certain because the book simply does not say.

Of this we are certain: Joel's prophecy is no useless relic, but has profound meaning for all who would read it and heed its message.

I. Anticipating the Day of the Lord

A Severe Locust Plague

1 The word of the Lord that came to Joël, the son of Pethu'el: 2Hear this, you aged men, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? 3 Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. 4 What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. 5 Awake, you drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. 6For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and without number; its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. 7 It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white (Joel 1:1–7).

The first verse declares the origin of the prophet's warning. Joel, whose name means "Yahweh is God," is but a messenger. The "word" he brings to his people is from Yahweh.

Joel's description of the massive agricultural loss brought about by wave after wave of devouring locusts calls attention to the terms set forth in the Covenant between God and the nation of Israel. Long before, God had promised this nation blessings for obedience to His commandments and curses for disobedience. If the people were careful to do all that God had commanded, He would set them "high above all the nations of the earth" (Deuteronomy 28:1). Their crops would produce abundantly, and food would be plentiful for them and their many healthy children; their herds and flocks would multiply; their enemies would turn and flee from them, and no foreign power would dominate them (verses 2–14). However, failure to obey God's commandments would bring just the opposite—crop failure, drought, famine, disease, defeat at the hands of the enemy, and ultimately, loss of the land (verses 15–68).

The locust plague Joel witnessed was due to the people's disobedience to the commandments set forth in the Covenant. God had warned their ancestors, "You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather little in; for *the locust shall consume it*" (Deuteronomy 28:38).

Agricultural pestilences varied in intensity, some causing far greater loss than others. This one was among the worst. It was of the kind that is not soon forgotten but is talked about for generations to come (Joel 1:3).

The prophet describes the invading locusts as a large and mighty "nation" that moves in and strips the land of the blessings God had previously given. This is the first clue of what will later become painfully clear: The locust plague, as devastating as it is, is only a harbinger of something much worse! A "day of the Lord" is drawing near! His mighty army would soon cast its terrifying shadow over the face of the land!

Temple Worship Affected

8 Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth. 9 The cereal offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord (Joel 1:8,9).

The prophet calls for an expression of the kind of deep sorrow a young maiden would experience if her intended husband were taken away before the wedding could take place. The crop losses and resultant shortage of food for the people as well as their flocks and herds are cause enough for lamentation, but Joel recognizes that the adverse effects of the locust plague upon the sacrificial system—the very heart of the nation’s religious life—is, in a sense, an even greater cause for sorrow.

The sacrifices and offerings of the Temple at Jerusalem were an integral part of Israel’s system of worship. Each offering was (ideally) an expression of humility and thanksgiving toward the God of the covenant. The abundance of agricultural produce brought to the Temple was a continual reminder of the promises of blessings God had made long before (Deuteronomy 28). But now, the agricultural loss brought about by the locust plague threatened the sacrificial system. The lamenting priesthood and lack of offerings was a stark reminder that God’s protection had been withdrawn, and served as a sign of the unhappy results of unfaithfulness.

Curses of Disobedience

10 The fields are laid waste, the ground mourns; because the grain is destroyed, the wine fails, the oil languishes. 11 Be confounded, O tillers of the soil, wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley; because the harvest of the field has perished. 12 The vine withers, fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are withered; and gladness fails from the sons of men (Joel 1:10–12).

Like the priests of the Temple, the farmers wail because of the severe loss. The fields that had brought forth abundantly in previous years are now barren. The vines and trees have been stripped of their fruit. Again we are reminded of God’s promises of abundant blessings for obedience to His laws, and of the devastation of having those blessings taken away because of disobedience.

God had intended to continually pour His blessings upon the people of Israel, and would have done so had they remained faithful. It had been His desire to place them in “a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing” (Deuteronomy 8:8,9). This they could have had, but instead of the good fruit of the land they chose to partake of the fruit of disobedience, the “grapes of wrath.”

Through Moses, God had warned, “All your trees and the fruit of your ground the locust shall possess” (Deuteronomy 28:42). The rebellious nation of Joel’s day could no longer treat God’s warnings to the Exodus generation as outdated and obsolete.

A Call to Repentance

13 Gird on sackcloth and lament, O priests, wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because cereal offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. 14 Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God; and cry to the Lord (Joel 1:13,14).

The priests were to officiate in all sacrificial rites and see to it that the rituals and ceremonies of the Tabernacle (or Temple) were properly performed. They represented the people before God, and were to teach the Israelites God's laws and statutes. As the spiritual leaders of the nation, it is important that repentance begin with them. God calls upon them to put on sackcloth, an outward symbol of heart-rending repentance, and to call for fasting and fervent prayer.

In Scripture, fasting is a physical expression of contrition and penitence. An outstanding example of such fasting is in the scriptural account of Nineveh's response to the dire forecast of the prophet Jonah. When Jonah announced to the people of Nineveh that God would soon overthrow their city, they "proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). The king proclaimed a fast for all Nineveh, and called upon the people to cry out for God's mercy as they resolved to turn from their evil ways (verses 6-8). God responded to their repentance by deciding not to destroy the city (verse 10).

It is not the act of refraining from food and drink that causes God to withhold punishment. Rather, it is the *inner transformation*, expressed through "a broken and contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17), that draws a positive response from God. The pleasures of food and drink seem inappropriate during a period of such heart-rending contrition and penitence.

This is the kind of fasting Joel has in mind when he calls upon the priests to sanctify a fast and call for the elders and people to cry out to God. He knows that the health of the nation depends heavily upon the spiritual condition of the individuals that make up the nation. If enough people will truly turn to God with all their hearts, the nation will be spared; but if no, something far worse than the locust plague lies in the immediate future.

Description of Desolation

15 Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. 16 Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? 17 The seed shrivels under the clods, the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are ruined because the grain has failed. 18 How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dismayed. 19 Unto thee, O Lord, I cry. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field. 20 Even the wild beasts cry to thee because the water brooks are dried up,

and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness (Joel 1:15–20).

The plague of locusts was only part of the problem. The wasted fields now lay barren under the cloudless sky of a hot summer. The locusts had destroyed the crops, and the intense summer heat and lack of rain had resulted in ruined pastures and insufficient water supplies. Again, the prophet's description draws our attention to God's promise of curses for disobedience: "And the heavens over your head shall be brass, and the earth under you shall be iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down upon you until you are destroyed" (Deuteronomy 28:23,24).

Joel describes the desolation that had already occurred and the turmoil the people had been experiencing for some time. Until this point, Joel's descriptions have been in the present tense. But now, the prophet links the present distress with something yet to come—an even greater time of trouble that lies in the immediate future.

Joel warns that "the day of the Lord is near." Four other prophets in four different centuries gave the same warning (Isaiah 13:6; Ezekiel 30:3; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14). In each case, the day of the Lord was imminent, and was a day of divine visitation wherein the wrath of God would be poured upon the ungodly.

The apostle Peter, writing many centuries later, clearly places the day of the Lord in the future, and associates it with the time of the Second Coming of Christ (2 Peter 3:3–12). This is the "great day of...wrath" the apostle John foresaw (Revelation 6:17).

But how can this be? How can prophets and apostles living hundreds of years apart say that the day of the Lord is *near*?

The day of the Lord is *any* day of divine visitation. God has intervened and brought both destruction and deliverance many times in the past, and each divine act was a "day of the Lord." Each day of divine visitation points to and serves as a forerunner of the *final* judgment of the present age. Therefore the day of the Lord can be both near and distant. For Joel and other Old Testament prophets, the day of the Lord was near in that divine punishments for disobedience were imminent. However, since God's promise of divine retribution for the ungodly was never exhausted in any past intervention, the ultimate and final day of the Lord lies in the future.

II. Judgment and Restoration

The Coming Judgment

1 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near, 2 a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. 3 Fire devours before the, and behind them a flame

burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but after them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. 4 Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run. 5 As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle. 6 Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale. 7 Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall. They march each on his way, they do not swerve from their paths. 8 They do not jostle one another, each marches in his path; they burst through the weapons and are not halted. 9 They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls; they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief. 10 The earth quakes before the, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. 11 The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his host is exceedingly great; he that executes his word is powerful. For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it? (Joel 2:1–11).

The fact that the day of the Lord “is coming” indicates very strongly that the events described in 2:1–11 are future to the locust plague, which has already taken place. Further, the destruction described in 2:1–11 suggests that this is a plague of a different sort than the earlier one.

This is the second time Joel speaks of the rapidly approaching day of the Lord. The prophet warns of a coming invasion, and describes the invaders in terms reminiscent of the locust plague of chapter one. Their number is so great that their distant approach appears to be a huge shadow. They leap, devour, climb, run upon the walls, and turn the garden of paradise into an empty wasteland. The prophet draws from the earlier plague in his description of this “great and powerful people,” but makes it clear that these invaders are not locusts.

This exceedingly great host cannot be another swarm of locusts, for “their like has never been from of old.” The desolation resulting from the locusts and drought was thorough, so another swarm of locusts could hardly bring unparalleled destruction.

The invader is called “the northerner” in verse 20. Both the Assyrians (in 701 B.C.) and Babylonians (in 598 and 588 B.C.) invaded from the north, so the prophecy most likely pertains to one of these encroachments, depending upon when Joel lived. The locust plague served as a harbinger of this far worse invasion.

As with the locust plague and drought of chapter one, this prophecy must be viewed in light of the covenantal curses of Deuteronomy 28: “The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies....and they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land (verses 49,52).

The invading army is God’s army. It may seem strange that the warriors of a foreign nation are called God’s army, but it should be understood that they are God’s army in the sense that god uses them to chasten His own nation.

The Only Hope

12 “Yet even now,” says the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mournings; 13 and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil. 14 Who knows whether he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him, a cereal offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God? 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 16 gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. 17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, “Spare thy people, O Lord, and make not thy heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” (Joel 2:12–17).

God calls upon the people to turn to Him in heart-rending repentance, and assures them that “even now,” at this late date, it is still possible to mend the broken relationship. The problem is with the unwillingness of the people, not with God. His love, mercy, and graciousness far exceed the ordinary human boundaries of these qualities. He is “slow to anger” in that He always allows plenty of time for repentance, and sends prophets to warn His people and give them a chance to repent before being severely chastised. God “repents of evil” in that He changes His course of action and withholds punishment—“relents from sending calamity” (NIV)—when His people turn to Him in wholehearted repentance.

Unfortunately, many believe that God foreordained every event that would ever happen over the entire course of human history, from the beginning to the end. This is clearly not true. Joel’s prophecy, alongside many other prophecies of Scripture, reveals the conditional nature of prophetic pronouncements. Here, Joel declares that the day of the Lord is near. He even indicates that God has already selected and prepared His army to carry out the punishment He has determined upon His people. Yet, the prophet cites God’s own call for repentance in assuring the people that their future depends upon whether they turn from their evil and restore their relationship with God.

Joel asks, “Who knows whether he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him...?” This is almost identical to the hopes expressed by the repentant king of Nineveh after hearing of Jonah’s pronouncement of doom upon the city (Jonah 3:9). The question is not *whether* God will respond positively to the people’s repentance, but *how* He will respond. Who knows?—In addition to calling off the invasion, He might restore everything that’s been lost, and then add some additional blessings! The priesthood could begin sacrificing again, and the joyous worship of God could be recaptured.

Joel reiterates God’s call for fasting and repentance. He calls for a solemn assembly of all the people, exempting no one, not even the children, infants, and newlyweds. He calls for the priests, the ministers who represent the people before God, to go to God with contrite hearts and pray on behalf of the assembled crowd. Only then would God relent from

bringing calamity upon the nation—but if the people would offer to him the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart, He would do it gladly.

Repentance is the key.

Divine Deliverance

18 Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people. 19 The Lord answered and said to his people, “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations. 20 I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his front into the eastern sea, and his rear into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things. 21 Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! 22 Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree brings its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. 23 Be glad, O sons of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord, your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. 24 The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. 25 I will restore to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you. 26 You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. 27 You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, a your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame” (Joel 2:18–27).

God assures the repentant people that He will drive away the enemy, bring an end to the drought, and restore all that was lost in the locust plague. The people will then rejoice before God, praising Him as the faithful Provider who defends, protects, and preserves His people, and who dwells in the midst of Israel.

Rather than allow the invaders to overtake the land, God will scatter them, sending them into the desert, the Dead Sea (“eastern sea”), and the Mediterranean (“western sea”). As Deuteronomy 28:7 states, “The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways.”

On the one hand, this entire section expresses the ideal outcome, and should be understood as conditional. On the other hand, it prophetically points to both the temporal restoration (which did occur) and the ultimate restoration of Israel in the future. The assurance that God’s people “will never again be put to shame” points to the future period when God will regather the scattered descendants of Jacob and renew the Covenant with them (Jeremiah 31:31–40; Ezekiel 37:21–28; 39:25–29).

The history of Israel and Judah is a history of curses and blessings. At times, the prophets

warned of the nearness of national calamities due to the sins of the people; at other times God blessed the people because they turned to Him in repentance. Unfortunately, such “revivals” were always short-lived.

In summary, this section (2:18–27) should be understood three ways: 1) It expresses the ideal outcome and is therefore conditional. 2) It speaks of the temporal effects of the people’s repentance, and refers to actual events in Israel’s history. 3) It prophetically describes the ultimate restoration of Israel and fulfillment of God’s promise to gather the scattered people to their own land, reestablish His Covenant with them, and make them the model nation they were intended to be.

The prophesied events of the following sections will ultimately be fulfilled *after* the restoration of Israel—during the millennial reign of Christ—but it is a mistake to place the entire spectrum of fulfillment for these prophecies on the other side of the Second Coming. Indeed, the promises contained in these prophesied events have *already* been fulfilled to some extent.

God’s Spirit to be Poured Out

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. 29 Even upon the manservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit. 30 And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. 31 The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 32 And it shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls” (Joel 2:28–32).

The term “afterward” in verse 28 is important. It tells us that the events described in the subsequent verses occur at some point *after* the events described in the previous sections. The outpouring of the Spirit of God will take place at some undesignated time *after* the “day of the Lord” described in 2:1–11. Yet, 2:31b seems to indicate that the outpouring of the Spirit and celestial/terrestrial portents (2:30,31) take place *before* the “great and terrible day of the Lord” arrives.

This seeming conflict can be resolved once we understand that the “day of the Lord” of 2:1–11 happened long before the time of Christ, and that the “great and terrible day of the Lord” of 2:31 is the *eschatological* day of the Lord—the same “day of the Lord” mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–4 and 2 Peter 3:10, and described through the powerful symbolism of the book of Revelation (6:15–17; 8:1–9:21; 11:15–19; 16:1–21; 19:1–21). The “great and terrible day of the Lord” is the culmination of all previous days of divine visitation. The portents in heaven and earth will precede, and announce the arrival of, that day. God’s Spirit will be poured out before that day arrives; however, the everlasting nature of the

blessings described in this section indicates that the greater outpouring will occur *after*, or *during*, the eschatological day of the Lord.

Preliminary fulfillments of this prophecy occurred in Jerusalem (Acts 2), at Samaria (Acts 8), and Caesarea (Acts 10). From God's prospective in eternity, these occurrences and all subsequent down-pourings of the Holy Spirit are seen as a single event. The event *began* on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit descended with a sound "like the rush of might wind" (Act 2:2), but did not end there. It continued in the days subsequent to Pentecost, and *has not yet been completed!*

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter cites Joel 2:28–32 and declares that the downpour of the Spirit they were experiencing is a direct fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:16–21). That the prophecy is open-ended and subject to future fulfillments is indicated in the promise of salvation for "whoever calls on the name of the Lord" (2:21; cf. Joel 2:32).

The book of Revelation reveals that the Pentecost event will be repeated in the end-time, just before the great and terrible day of the Lord. When Christ opens the sixth seal, a great earthquake accompanied (or followed) by heavenly signs occurs (Revelation 6:12–14). These occurrences are not unlike those Joel predicted (Joel 2:30,31), and, like the portents of Joel's prophecy, these begin *before* the final day of the Lord. This is indicated in Revelation 6:15–17, where everyone from the kings to the slaves call for the mountains and rocks to fall on them and hide them "from the face of him [God] who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb [Christ]; for the great day of their wrath [the final day of the Lord] has come..." Then, before Christ opens the seventh seal, which represents the final day of the Lord, 144,000 Israelites are "sealed...upon their foreheads" (7:3,4). These are followed by "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation" (7:9). Apparently, the innumerable multitude is also "sealed" before the wrath of God is poured upon sinful humanity.

The seal sets the servants of God apart for protection from God's wrath during the tumultuous day of the Lord (Revelation 9:4). But what does the seal consist of? Paul writes, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were *sealed* for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30). Those who turn to God in heart-rending repentance and accept His provisions for salvation are "*sealed* with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (1:13,14).

The 144,000 Israelites and great multitude from all nations are set apart, or sealed, by the Holy Spirit immediately before the day of the Lord commences. This suggests that another great downpour of the Spirit will occur in the time of the end. Perhaps it will be even greater than the downpour that occurred in the days of the apostles. At any rate, it is certain that the prophetic downpour of the Spirit was not exhausted in first-century Jerusalem, Samaria, and Caesarea.

It is also important to realize that Joel's prophecy of the down-pouring Spirit is not re-

stricted to the boundaries of a restored nation of Israel. God's Spirit is to be poured upon "all flesh" (Joel 2:28), not just the Israelites. This is consistent with the promise God had given to Abraham, which is the basis of the covenant between God and Israel. God had said to Abraham, "And I will make you a great nation...and by you *all the families of the earth* shall bless themselves [or be *blessed*]" (Genesis 12:2,3).

The pattern of the Abrahamic promise is seen in the formation and growth of the apostolic church. Abraham's children were the first to receive the Spirit, but soon afterward the Samaritans and other non-Israelites received it. The pattern seems to be repeated in the sealing of the 144,000 Israelites and great multitude from all nations. It will repeat once more when the Messianic Kingdom is established.

The ultimate and final fulfillment of Joel's prophecy will dwarf the initial fulfillment that occurred in the days of the apostles.

III. Divine Blessings for Zion

Israel's Enemies Overthrown

1 "For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, 2 I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on accounts of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations, and have divided up my land, 3 and have cast lots for my people, and have given a boy for a harlot, and have sold a girl for wine, and have drunk it. 4 What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia? Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back, I will requite your deed upon your own head swiftly and speedily. 5 For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. 6 You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, removing them far from your own border. 7 But now I will stir them up from the place to which you have sold them, and I will requite your deed upon your own head. 8 I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the sons of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabæans, to a nation far off; for the Lord has spoken." 9 Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near, let them come up. 10 Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a warrior." 11 Hasten and come, all you nations round about, gather yourselves there. Bring down thy warriors, O Lord. 12 Let the nations bestir themselves, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat for there I will sit to judge all the nations round about. 13 Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. 14 Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. 15 The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. 16 And the Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But the Lord is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel (Joel 3:1-16).

Continuing the thought, God speaks of “those days” when the captives of Judah and Jerusalem will be brought back. While this occurred at the end of the Babylonian exile, its ultimate fulfillment is yet future. At that time, God will enter judgment with the nations who had scattered His people. To God, there is little difference between a day and a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8), so the events of ancient times and the events of the last days of the present age are closely related. This is why God can speak of ultimate things in an ancient context. He links the past to the future by referring to the deeds of ancient Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia as He speaks of the future restoration of Israel. The judgments pronounced against those nations, while fulfilled in history, apply to end-time nations performing the deeds of those ancient enemies of Israel.

Isaiah’s depiction of nations living at peace is reversed. Rather than beating their swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4), the nations called to the valley of Jehoshaphat for judgment are told to beat their plowshares into swords and prepare for war. Again, “the day of the Lord is near.” That this is the eschatological day of the Lord is certain because it is linked with the celestial and terrestrial portents (compare 2:30,31 with 3:15,16).

The Glorious Future

17 “So you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy and strangers shall never again pass through it. 18 And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the valley of Shittim. 19 Egypt shall become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness, for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. 20 But Judah shall be inhabited for ever, and Jerusalem to all generations. 21 I will avenge their blood, and I will not clear the guilty, for the Lord dwells in Zion” (Joel 3:17–21).

This is quite a different picture from that of the locust plague and drought of chapter one and the foreign invasion of chapter two. God is no longer far removed from His nation, but dwells in Zion. Full and joyous worship has been restored in Jerusalem, and all the enemies of Israel have been vanquished, their lands inheriting the curse earlier placed upon the land of promise. Zion, on the other hand, is a veritable paradise, overflowing with both material and spiritual blessings.

The return of Jesus Christ will bring not only severe judgment for the ungodly, but blessings to those who turn to God in whole-hearted repentance. In that day, Christ will re-gather the scattered descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and give them the land He promised to their forefathers. Then, “the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:2-4).

That's what the future holds for Israel and the world.

But the book of Joel is not just a story of what is going to happen. It is far more than a mere prediction about what we can expect. It is a *call to repentance!* The message for us is contained within God's admonition to Joel's original audience: "Yet even now,' says the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.'"

This is what God wants for each of us. Turning to Him with fasting and weeping simply means giving our lives to Him completely. It means committing ourselves to becoming a pliable lump of clay to be molded and formed by the hands of the Master Potter. It means accepting His provisions, obeying His laws, bowing before the King He appoints as Ruler over all Israel and the world, and *trusting* Him without wavering.

That, above all else, is the message God wants us to glean from the book of Joel.

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