

JOEL: THE REVELATION OF GOD'S HAND

by Ray C. Stedman

The little book of Joel is only three chapters long, and we should all read it. We ought to give ourselves to the reading of God's word, as the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and encouraged him to do. Now, while the prophecy of Hosea reveals the heart of God, the prophecy of Joel reveals the hand of God, the hand that controls destiny, the hand that moves history.

For centuries men have been looking for the principle upon which all the events of history turn, and ever since the dawn of history there have been many guesses about what that controlling principle is. Long ago, the great Greek philosophers came up with the idea that history moves in cycles; and a leading modern historian, Arnold Toynbee, agrees with that. Aristotle also said that history follows this kind of course. He said that first a tyrant rises, a man of iron, who seizes control of a nation or a group of people and rules until his dynasty ends. Then control gradually passes to a ruling family of aristocracy. And gradually their power deteriorates until control passes down to the people, and this is what he calls a democracy. But a democracy also deteriorates and gradually yields to the breakdown of all power, and anarchy ensues. Out of anarchy a tyrant again seizes control, and on goes the cycle of history. And there is a lot of truth in that theory.

Through the centuries other men have contributed guesses about the controlling principle of life. Thomas Jefferson thought it was political, and when he wrote the Declaration of Independence he incorporated that idea in the prologue -- that human governments recognize that certain inalienable rights are granted to men, and that to preserve these rights, governments are instituted among men. He felt that the forces that shape human history and form the nations of earth are political in nature.

Back in the last century, Karl Marx dipped his pen into the acid of his own embittered spirit and wrote the great work that has dramatically influenced our modern times. His idea was that the controlling force of history was economics, that it is the need to meet the material demands of life that shapes the course of history. He called this force dialectical materialism -- the principle of materialism arrived at through debate, through discussion of these issues. And this idea has so seized the minds of men today that all over the earth are millions who feel that economics is the controlling interest of life.

Others have said that the principle is sociological. H.G. Wells, for instance, was one of a great number of thinkers who said that evolution shapes the course of human destiny. It is often taught in schools today that behind all the events of human history recorded in our daily newspapers and by historians there is an evolutionary principle always trending higher and higher, making life better and better.

But the Bible says that all these are wrong. The Bible says that behind the whole course of human history is God. The hinge on which history turns is spiritual -- God's Spirit is at work among men, and you cannot understand human events if you do not first recognize that fact.

One of the most meaningful statements ever written in the scriptures and one of the most terrifying things that can ever be heard by men was said at the time of the flood when God told Noah, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever." (Gen. 6:3 NASV) And whenever that statement is uttered it means that judgment is at hand. For God's Spirit strives with man by patiently restraining evil so that human life can go on. God tries to win men to himself by holding back the destructive forces in human events. But at last God's patience reaches an end and there comes a time -- repeated throughout human history -- when God says either to an individual or to a nation, "My Spirit shall not always strive with men." And when he removes his Spirit -- the controlling force of life -- everything collapses. That is when catastrophe occurs and judgment strikes. And that is essentially the message of the book of Joel.

This young man Joel was a prophet to the kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom. He was probably a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We don't know much about Joel, but he was one of the most far-sighted men who have ever written, even in the pages of the word of God. Joel saw clear to the end of

human history, far past our own day to the final stages of God's dealing with human events; and he links it all to a great dramatic occurrence in his own day.

The book opens with his call to the people to consider a tremendous thing that has happened in that land. He says:

**Hear this, aged men, give ear,
all inhabitants of the land! {Joel 1:2a RSV}**

Whenever I read that it always reminds me of my days in the Navy. Whenever the Navy made an important announcement, it always began, "Now hear this." And that is the way Joel begins:

**Hear this ...
Has such a thing happened in your days,
or in the days of your fathers?
Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children another generation. {Joel 1:2-3 RSV}**

There is going to be an event of such transcending importance that people will be talking about it for years and years to come. And what is Joel talking about? Well, he is talking about the great day of the Lord. Back in World War II we talked about the coming of D-Day, and then V-J Day; we were looking forward to the end of the war, calling it the day. Well, God has a day, what he calls the day of the Lord, and it was given to Joel to describe this great day.

Now the day of the Lord is not just one event in human history. We will find in this prophecy that the day of the Lord is any event in which God moves in judgment, at any time. But judgment is also culminating and building up into cycles to the great and terrible day of the Lord of which Joel speaks in chapters 2 and 3.

The great and terrible day of the Lord is that period described by the Lord Jesus Christ as a time when there will be tribulation as has never been seen since the creation of the world, nor ever will be. And it was given to the prophet Joel to see across the intervening centuries of time, and to describe it, and to illustrate it by events taking place in his own day.

Now the event that had occurred in his day was an invasion of locusts. I wonder if you have ever seen an invasion of locusts. I was in Minnesota years and years ago when there was an invasion of grasshoppers -- insects very similar to locusts -- and I can still remember how the sky was literally darkened by the great cloud of these insects. You could hear them descending into the standing grain of the fields like hail upon the ground, and there was a continual rustling of the noise of their wings as you walked through the fields. Within moments after they lit upon a field, every blade of grass, every bit of vegetation was gone, and the fields were left as though they had never been planted. That is what happened in Israel. A locust horde had descended upon the land and devoured every living thing. The crops were all ruined and a famine had come. And Joel is calling their attention to this event. They hardly needed that under those conditions. Everyone certainly was aware of what was happening -- but what they didn't see was where it came from.

Joel says to them, "God is behind this." He describes how "the fields are laid waste, the ground mourns because the grain is destroyed" (1:10), and then he says:

**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.
Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. {Joel 1:14-15 RSV}}**

God is behind this. This didn't just happen. This isn't just one of those freaks of nature. This happened in obedience to the command of God, working through the natural laws that govern human life, and there is a lesson for us in this. "Don't fail to heed the lesson," this prophet says, "for if you learn the lesson now -- this minor-league example of the day of the Lord -- you will save yourself the awful heartache that will come at last in the great and terrible day of the Lord." Joel is simply pointing out that God's hand is allowing catastrophes like this to occur to make people aware of the spiritual background to life. Life is not merely a cycle of eating and drinking and getting money to do so. For behind all the commonplace things of life there is the controlling hand of the Spirit of God. Man needs to wake up to the fact that God is talking to him, that God has something to say to him. God wants to bless man but man will not listen. That is the problem. And God shakes him up with something to make him listen. Has that ever happened to you? Has God ever done anything to you, as you were complacently eating your Wheaties and doing fine, that made you suddenly aware? Perhaps some terrible thing happened to make you realize that things weren't as good as you thought they were; you began to listen, realizing that there was something you needed to hear. This is what God did in the first chapter of Joel.

In chapter 2 the prophet leaps over a great span of time to the end days, using this invasion of the locusts as a picture of the invasion by a great army into the land of Israel in the last days. Only by examining the whole stream of prophecy together can we detect that Joel is speaking of the future. Anyone taking this book by itself would never notice any difference, except that the prophet is now describing the invasion by an army of men instead of by an army of insects. But he goes on to describe this. and again he calls it the day of the Lord:

**Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near,
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. {Joel 2:1b-2 RSV}**

That sounds familiar, doesn't it? Again, that is the language that the Lord Jesus used. "It will be a time of trouble," he says. "such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no. and never will be." (Matt. 24:21) Then the prophet describes how the land is scorched behind them as this great army advances, and he describes the army itself: "Their appearance is like the appearance of horses." (2:4) Now fear grips the hearts of the people as they see this invading host drawn up for battle. Nothing can resist them. Nothing can stop them in their march. The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. And then we come to a very significant passage:

**The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining. {Joel 2:10 RSV}**

Now anyone who spends time with the prophetic passages of Scripture soon learns to look for interpretational landmarks. Certain prophetic symbols occur again and again throughout various books of prophecy to give you a landmark so that you know where you are. This darkening of the sun and the moon and the stars withdrawing their light, is one of these landmarks. You remember that this is also part of Jesus' great discourse on the Mount of Olives. He refers to this time when the sun shall be darkened and the moon will not give light and turn to blood and the stars will fall from heaven. (Matt. 24:29) It appears also in the book of Daniel. It appears in Isaiah. It appears in the book of Revelation. It appears in several places throughout Scripture and it always marks the same event in human history. It is an interpretational landmark pointing to the last days before what is called the great and terrible day of the Lord. This section, then, seems to describe the invasion of Israel that is also foretold and described by the prophet Ezekiel in chapters 38 and 39 -- a great army invades the land from the north and, sweeping down across the land, destroys everything there and captures the city of Jerusalem.

But God promises that this northern army will be dealt with in that land. Isaiah says so. Ezekiel says so. Daniel says so. Now Joel, also, adds his voice to the chorus of prophets and God reveals the purpose behind

this great invasion:

**"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."
Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and repents of evil.
Who knows whether he will not turn and repent,
and leave a blessing behind him, ... {Joel 2:12-14a RSV}**

After all, God does not delight in judgment. That isn't what he is after. He never enjoys judging anyone. What he seeks is a heart that will listen to him, heed him, and open the door for the blessings that God wants to pour in. In order to get that person or nation to listen and turn, God will permit all kinds of harsh things to obstruct their wayward path. But all he is after is that repentant heart. "Rend your hearts and not your garments."

When we see God dealing with us like this it is so easy to think, "Well, even if I won't give in inwardly, at least I can outwardly." Most of us are like that, aren't we? We are so like the little boy whose mother told him, "Now sit down!" But he wouldn't sit down. She said again, "Sit down!" And he said, "I won't." So she grabbed him by the shoulders and sat him down in the chair. Then he looked up at her defiantly and said, "I'm sitting down outside, but I'm standing up inside!"

Do you ever do that? Do you rend your garments but not your hearts? God says, "Don't try to fool me with your outside self. I'm not interested in that. Don't bother with hypocritical attitudes and actions. They don't impress me in the least. I want to see the heart rent." That is the thing. God is utterly unimpressed by our hypocrisy. We may fool others. We can even fool ourselves. But we don't fool him. Unless our heart is really rent before him, torn garments mean nothing. The prophet says:

**Then the Lord became jealous for his land,
and had pity on his people. {Joel 2:18 RSV}**

And at last God says:

**"I will remove the northerner far from you,
and drive him into a parched and desolate land,
his front into the eastern sea, [i.e., the Dead Sea]
and his rear into the western sea; [the Mediterranean]
the stench and foul smell of him will rise,
for he has done great things." {Joel 2:20 RSV}**

You can compare this with the prophecy in Ezekiel 38 and 39 -- the destruction of the invading armies on the mountains of Israel in the wilderness of Judea. It is the very same event.

Something that happens frequently in prophecy now occurs. After leaping over this great span of years to the end days, the prophet returns to the event of the present hour -- the locust plague in the land. He tells the people that just as God in that great future day will deliver his people and drive away the northern armies, so today, in this present catastrophe, he will restore the land from its barren condition and its desolation.

**"Fear not, O land;
be glad and rejoice,
for the Lord has done great things!
Fear not, you beasts of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green; ..." {Joel 2:21-22a RSV}**

And in beautiful language he describes the restoration of the land:

**"The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil." {Joel 2:24 RSV}**

And God promises,

**"I will restore to you the years
which the swarming locust has eaten, ..." {Joel 2:25a RSV}**

I will never forget the agony in the eyes of a young man who a number of years ago looked at me and said, "You know, I've become a Christian and it's wonderful. But when I think back to what I've missed and the years of my life that I've wasted, my heart gets sick remembering it. If I'd only had the sense to come to the Lord before I did all those terrible things." And I had the joy of being able to say to him, "Son, God says, 'I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten.'" That is God's promise. He will make up for the barrenness of our lives when we turn back to him.

**"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.
"You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God..." {Joel 2:25-26a RSV}**

And so it happened in Israel.

But now, as is often the case with these prophets, Joel suddenly leaps ahead again and he writes the great passage that the apostle Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost. That was a dramatic day. Suddenly a rushing, mighty wind visited the Christians as they gathered in the courts of the temple, and tongues of fire burst out over every head, and they began to speak in tongues. Gathered around them was a great multitude of people, who watched these Christians and heard them praising God in various languages. These people, who had come from all parts of the earth, said to themselves, "What is this? Here are these simple Galilean fishermen talking to us in our own tongues and praising God. What does it all mean? Why, these men must be drunk! I never saw anyone act like this before." At that moment Peter stood up; led of the Spirit of God, he said to them, "Men and brethren, these are not drunk as you supposed, seeing it is but the third hour (i.e., 9 a.m.) of the day. It is too early to get drunk. But this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel." (Acts 2:14-16)

Then he quoted this passage:

**"And it shall come to pass afterward [that is, after God has restored the land of Israel and given back the years that the locusts have eaten.],
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.
Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days,
I will pour out my spirit." {Joel 2:28-28 RSV}**

"And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And It shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered; ..." {Joel 2:30-32a RSV}

And here Peter ended his quotation. Now what is all this about? Well, here is the prophet Joel. He has already seen beyond to the time of the invasion of Israel. And now he sees something different, a mystery still somewhat undefined to his vision. He says that following Israel's restoration there is going to be an indeterminate period when God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, when no distinctions will be made between classes or ranks of people, when even servants, menservants, and maidservants shall speak as the voice of God. They shall speak the word of God, as God pours out his Spirit upon all kinds of men everywhere.

Now we don't have to remain in doubt, do we, as to what he was talking about? We know what that day is. It is the day of the Spirit in which we live, the day which began on Pentecost when God first poured out his Spirit; and that Spirit is being poured out throughout this whole age. Peter also quotes Joel concerning the sign of the end of that age, "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord shall come." That is the end of the age. We have the sign of the beginning and the sign of the end. No man knows how long this age will last. but during this time God is pouring out his Spirit without distinction among men. The age of the Spirit is the age in which we are living.

In chapter 3 the prophet returns to the end times and beyond. Other prophets as well had spoken on this matter. All that he sees of the age of the Spirit is the great mark of the Spirit's presence: but beyond that he sees that God will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem:

"I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat [of judgment] and I will enter into judgment with them there, ..." {Joel 3:2a RSV}

Jesus said, "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him...Before him will be gathered all the nations" (Matt. 25:31, 32), and then the Son of man shall judge them and shall say to the righteous, as a man divides the sheep from the goats, "Come and enter into the inheritance of my Father," and to the unrighteous, "Depart from me." This is the valley of judgment. In preparation for this God instructs the nations of the world with amazing words, startling words:

**Proclaim this among the nations:
Prepare war,
stir up the mighty men.
Let all the men of war draw near,
let them come up.
Beat your plowshares into swords,
and your pruning hooks into spears; ...** {Joel 3:9-10a RSV}

Did you know that the Bible says this? Many times you have heard quoted, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks." This is found in the third chapter of Micah; but in Joel quite the opposite is said. And Joel's prophecy comes first; the fulfillment of Joel's prediction comes first. That is why nations are at war. This is what God is saying to the nations today. And they will remain at war in one way or another until God says, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks." Just as Jesus said "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars... nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matt. 24:6-7), and so it shall be until the end. This is what Joel says.

Then we come to another verse that is often quoted:

**Multitudes, multitudes
in the valley of decision!
For the day of the LORD is near
in the valley of decision.
The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining [again, that familiar landmark].** {Joel 3:14-15 RSV}

This is the great and terrible day of the Lord that is to come. What does this mean "Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision"? I have heard many evangelistic messages on this passage that present a picture of many thousands waiting in the moment of decision, hanging between the choice of heaven and hell. Perhaps it is justifiable to interpret it that way, but that isn't what this verse means. It isn't man's decision that is talked about here -- it is God's. God will enter the valley of decision and the multitudes of the nations will be gathered before him. All the world will be there on this judgment day:

**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 3:16 RSV}

Now that is the day of the Lord -- the final day of judgment of the living nations of earth at the return of Jesus Christ -- and the effect will be as the prophet describes it:

**"So you shall know that I am the Lord your God,
who dwell in Zion, my holy mountain.
And Jerusalem shall be holy ..." {Joel 3:17a RSV}**

After all, that is what God is always seeking. Because that is what he desires for you, God deals with you in judgment. When things begin to go wrong with you, it is God's way of saying to you, "Look, you are not your own boss. You are not your own. You are bought with a price. I am God." He is waiting for you to realize that he is God -- not you. You don't have the right to run your own life. You don't have the right to do with your life whatever you please. He alone has that right.

**"And Jerusalem shall be holy
and strangers shall never again pass through it." {Joel 3:17 RSV}**

The final scene is a beautiful one:

**"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." {Joel 3:18 RSV}**

Water is always a picture of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said. "He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:38) -- rivers of blessing to satisfy man's thirsty soul.

You see, the future is in God's hands. It isn't in men's hands. If it were, we would make a mess of it. It isn't in the Devil's hands. If it were, we would be on our way to destruction -- everyone, without fail. The blind principle of historical determinism isn't guiding the future. If it were, there would be no meaning to life. The future is in the hands of one who is preparing something that eye has never seen and ear has never heard. Neither has it ever entered into the heart of man, the wonderful things that God is preparing for those who love him. I believe that.

Every moment that God deals with us in judgment, he is capturing our attention, waking us up. Through these difficult things. God in grace is simply saying to us, "Look and listen. Stop and wait. Pay attention now, so that you will be ready for the great things yet to come." There is truth from time to time in some of the words of the poets, you know. I always love these words by Robert Browning, but the words of Scripture give them a new meaning:

Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for giving us this picture of life and for invisibly guiding the affairs of men, the destinies both of nations and individuals. Grant to us, young and old alike, the wisdom to listen to you and to turn back from going our own way. Help us to yield our hands and hearts and lives to the one who loves us, who has given himself for us, and who is preparing us for a future so unbelievably wonderful that it takes our breath away. We thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

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