

Dickson Old Testament Commentary

JOEL

WRITER

Joel is confirmed to be the writer of this book by Peter (See At 1:16,17). He was the son of Pethuel (1:1). His name means “the Lord is God,” or “Jehovah is God.” We know nothing of Joel outside what is revealed of him in this book. He was the prophet of revival among God’s people, speaking boldly and powerfully the word of God from Judah to a nation that God wanted to bring to repentance. From a message of judgment, he took the minds of the people to the outpouring of the Spirit.

DATE

It is difficult to date the ministry of Joel or this book. From the text of the book, Bible students have suggested dates anywhere from the 9th century to the 4th century B.C. From the content of the book, the most probable date would be somewhere in the 7th century B.C.

BOOK

Joel was a prophet from Judah who warned the people of God concerning the coming judgment of God if they did not repent. The message of the book was written in response to a devastating blight and drought that had ravaged the land. Joel used the historical occurrence of the locust (grasshoppers) plague and drought as a warning from God that Israel repent. A drought followed the plague, and thus a famine was upon the land at the time of writing. It was a severe environmental calamity wherein even the sacrifices at the temple were terminated. Both man and animals suffered severely (1:9).

Joel wrote the book in a poetic style, producing a literary vividness that spoke directly to the sin of the people. He wanted the people to know that the locust plague and famine were the direct work of God to stimulate repentance. He wanted the people to realize that the coming day of the Lord meant a day of judgment. If they did not repent, the nation would be doomed.

Seated within the message of repentance, was a message of hope. One of the most profound prophecies of the beginning of the Messianic age is included in the book. The prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 was given in order to give the people hope for the future.

Interpretation Of Natural Calamity (1:1 – 2:27)

Outline: (1) Description of the devastation (1:1-20), (2) The day of the Lord (2:1-11), (3) Call to repentance (2:12-17), (3) Promise of restoration (2:18-27)

Chapter 1

1:1-3 These were not the words of Joel, but the writing of Joel that was inspired by God, and thus the word of God.

Hear: Joel called for attention to what he was writing to the people. What he was about to reveal was profound, for the fulfillment would be in the centuries to come. The fulfillment would not come for generations. The purpose for the writing of the book, therefore, was that they not forget what was said and recorded. We would assume that Joel did not understand all that he was writing, but wrote in faith concerning what God wanted revealed to His people (See comments 1 Pt 1:10-12).

1:4-7 A severe blight of locust had just ravaged the land. **Gnawing locust ... swarming ... creeping ... stripping:** Though different Hebrew words are used in this text, we would assume that the different words refer to the four developing stages of the locust, not four types of locusts. They had stripped the land. The plague was so severe that the grape vines were stripped and the drinkers waited for wine. **Cut off:** Joel attributes the plague to the work of God in order to generate repentance. **A nation:** The coming of the locusts was as a strong nation that would come upon the land to devastate it.

1:8-12 Virgin ... husband: In Jewish custom, when a young woman was betrothed to a man, the man became known as her husband (Dt 22:23,24; Mt 1:19). **Sackcloth:** A sign of mourning. **Offering ... cut off:** Because there was famine in the fields, there was no grain or oil for offerings. The farmers and vinedressers could not produce sacrifices for the priests, and thus the priests were going hungry.

1:13-20 Consecrate a fast: It was a time for fasting. The land was so devastated by the drought that there was no food. **The day of the Lord:** Herein is the definition of the day of the Lord. It was a day of destruction. It was a day of judgment on the people. It was a day in which God called on the people to repent. If they did not, they would perish. In this calamity, the people personally witnessed the destruction that prevailed upon the land. They stood helpless in a severe famine. Grainaries were empty. Pasture land was dried up. Rivers were dry. **I will cry out:** Man, animals and the land were all suffering. Joel was driven to cry out to the Lord for relief. Since fires had burned the remainder of the pasture lands and trees, the people were at the end of their existence in the land. God had brought them to their knees.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

2:1-11 The day of the Lord is the judgment of God on His people (Is 2:12; Am 5:18). In this context, the judgment of the Lord comes upon the people in the form of locusts spreading across the land

as a great army of men. It was a time to blow the trumpet to warn the people. The trumpet was to be blown in Zion, Jerusalem. The sound of the trumpet was to alert all trumpet blowers throughout the land in order that all be warned of the invasion of God's judgment through the plague of locusts. The picture that Joel reveals is that the land is totally devastated by the blight. Nothing was left. It was as if a fire had swept through the land, destroying everything in its path. The locusts came as a well-trained army. They scaled the walls of the city and entered into every home. The locusts were so numerous that they darkened the sky. Since the Lord led them with His voice of command, the message was that God brought the locust plague on the people instead of an actual army. However, if they did not repent, the destroying army would come later. If they did not repent because of the locust plague, then God would eventually bring the armies of the Assyrians and Babylonians on them.

CALL TO REPENTANCE

2:12-17 Joel calls on the people to repent. *Fasting ... weeping ... mourning:* Every aspect of a repentant heart is portrayed. The nation must utterly turn with remorse to the Lord (Ps 51:17; see At 3:19). The extent to which Joel calls on them to repent manifests the extent into apostasy to which they had gone. Joel's request for repentance was based on the severity of the plague and famine. The people were at the point of death because of the environmental calamity. He thus called on the people to repent in

their hearts in order that God bring them relief from destruction. *Elders ... children ... priests:* The call for repentance was to all the people, indicating that the entire nation had developed a culture of sin. Though individuals within the society sinned, the culture promoted sin. The call for repentance, therefore, was more than an appeal to individuals. It involved everyone of society to turn to God. *Heritage to reproach:* As the surrounding nations observed the devastated land of Palestine, they would conclude that the God of Israel was no different than the gods in which they believed. Joel's plea for repentance, therefore, was that God bring them relief in order that the nations not make this accusation against God.

PROMISE OF RESTORATION

2:18-27 *The northern army:* Specific reference in the text was to the locust plague. But we would also assume that God brought the plague on the land and the people from the north, symbolizing both the Assyrian and Babylonian armies that would in the future approach Palestine from the north as invading armies. However, if the people repented, Joel gives a wonderful picture of the restoration of their livelihood. The rains would come and the fields would once again produce. Man and animal life would be restored. In fact, the restoration of vegetation and animal life would be so abundant that the people could not miss the point that God was working behind the scenes of physical laws in order to provide abundantly for His people. Since the plague and drought had gone

on for some time, possibly years, the restoration would continue as long as they remained faithful. The result would be that the people would never again be ashamed before the nations.

The Day Of The Lord (2:28 – 3:21)

Outline: (1) Outpouring of the Spirit (2:28-32), (2) Judgment of God's enemies (3:1-17), (3) Victory of God's people (3:18-21)

2:28-32 Peter's quotation of these few verses in Acts 2 makes Joel's statement here very profound and prophetic of the Messianic age. Verses 28-32 are very significant in reference to the work of the Holy Spirit in the coming ages at the conclusion of national Israel. The prophecy is a foundation upon which the activity of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament church would be defined. In Acts 2:16,17 Peter quoted this prophecy and made direct application of it to the Pentecost events of Acts 2:1-4. Therefore, Peter's reference to this prophecy introduces us to the significance of Joel's promise concerning the Holy Spirit. **Afterward:** In quoting this prophecy on the day of Pentecost in A. D. 30, Peter interpreted "afterward" to mean "last days," a reference to the last days of the Jewish commonwealth. The promise would be fulfilled after the return of the Jews from the dispersion of the Babylonian and Assyrian captivities. It would take place during the end of God's special work with the nation of Israel. The prophecy would find its fulfillment after the captivities

and after the almost four hundred years of Jewish history between the ministry of Malachi to the days of John the Baptist. The fulfillment of Joel's prophecy would signify the last days of physical Israel in the eyes of God. We must keep in mind that when Peter quoted this text, he said that the fulfillment happened "in the last days" (At 2:16). The outpouring, therefore, took place in the last days, not at the beginning of the last days. Since the prophecy referred to national Israel, then the "last days" would refer to the last days of Israel. **Pour out My Spirit:** Reference here was to the manner by which the Spirit would come or be given. "Pour out" is a figure of speech, a metaphor. We must not think of the Spirit being literally poured out on all flesh as water is poured out of a container. We must not interpret the manner by which the Spirit is to come upon all flesh in a literal sense. In view of the fact that the Spirit was already with Jesus throughout His ministry (Mt 3:16), and was with the apostles (Mt 10:19,20) before Acts 2, we would interpret the pouring out of the Spirit to refer to a time when men (the apostles) would be immersed in the will of the Spirit at the beginning of the age of the Spirit. The Spirit would come upon those whom He would inspire to accomplish the purpose for which He was poured out. In Joel 2 God's initiative was emphasized in contrast to man's ability or righteousness to warrant the reception of the Spirit. From the perspective of when Joel wrote, this outpouring would be something that God would do. It would not be something that men would

do in order to call upon God to take action. God was going to do something, but not something in response to the pleas or actions of man. In preparing the way for Israel to accept the crucifixion and the Acts 2 events, Zechariah prophesied that God would pour the Spirit out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Zc 12:10,11). In that day, the Lord said He would pour out His Spirit (Ez 39:29). God promised that He would pour out the Spirit on the descendants of Israel (Is 44:3; see 32:15). The outpouring of the Spirit would be accomplished in a day that God planned. It would be a specific event at a specific time. **All flesh:** It must first be understood that “all flesh” does not refer to both believers and unbelievers. We do not understand this from the prophecy itself. When considering the fulfillment of the prophecy, the “all flesh” applies first to the apostles, and then to “those who believe” (See comments Mk 16:15-20). In other words, the Spirit would first be poured out on the apostles. From the apostles, it would then go to all those who believe through the laying on of the apostles’ hands (See comments At 8:18). **Sons ... daughters ... old men ... young men:** In the context of Joel 2, what followed the statement of “all flesh” explains what was meant by the outpouring on all flesh. Sons and daughters, old men and young men, menservants and maidservants are included in the “all flesh.” The Spirit would not be poured out on a special class of prophets as in the Old Testament Jewish dispensation. He would not be given only to special men who were prophets

of the special Jewish people. He would be poured out on sons, daughters, old men, young men, male and female, servants and slaves of all people. The emphasis here was not so much that the Spirit would be given to every individual, but that He would be given to every class of individuals. The outpouring would be in contrast to how the Spirit was given during the Old Testament era. Under the Old Testament law, the Spirit was given to selected prophets who were a class of men and women by themselves (2 Kg 24:2; Hb 1:1). A time was coming, however, when even the lowest class of society (servants and slaves) would receive the Spirit as the esteemed prophets of the Old Testament. However, we would also assume that the Spirit would be a blessing to all those who believed, since all who obeyed the gospel would receive the Spirit (See comments At 2:38). **Will prophecy:** Not only would the outpouring be miraculous when the Joel 2 prophecy was fulfilled, the result of the outpouring would be miraculous. Prophecy was first the speaking forth of the word of God. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the definition of prophecy was the preaching of the word of God. However, in reference to inspired prophecy, the preaching or teaching of the word of God was by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1:20,21). The Old and New Testament prophets spoke by inspiration in view of the absence of the inspired written word of God that was preached and taught by uninspired New Testament prophets. In the context of the promise of Joel 2, inspired prophecy is

under consideration. The direct result of the outpouring would be manifested by the inspired work of prophecy by men and women after the outpouring. **Wonders:** Verses 30-32 of Joel 2 continue the prophecy of what God would do in the last days. The metaphors in these passages refer to the finality of the Jewish commonwealth. The fall of celestial bodies in prophetic literary language was used to figuratively portray the termination of earthly kingdoms (See Is 13:9,10; 34:4; Ml 4:1,5,6). The sun usually referred to the king of the nation. The moon and stars referred to the governors, generals and captains who received their power from the king. When a nation was to fall, the Old Testament prophets figuratively portrayed such by the fall of the sun, moon and stars. Joel did the same in reference to national Israel. He was prophesying of a time when the Jewish commonwealth would be terminated. The outpouring of the Spirit in the last days, therefore, was a signal of the end of national Israel in the eyes of God (See comments Gl 3:26-29). **The great and awesome day of the Lord:** The word "day" refers to the time when God would begin the end of national Israel. It was a great and awesome day for believers. It would be a sad day for those who would not be of those who believe. The "day of the Lord" would be a day of judgment for those who would not accept the results of the outpouring of the Spirit. **Will be delivered:** There is a possible double meaning to the deliverance of which mention is made in this statement. If we use the context of Joel 2 as the first hint

to understand the meaning, then the deliverance refers first to escaping an impending destruction. In the context of the fulfillment of the prophecy in the first century, this would be deliverance from the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. However, the physical deliverance of one's life from the destruction of Jerusalem depended on his obedience to the gospel, and being delivered from sin. When the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 took place, the early Christians experienced both deliverances (See comments Mt 24). Since they had obeyed the gospel, they were not in Jerusalem when the Roman army destroyed the city.

CHAPTER 3

JUDGMENT OF GOD'S ENEMIES

3:1-3 Bring again the captivity: The immediate promise would be to the restoration of Israel from the dispersion of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. **I will also gather all nations:** Though God gathered a remnant of national Israel out of the nations with the release of the captives by King Cyrus in 536 B.C., reference here seems to be to the gathering of spiritual Israel out of all nations through the preaching of the gospel. Reference would thus refer to the going forth of the gospel into all the world, and the obedience to the gospel by those in all nations (See comments Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16; At 8:4). **Valley of Jehoshaphat:** Some have assumed that reference here was to the Kidron Valley that is on the east side of Jerusalem. It was a place where many enemies of Israel fell in their efforts to destroy Jerusa-

lem, specifically the 185,000 men of the Assyrian army during the reign of Hezekiah. The emphasis here is symbolic in the sense that the valley signified a place where God brings judgment on those who have caused calamity to come upon His people. ***I will enter into judgment with them:*** God would contend for His people, and thus bring them forth out of all nations to which they had been taken captive. He could call physical Israel out of the nations through those who would lead captives back to Palestine (See comments Et & Ne). Through the gospel, He would in the fulfillment of this prophecy call out of the captivity of sin those who were in the bondage of sin (See comments 2 Th 2:14). ***Cast lots for My people:*** When the Israelites were taken into Assyrian and Babylonian captivity, their captors showed little consideration for the people.

3:4-8 This judgment is directed to the Philistines and Phoenicians, pagan nations that had dealt harshly with the children of Israel. They would be repaid for their participation in the calamities that came upon Israel. They had stolen the temple treasures of Israel and placed them in their pagan temples of false gods. They traded in slavery by selling Israelites to other nations. The very people to whom they had sold God's people, the Greeks, would eventually be the people who would conquer and sell them as slaves to other nations. When Alexander the Great of Greece conquered Tyre and Sidon, he plundered the cities. What the people of Tyre and Sidon had sowed, they reaped.

3:9-17 Judgment was coming on the

nations for the harm that they had caused the people of God. The nations were summoned to the Valley of Jehoshaphat in order that judgment might be rendered. The nations are thus summoned to a final battle, but their adversary would be the Lord. And because their battle would be against the Lord, their defeat was certain. ***Valley of decision:*** The valley of judgment. The nations were summoned by God to judgment. Since the nations were overflowing with wickedness, it was a time when God had decided to bring them down. Their destruction meant deliverance for the people of God. ***Sun and the moon will be darkened:*** This was judgment language, symbolizing the termination of the kings and rulers of the nations that came under the judgment of God. ***Lord... will roar:*** God roars as a lion to those who are enemies of His people (See 2:11; Jr 25:30; Am 1:2). However, He speaks of hope and strength to those who are His. When God carried out His judgment on the nations, the promise was that no conquering foreigners would pass through Jerusalem again. In the context, we would conclude that Joel was speaking of the new Jerusalem, and spiritual city of God, the church, that descended from heaven (See comments Rv 21). Since the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Syrian kings would pass through Jerusalem during the interbiblical period, we would conclude that Joel went beyond this period to the new Jerusalem, the church, that was established in A. D. 30 (See comments in intro. to Dn). No foreigner, unbeliever, would pass through the church.

VICTORY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

3:18-21 The enemies of God's people, symbolized by Egypt and Edom, would no longer affect them in their new dwelling with God. The enemies would become desolate, but the people of God would dwell in safety under the cleansing blood of the Messiah. The new

Jerusalem would continue into eternity, but the enemies of God's people would be avenged for their onslaught of wickedness against the work of God through His people. God would not acquit the wicked, but bring just judgment on them for their harm that they brought on His people.