

Joel 1:1–20 – A Call to Wake Up

The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel. (Joel 1:1)

The book of Joel opens simply. We do not know much about Joel's background beyond this: he is "*the son of Pethuel.*" History does not tell us who Pethuel was, but that is not the point. The emphasis is on this: "*the word of the Lord... came to Joel.*" God took hold of this man, filled him with His message, and sent him to speak to Judah, the southern kingdom.

Joel probably ministered around the same time as Elisha in the northern kingdom. In those days there were "schools of the prophets," where men who were called to speak for God were trained and encouraged. Joel would likely have been familiar with Elisha and his ministry. But Scripture does not linger on Joel's résumé. What matters is the message.

A Devastating Locust Plague

Joel chapter 1 begins with a very real, very recent disaster: an overwhelming **locust plague** that stripped the land bare.

*Hear this, you elders,
And give ear, all you inhabitants of the land.
Has anything like this happened in your days,
Or even in the days of your fathers?
Tell your children about it,
Let your children tell their children,
And their children another generation. (Joel 1:2–3)*

Joel is saying, in effect: "You elders—those who have seen a lot—have you ever seen anything like this?" This was not a normal bad year; it was a catastrophe that old men could not remember and that future generations needed to hear about.

*What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten;
What the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten;
And what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten. (Joel 1:4)*

The English text lists four terms—chewing locust, swarming locust, crawling locust, consuming locust. These likely refer to different stages of the same insect rather than four different species. From early stages to full development, the locusts consumed everything. One wave after another came through, leaving nothing behind.

This literal devastation becomes, in Joel's hands, a picture of deeper spiritual realities and a springboard to speak of a coming day when the land, and indeed the world, will face God's righteous judgment in a far more ultimate way.

Passing the Story On – God’s Design for the Home

Joel instructs the people:

*Tell your children about it,
Let your children tell their children,
And their children another generation. (Joel 1:3)*

In ancient Israel, history was often passed down orally. Fathers and mothers would recount God’s works and the nation’s failures to their children, who in turn would tell their children. God designed the home to be the primary place where the knowledge of God was to be transmitted from one generation to the next. A priority that we should observe today.

Israel’s feasts and memorials were built around this pattern:

- At the Feast of Tabernacles, families moved into temporary shelters made of branches. When children asked, “Why are we doing this?” parents would tell them how God provided for Israel during forty years in the wilderness.
- At Passover, children were taught to ask, “What makes this night different from all other nights?” That question opened the door for parents to recount how God delivered Israel from Egypt.

Even the pile of stones by the Jordan River had a teaching purpose:

“When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, ‘What are these stones?’ then you shall let your children know...” (see Joshua 4:21–22)

God intended that the stories of His faithfulness and His mighty works would be normal conversation in the home.

Today, much of that has been lost. Entertainment, screens, and constant noise have crowded out simple, meaningful conversation. Families can sit in the same room with no real heart-to-heart interaction. But Joel’s words are still needed: tell your children. Rehearse the ways God has worked in your life. Talk about answered prayer, His provision, His guidance, and how He brought you to trust in Jesus.

The First to Feel It: The Drunkards and the Worshipers

*Awake, you drunkards, and weep;
And wail, all you drinkers of wine,
Because of the new wine,
For it has been cut off from your mouth. (Joel 1:5)*

The locust plague appears to have begun around the time of the grape harvest, the last major harvest of the year. When the locusts struck, the vineyards were stripped. There was no new wine. Those who lived for wine and pleasure were the first to feel the shock. Their comfort was suddenly gone.

In Judah's society, drunkenness had become a serious problem, and many of the prophets address it. Joel confronts it here: the pleasure you thought you could depend on has vanished in a moment.

Then he turns to another group.

*The grain offering and the drink offering
Have been cut off from the house of the Lord;
The priests mourn, who minister to the Lord. (Joel 1:9)*

Because the fields were stripped, there was no grain for the grain offering and no wine for the drink offering in the temple. The public worship of God was interrupted. It is one thing when luxury is taken away; it is more serious when worship itself is hindered. The locusts, in a sense, reached all the way into the temple.

Joel then describes the total ruin:

*The field is wasted,
The land mourns;
For the grain is ruined,
The new wine is dried up,
The oil fails.
Be ashamed, you farmers,
Wail, you vinedressers...
Because the harvest of the field has perished. (Joel 1:10–11)*

Grain, wine, oil, figs, pomegranates, palms, apples—every source of food and joy was affected.

Surely joy has withered away From the sons of men. (Joel 1:12)

The land is dry, the animals are suffering, and the people's joy has evaporated.

A Call to Humble Prayer

In light of this, Joel calls the spiritual leaders and the people to a specific response:

*Gird yourselves and lament, you priests;
Wail, you who minister before the altar;
Come, lie all night in sackcloth,
You who minister to my God;
For the grain offering and the drink offering
Are withheld from the house of your God.
Consecrate a fast,
Call a sacred assembly;
Gather the elders
And all the inhabitants of the land
Into the house of the Lord your God,
And cry out to the Lord. (Joel 1:13–14)*

When the land is in crisis, God does not first call His people to political strategy or clever programs. He calls them to humble fasting, gathered prayer, and heartfelt repentance. The priests—the leaders of worship—are called to set the example by lamenting and seeking God.

From Present Crisis to Coming Judgment: The Day of the Lord

Then Joel lifts his eyes from the present locust disaster to a future day of judgment:

Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is at hand;
It shall come as destruction from the Almighty. (Joel 1:15)

The Day of the Lord in Scripture is a phrase that describes a season when God acts in a decisive, public way to judge evil and to bring about His righteous purposes. Joel uses the locust plague—a visible, unforgettable crisis—as a foreshadowing of a greater, world-shaking time of judgment yet to come.

In that future day, there will be upheavals in nature, the collapse of human pride, and severe disruptions in the ordinary systems people rely on—food, economy, security. The book of Revelation, in its own imagery, speaks of famine, war, plague, and cosmic disturbances. Whatever interpretive details believers may differ on, the central message is clear: God will not ignore human rebellion forever.

Joel's point is not to satisfy curiosity about timelines but to shake people awake: if God can strip the land bare with one locust plague, He can and will bring final judgment on unrepentant evil.

Not All Suffering Is the Same—but All Should Drive Us to God

There is a difference between the ordinary tribulations believers face now and the climactic judgment that Scripture describes. Followers of Jesus are not promised escape from hardship; in fact, Jesus said:

“In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

We may face opposition, persecution, sickness, and loss, sometimes directly because we follow Christ. These sufferings come in a world broken by sin and stirred up by spiritual opposition.

But the final, worldwide judgment that Joel hints at and Revelation portrays is something deeper: it is the settled, righteous response of a holy God to persistent, unrepentant evil. It is not random cruelty; it is justice. And yet, even in warning of judgment, God speaks in order to invite people to return to Him before that day arrives.

Joel's Personal Cry

Joel himself cries out:

Is not the food cut off before our eyes,
Joy and gladness from the house of our God?
The seed shrivels under the clods,
Storehouses are in shambles;

*Barns are broken down,
For the grain has withered.
How the animals groan!
The herds of cattle are restless,
Because they have no pasture;
Even the flocks of sheep suffer punishment.
O Lord, to You I cry out;
For fire has devoured the open pastures,
And a flame has burned all the trees of the field.
The beasts of the field also cry out to You,
For the water brooks are dried up,
And fire has devoured the open pastures. (Joel 1:16–20)*

Joel does not stand at a distance analyzing the suffering of others. He enters into it and cries out to the Lord. The land is scorched, the animals are starving, and the rivers are dry. The whole creation seems to groan. Joel turns that groaning into prayer.

Practical Application for Believers

Joel 1 presses several questions onto our hearts:

1. How does God get our attention?

Sometimes God allows or uses crises—personal, family, national—to shake us out of complacency. Have you experienced a “locust season” where it seemed everything was stripped away? Joel reminds us: do not waste that season. Let it drive you to God, not away from Him.

2. What are we passing on to the next generation?

Are we telling our children and grandchildren about the living God—His faithfulness, His discipline, His mercy, His Son Jesus Christ? Or have we let entertainment and distraction replace real conversations about the things that matter most?

3. Where has joy withered in your life?

Joel says, “*Surely joy has withered away from the sons of men.*” If your joy has dried up, it may be time to examine where your trust and your priorities are anchored. When our joy is rooted in comfort, possessions, or pleasure, locusts—of one kind or another—will eventually strip it away. When our joy is rooted in Christ, even in tears we can still say, “*The joy of the Lord is my strength.*”

4. Will we humble ourselves?

God calls the priests, the elders, and all the people to fast, assemble, and cry out to Him. As believers, we are called to respond to crisis not with cynicism or despair, but with humble, persistent prayer. This may mean setting aside time to fast, turning off the noise, gathering with others to seek God’s face, and confessing sin honestly before Him.

A Challenge for Believers

Joel's message challenges every follower of Jesus:

- Are you awake, or spiritually groggy?
- Are you more shaped by constant digital entertainment or distraction—whether TV, social media, scrolling, gaming, or online noise—or by Scripture and prayer?
- Are you willing to let God use loss, disruption, or disappointment to deepen your dependence on Him?

The cross of Jesus Christ reminds us how seriously God takes sin and how deep His love runs. Jesus shed His blood on the cross to bear our sin, and His resurrection declares that He is God, Savior, and Lord. That same risen Lord calls His people to live awake, watchful, repentant, and hopeful as we wait for His final renewal of all things.

An Invitation to Non-Believers

If you do not yet know Jesus, Joel's first chapter is not just a history lesson; it is a warning and an invitation.

God is holy, and He will judge evil. But He is also merciful and patient. The greatest act of His mercy was sending His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world:

- Jesus lived a sinless life.
- He willingly went to the cross, where He shed His blood to pay the penalty for our sins.
- He rose again from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

God now calls all people everywhere to turn from sin and trust in His Son. You do not have to wait for a "locust plague" in your own life to respond. You can come to Him now.

If you sense Him drawing you, you can pray something like this:

*"Lord God,
I acknowledge that I have sinned against You.
I cannot save myself.
I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sins,
and that He rose again to give me new life.
Please forgive me, cleanse me, and make me new.
I surrender my life to You as my Lord and Savior.
Teach me to follow You from this day forward.
In Jesus' name, Amen."*

The words themselves are not magic, but if they express the desire of your heart, God hears. The same God who spoke through Joel now offers you forgiveness, new life, and a living hope in Jesus Christ.