

Unexpected Answers from an Expected Source: What Joel Teaches About Natural Disasters, and What We Can Learn About Opening Our Bibles

By Patrick Swayne

Christians generally believe Peter when he claims that God’s “divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).¹ Further, conservative Christians believe that God has provided “all things” through an all sufficient word (2 Timothy 3:16-17). However, even conservative Christians rarely treat the Bible as if it contains the kind of information that Peter’s statement implies. Too often, Christians are left genuinely stumped when looking for information that God has freely provided. Part of the issue is what can only be described as illiteracy among Christians as relates to large portions of God’s Book and in particular the Old Testament.

For example, to what portion of Scripture ought a Christian to turn in a time of natural disaster? If asked this question, the average Christian might cite Romans 5 or James 1. These passages do deal generally with trials and suffering, but do not specifically address a widespread calamity. If told to give an answer from the Old Testament, Christians might offer the book of Job. However, this is probably only because they “have heard of the steadfastness of Job” in trials and little else as relates to the book (James 5:11). Too few realize that there is a book of the Bible written with a natural disaster as its backdrop.

INTRODUCING THE MESSAGE OF JOEL

Joel is often called the prophet of Pentecost due to the quotation of a small portion of his book by Peter (cf. Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21). However, that portion is not really the focal point of Joel’s message. Instead, Joel wrote to offer an inspired interpretation of a natural disaster that had befallen Israel. His prophetic writing can be divided in half by considering who is speaking: in the first half, the prophet Joel speaks for God (Joel 1:2-2:18); in the second half, God speaks for Himself (2:19-3:21). God’s speech assumes Israel has responded favorably to Joel’s speech and thus contains no real call to action besides a challenge to Israel’s enemies (3:9-12). By examining Joel’s speech, New Testament audiences can find some principles to carry into natural disasters today.

BREAKING DOWN JOEL’S SPEECH (1:2-2:18)

After a typical prophetic introduction (1:1), Joel calls the people to take note of what has just happened – a locust plague so intense that even the oldest members of the nation had not seen its like (1:2-4). Joel examines the impact of the plague: the alcoholics have no wine as there are no grapes (1:5-7); the priests have nothing to offer to the Lord (and also have nothing for themselves) (1:8-9); the farmers have no olives, grapes, or grain to tend (1:10-11); the fruit crops are entirely gone and with them the happiness of the nation (1:12). The call of Joel in response to this calamity is for the people to mourn, fast, and cry out to the Lord (1:13-14).

¹ All Scripture quoted is taken from the ESV Bible unless otherwise noted.

Joel's speech introduces a dangerous reality – as difficult as the locust plague has already been, the day of the Lord was near – a day of “destruction from the Almighty” (1:15). The proof that they were on the eve of such a day was in the state of the farmland which the prophet again describes (1:16-18) as well as in the wildfires and drought which accompanied the locust plague (1:19-20). The prophet then describes the realities of the potential day of the Lord yet to come – it will be a day far worse than anything the nation had already suffered (2:1-2). Evidently, a literal locust plague was sent by God to prefigure the attack of a mighty army which the prophet describes in vivid terms (2:3-10).² The literal locusts and accompanying drought and wildfires had left many Israelites alive, but when this day came, the prophet asks, “Who can endure it?” (2:11).

Thankfully, God did not commission the prophet Joel to preach a message of doom without preaching a message of potential hope. The Lord even gave Joel a beautiful promise to convey to the people. Quoting the Lord, Joel says, “‘Yet even now [...] return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments,’” (2:12-13). With that promise in his heart, the prophet renews the calls for repentance he began in chapter 1. Specifically, he calls for the people to “return to the LORD,” “consecrate a fast,” and “gather the people” together for a “solemn assembly” featuring fervent prayer led by the priests (2:14-17). Joel's speech ends on a positive note that implies that the people did as the prophet instructed while at the same time highlighting the power of the behavior which the prophet enjoined: “Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people” (2:18). As happened in Nineveh after the preaching of Jonah, so too happened in Israel – the behavior of the Israelites produced by repentance averted the day of the Lord.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

New Testament audiences sometimes need help in understanding the Old Testament use of the phrase “the day of the LORD.” For Christians, the phrase conjures up thoughts of Christ's triumphant return to defeat death and usher in eternity (e.g. 2 Peter 3:10-12). However, a simple study of the phrase as used throughout the Bible will reveal many contexts where the phrase is used but where the Second Coming of Christ is not referenced. A working definition of the phrase as it is used throughout the Bible regardless of context is, “An indefinite period of time during which God's power is manifested, either providentially or miraculously, either for blessing or for cursing.” In the case of Joel, a study of the five times the phrase is used will reveal that the repentance of Israel averted a “day” of providential cursing (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11) and prompted God to promise a “day” of miraculous blessing (2:31, i.e. Pentecost) as well as a “day” of providential cursing for Israel's enemies (3:14). Understanding the day of the Lord in Joel is not merely an academic exercise; it is a further illustration of the power of the behavior Joel prescribed in 1:13-14 and 2:12-17.

² Opinions on the “locusts” and the “day of the Lord” of Joel are legion. Scholars debate as to whether the “locusts” of chapter 1 are literal or figurative, whether chapter 2 describes the locusts or a literal army, and whether the “day of the Lord” of chapter 2 in Joel's speech has happened or is yet to come. While I do not seek to set myself above others who might think differently, I believe a straightforward reading of the text lends the facts as I have presented them.

THE LIVING LESSONS OF THE TEXT

If the Bible truly does contain “all things that pertain to life and godliness,” then it seems natural that in a time of natural disaster Christians would turn to the book of Joel. Of course, it is impossible for Christians today to know whether or not a disaster is a matter of “time and chance” or whether a disaster has in fact been sent to enact Divine discipline (Ecclesiastes 9:11; Hebrews 12:5-11). Christians have no Joel of their own to interpret what they see or to offer Divine guidance. However, if Joel does not provide *any* advice during these times which so dominate human existence, what book does?

In applying this text, Christians should to respond to natural disasters with introspection on a congregational level. There can be no harm in doing so – Christians are encouraged to practice self-examination (e.g. 2 Corinthians 13:5). Also, it may very well be that such an exercise would leave a body of believers confident of their place in the Lord, which in turn would help them to face trials (James 1:2-4).

If sin is discovered, then the congregation ought to behave as if a natural disaster has in fact come because of Divine discipline, particularly if members of the congregation have been affected by the disaster. Christians ought to remember that “the Lord knows those who are His,” and that He “knows how to rescue the godly from trials” (2 Timothy 2:19; 2 Peter 2:9). Again, Christians cannot pretend to know why God has done what He has done without Divine guidance. However, when sin is found in the body, Christians ought to avoid doing as so many do by blaming the community, the country, or God Himself. Joel did not blame the Canaanites or God for the locust plague; he put the blame on God’s people.

The behavior of a congregation after a period of self-examination would be guided by Joel’s instructions to Israel (Joel 1:13-14 and 2:12-17). Namely, they would need to repent from the heart as motivated by godly sorrow, to fast³, and to gather together congregationally to pray specifically for their sin(s), for the crisis to be averted, and for the recovery to begin. Even if sin is not present among the church, fasting and prayer are good behaviors! God’s people have forgotten the power of communal fasting and prayer – which again highlights why Joel’s message is so needed for modern audiences.

CONCUSION

God’s message does in fact contain “all things that pertain to life and godliness.” Christians simply need to treat it that way! Joel’s message teaches us that regardless of whatever crisis God’s people might face, the Bible provides man a roadmap to guide man away from sin and towards acceptable behavior. May Christians everywhere strive to give more attention to more of the Bible more often!

³ Christians are quick to reject congregational fasting. Certainly we have no authority to command such behavior. However, we have examples of congregational fasting in Scripture (e.g. Acts 13:2-3; 14:23) and a sort of expectation that fasting will occur among Christians (e.g. Matthew 6:16-18; 9:15; 1 Corinthians 7:5).