

“All the Prophets Testify”: Joel

Midweek Bible Study – 2025 August 20

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<https://www.pilgrimlc.org/bible-studies/prophets>

Invocation & Opening Prayer

“Isagogics” (Introductory matters prior to “exegesis”, the explanation or interpretation of the text):

Who: God inspired the book through the prophet Joel (“Yahweh is God”), the son of Pethuel (1:1). *CSSB* suggests that the prophet Joel should not be identified with twelve other Old Testament figures named “Joel” and that the non-Biblical legends about the prophet are “unconvincing”.

What: Three-chapter book of prophecy largely in poetry but also in prose. Keil-Delitzsch refers to “a connected prophetic proclamation, which is divided into two equal halves”.

When: *TLSB* p.529 puts Joel in Joash’s reign (835-796 BC); p.1082 says only 9th century BC; p.1447 says after Jehoshaphat’s reign (873-848 BC) or later; confer p.1448’s “Historical Context”. Keil-Delitzsch call Joel “one of the earliest of the twelve minor prophets” and think of the first 30 years of the reign of Joash as the period of Joel’s ministry. (Laetsch p.112 is similar, thinking Joel one of the earliest, following close upon Obadiah, though we are putting Obadiah later.)

Where: *TLSB* p.529 puts Joel in the southern kingdom of Judah; p.1447 notes places including Jerusalem (Judah’s capital) and the Valley of Jehoshaphat (“Valley where Yahweh judged”, place to which the Lord summons the nations for judgment in 3:2 and 12, said traditionally to be the Kidron Valley but probably symbolic, perhaps drawing on events during Jehoshaphat’s reign).

Why: *TLSB* p.1447 says “To call for fasting and repentance before the day of the Lord, depicted by a plague of locusts and a coming battle.”

How: *TLSB* p.1447 notes the following:

Law Themes: Punishment brought by locusts; the day of darkness; fasting and mourning; judgment of the nations. (We might note that, if “fasting” is “repentance”, understood as “sorrow” and “faith”, then such repentance depends on the Gospel creating the “faith” and being its object.)

Gospel Themes: Grace and mercy for the repentant; consecration; the gift of the Spirit; a harvest of blessings; refuge from enemies.

TLSB p.1448 “Plague of Locusts” discusses whether Joel refers literal to a plague of locusts or whether he refers figuratively to invading armies such as those of the Assyrians or Babylonians, and the paragraph indicates that “the notes treat the prophecy as a warning about an actual locust plague, which the prophet used as a picture of Judgment Day.” (Fresh from studying Revelation, we might reflect on locusts there and remember that the historical sequence of the books is reversed.)

CSSB p.1342 refers to linguistic parallels with Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and notes that the relationships of the books are in part determined by their dating, though others see all the prophets’ drawing from religious traditions shared with their hearers/readers. (We might mention the Holy Spirit as the common inspirer.)

Outline: After the superscription in 1:1, *TLSB* p.1448 has the following major points:

- I. Catastrophes Current and Coming (1:2-2:17)
 - A. The Current Catastrophe: The Locust Plague (1:2-20)
 - B. The Coming Catastrophe: The Day of the Lord (2:1-17)
- II. The Lord's Response (2:18-3:21)
 - A. To the Locust Plague: Healing and Restoration (2:18-27)
 - B. To the Coming Day of the Lord (2:28-3:21)

Superscription: 1:1

The word of the Lord that came: *CSSB* notes the claim to prophetic authority's being similar to other prophets'. *TLSB* discusses various ways God used to inspire His prophets and that regardless of how it came to Joel it is God's Word, even through imperfect men still a perfectly reliable revelation. (Allen discusses a process of recognition of Joel's authority.)
Joel, the son of Pethuel: *TLSB* notes that nothing else is known about Pethuel.

The Current Catastrophe: The Locust Plague (1:2-20 [the *TLSB* subdivisions are not absolute]):

1:2 *you elders:* the term can be for those with an office of authority but here seems to be simply the old ones, who could attest to the lack of precedent for what is coming (confer/compare 1:14 and *TLSB* in both places; *CSSB* says "either", and Roehrs-Franzmann thinks both; see further below at 1:14).

all inhabitants of the land: poetic parallelism in some sense but expanded to Judah. (Confer also 1:13.) Roehrs-Franzmann notes that a king is not mentioned anywhere in the book, which is used as an argument for the book's originating after the exile, though Allen p.20 explains that away be referring to Joash being a minor and so appeals being made to the priests, especially the high priest Jehoiada while Joash was a minor.

such a thing happened: *TLSB* refers to the unprecedented invasion of locusts (v 4), followed by wildfires and drought (vv 19-20). The event seems to have happened already and not be being foretold by Joel (so Roehrs-Franzmann; Keil-Delitzsch says "in part already begun"). Keil-Delitzsch says that that the plague is so unprecedented makes clear that it is a judgment inflicted by God.

1:3 *tell ... let tell ... and:* four generations are mentioned but implicitly all future generations should learn from the current catastrophe to avoid similar ones. Roehrs-Franzmann comments, "to preserve the memory of it, not as just another piece of history but as a speaking act of God which points to the end of history and His judgment upon it", and we might add God's deliverance from it in their time, which is an at least implicit Gospel promise of His future deliverance (to some extent confer especially Keil-Delitzsch).

1:4 *cutting ... swarming ... hopping ... destroying:* four kinds of locusts are mentioned and discussed by *TLSB* in contrast to grasshoppers or cicadas, emphasizing that "no edible leaf, twig, or bark would remain in Judah (confer what follows in the text). Four stages of locust development might also be in view or a poetic device emphasizing the destruction of successive swarms (confer Roehrs-Franzmann; Keil-Delitzsch sees "rhetorical drapery").

1:5 *awake ... drunkards ... weep ... wail drinkers of wine*: perhaps intentionally targeting those who might otherwise be numbed to catastrophes (to some extent confer Roehrs-Franzmann), calling them out of the stupor to prepare for the pains of withdrawal (so *TLSB*). Perhaps confer/compare v.8, where the most joyous is described lamenting. *CSSB* refers to drunkenness as “the only specific sin mentioned in the book”.

sweet wine ... cut off: *TLSB* mentions new wine that has not been stored and that once it was exhausted there would be no new stores of wine in Judah, but, if there is no new wine and people keep drinking the old wine, eventually there will be no wine at all (confer 1:10). Laetsch suggests new wine may be that “wine” still in the grape.

1:6 *nation*: *TLSB* refers to a “personification” of the locusts, and we remember the debate about interpreting the plague figuratively as the invading armies of the Assyrians or Babylonians.

my: *CSSB* draws attention to the personal pronouns, suggesting they “offer a hit of hope since they indicate that the people belong to the Lord”. Perhaps here the “my” is the Lord’s ultimately speaking through Joel? (Confer/compare presumably Joel’s calling to the Lord in 1:19?)

Beyond number: *CSSB* notes that the locusts in the plague on Egypt were so described, with reference to Psalm 105:34; Exodus 10:4-6, 12-15.

lions’ teeth ... fangs of a lioness: almost seems comical for smaller insects to be described in terms of larger beasts (confer the locusts of Revelation 9:7, who are said to have “teeth like lions’ teeth”; *CSSB* characterizes Revelation as “reflecting” Joel’s comparison, though we might attribute it to God as the books’ common author). *TLSB* notes that due to their “immense numbers”, the locusts’ teeth are “far more destructive than the fangs of a lion”.

1:7 *vine ... fig tree*: both fruit here, and later apparently olives and grain (1:9-13).

stripped off their bark ... made white: poetic parallelism for the damage that harms if not kills the tree. (The fig tree was singular in v.7a but are plural in v.7b.)

1:8 *Lament ... wearing sackcloth*: rough material worn in mourning or humiliation is appropriate for someone wailing in grief (confer 1:13). Roehrs-Franzmann sees the nation as being addressed at this point and finds significance to its being the center of five appeals.

Virgin ... bridegroom of her youth: *TLSB* refers to “a bride whose fiancé is killed just before the marriage ceremony”. *CSSB* is similar, noting the use of “husband” and “wife” already after betrothal. Roehrs-Franzmann notes that more than “lament like a virgin” Israel is often depicted as a virgin with a covenant relationship to the Lord. Laetsch thinks of Judah’s being cut off from communication with her Divine Spouse.

1:9 *grain offering ... drink offering*: *TLSB* refers to the regular use in various offerings and sacrifices, where the grain could be fresh ears, fine flour, or baked without yeast, and the drink offering was wine (confer 1:10 for the grain and wine and 1:11-12 for specific grains and the vine). *TLSB* notes that the locust-induced famine would end the sacrifices “and the blessings they provided”. The sacrifices did not earn or merit anything before God, but the faith of the one offering them mattered, though the offerings also provided food and drink to the ministers (confer what follows). God would seem to know what people could and could not offer, as today, when our offerings also support the ministers and ministry of the Church.

house of the Lord: The temple still is in use, which helps date Joel's prophecy before the fall of Jerusalem and Judah's exile to Babylon or after Judah's return and the restoration of temple worship (confer *TLSB* p.1448). See also the mentions in 1:13 and 14.

priests mourn ... ministers: A grammatical appositive sets the two nouns equal, though they could be distinguished. *TLSB* notes that the cessation of offerings affects the priests and Levites' sustenance and suggests the fellowship with the Lord would be broken. (Confer the "mourning" of the ground in 1:10.) Perhaps notably the priests are described as mourning and not called/commanded to mourn (compare imperatives in 1:2, 5, 8, and others, but also see 1:13).

1:10 *fields ... destroyed ... ground mourns*: The ground is personified as being able to mourn (as the priests did in 1:9), though "the reasons" are different. *TLSB* notes that the ground (Hebrew *adamah*) suffers the consequences of human wickedness as in Genesis 3:17 at the fall, though it "awaits" restoration as in Romans 8:20-23. (Animals are also affected, and they are explicitly mentioned in 1:19 and 20.)

grain is destroyed ... wine dries up ... oil languishes: The locusts eat or destroy the plants that produce the grain, grapes, and presumably olives. The vine itself is described as drying up in 1:12, where also the fig tree languishes, that is, is weak, droops, or exhausted. Removing the bark can cause drying up, or the reference at this point already could be to drought (so *CSSB*). *CSSB* notes the importance of the three items mentioned to the agriculture of the day.

1:11 *Be ashamed, O tillers ... wail, O vinedressers*: The ESV text note refers to some word play in the Hebrew of 1:10-12 and 17 with the similar sounding words translated "dry-up" and "be-ashamed" (*yabesh* and *buwsh*, respectively). *TLSB* notes that those responsible for the land's production would be especially grieved, though we might say that the plague of locusts and resulting famine are hardly their fault as tillers and vinedressers. Notably, so far there has been no mention of the ultimate causation or fault, and none of the wailing has yet sounded like repentance. (Consider the Law and Gospel Application Note for 1:2-12: Joel summons the people to hear what is coming, but that what is coming is the Lord's judgment for their sin is certainly not explicit.)

wheat ... barley ... harvest: More grains are mentioned; each had their seasons and first-fruit/harvest festivals.

1:12 *Pomegranate, palm, and apple*: These varieties had not yet been mentioned. Keil-Delitzsch refers to "date palm". *TLSB* notes that some botanists think "apricot" instead of apple (the Hebrew word is used six times in the Old Testament, all translated as related to "apple" by the AV). Laetsch says possibly quince.

dries up ... dried up ... dries up: The first two are the same Hebrew verb (confer also 1:10), but the third is a different Hebrew verb, the one translated "be ashamed" in 1:11 (where the word play was noted). The ESV use of the same English verb provides nice poetry, if not necessarily a consistent translation. To be sure, the loss of the things that bring gladness to people would dry-up their gladness.

1:13 *Put on ... lament ... wail ... go in, pass the night*: Five commands are quickly compacted (likely with some repetition of poetic parallelism), in contrast to the description in 1:9. On the sackcloth and lament, confer v.8 of the virgin. Sackcloth can be worn and also spread out to sit or lie on. *TLSB* suggests “go in” is to the temple, but unclear is exactly where they were to go in and what they were to do there. If passing the night in or on sackcloth means sleep (the Hebrew preposition can be “in” or “on”, among others), there were rooms around the Sanctuary in the temple building, or the term might be understood more broadly as the temple complex. If passing the night in sackcloth means praying, we might remember that few entered the Holy Place, much less the Most Holy Place, and in prescribed vestments and for prescribed purposes. Again, outer courts could be used for prayer. Keil-Delitzsch refers to between the altar of burn offerings and the porch of the temple praying day and night.

because ... withheld ...: The effects on the grain and drink offerings were noted in 1:9. “Withheld” is interesting, because the people would not be intentionally withholding offerings (the verb is passive voice, so “who” is withholding them is not identified).

my God ... your God: The prophet indirectly claims God and also speaks of the priests and ministers’ claiming God (the “your” is plural; see also 1:14 and “our” in 1:16). See the mention at 1:6 above for the “hint of hope” that *CSSB* says such pronouns offer.

1:14 *Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather ... and cry out*: Four more imperatives in quick succession (though again perhaps with some repetition of poetic parallelism). The priests were the last ones explicitly addressed, which can leave them as the ones still being addressed with these commands. The fast and solemn assembly and the gathering and crying out could certainly include a public confession of sin as *TLSB* suggests, with reference to Leviticus 16:29’s stipulations regarding the Day of Atonement, though such public confession need not be limited to that Day (*CSSB* mentions fasting was also practiced in times of calamity and was a sign of penitence and humility, noting the Bible’s condemnation of outward signs that do not match inward attitudes). The crying out certainly can be read as including asking to forgive the sins, believing that He will do so for the sake of the coming Messiah, to Whose sacrifice all the other sacrifices ultimately point.

elders ... all the inhabitants of the land: Confer and compare 1:2, where “elders” was thought to be more in the sense of “elderly” than lay religious leader (see also 2:16). We might reflect on how “all the inhabitants” could gather at the temple, or whether the “elders” stood in their place as the congregation and then perhaps repeated the ritual and rite as leaders with the people who could not be present (confer 1:2-3 “hear ... tell”). (Joel 1:14 is said to be connected to Revelation 22:2’s description of the Tree of Life in the midst of the Heavenly Jerusalem, but how so is unclear.)

1:15 *Alas*: an interjection expressing pain, as “Oh!”

the day ... day of the Lord: *TLSB* suggests the expression refers to when God will send the locusts (compare Roehrs-Franzmann and Keil-Delitzsch), though the expression at least elsewhere refers to the end of time when God ultimately condemns the wicked and delivers the righteous. The plague can be a “type” of the end, and prophetic perspective often fails “accurately” to see the distance between things on the horizon (confer “near” and “comes” but not quite yet).

1:16 *food cut off ... joy and gladness from the house of our God*: *TLSB* seems to think of the elimination of the offerings' cutting off food from the ministers, but the prayer or lament (as *TLSB* heads it in its outline) could be speaking more-broadly of all the people's losing food and so joy and gladness (confer 1:12), which ultimately comes from God, for whom "the house of our God" with its Ark (whether or not it was there at this point) can stand in, as His throne on earth.

before our eyes: Roehrs-Franzmann refers to "an inescapably demonstrative power".

1:17 *seed shrivels ... grain has dried up*: Perhaps the first indications that need to be understood as drought (the other references to drying could be due to damage from the locusts, while here the grain seems to remain but not be germinating). Note what is called a chiasmic structure: the pair of verses with their poetic parallelism has the references to the seed/grain at the beginning and end and the references to the storehouses/granaries in the middle.

Storehouses are desolate the granaries torn down: *TLSB* refers to their being "useless in a famine" and commenting, "Grain reserves for lean times and for planting will run out, guaranteeing long-term starvation." Keil-Delitzsch comments, "being useless they are not kept in proper condition" (Laetsch says, "the despairing people are no longer interested in repairing them"). We might reflect on Joseph and the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine in Egypt, as well as the so-called "Parable of the Rich Fool" from Luke 12:13-21 with the plan to build bigger barns (see also *TLSB*'s "Reading Joel" on p.1447).

1:18 *beasts groan ... cattle .. perplexed ... sheep suffer*: Livestock are finally mentioned, which, of course, also had a place in sacrifices and offerings. *TLSB* refers to the animals calling "for their owners to feed them" (but see below?), and *TLSB* explains that sheep normally could scrounge what cattle could not graze (*CSSB* mentions the grass roots out of the soil) but, due to the locusts, will suffer with them. *CSSB* notes that the Hebrew word translated "groan" was used for Israel's groaning in Egypt. Where the ESV translates "are perplexed", the NIV84 has "mull about", and the *CSSB* refers to its use describing "Israel's confused movements in the desert", with reference to Exodus 14:3.

no pasture: The word refers to a place for feeding, and, while there was land available for them to graze on, there was no food there for them to eat. (The English word "pastures" is used in 1:19 but there translates a different Hebrew word.)

1:19 *I call*: The first-person singular form of the verb seems somewhat surprising, presumably referring to the prophet Joel (compare the first-person plural in 1:16's "our God"). The prophet could be interceding on behalf of all of the people united into his one voice. We might reflect on various forms of corporate and individual, public and private prayer.

fire has devoured ... flame has burned: If there is drought, as 1:18 and 1:20 can be taken as suggesting, then wildfires would not be all that surprising, though *CSSB* suggests "fire" is being used to describe the effects of the drought (confer Keil-Delitzsch) and, perhaps either way, evokes the fire of God's judgment. Note the repetition of 1:19's first couplet at the end of 1:20, forming what can be called an *inclusio*, bracketing or framing the material in between, in this case perhaps Joel's prayer/lament introduced with the address of the Lord (confer Keil-Delitzsch).

Pastures of the wilderness ... trees of the field: We might imagine vineyards and any other agricultural venue as also included.

1:20 *pant for you*: *TLSB* comments, “The animals’ desperation mimics the prayers of the people.” Are the animals imitating or copying the people? Perhaps more likely is that to the animals is being attributed the desperation of the people, or, perhaps the idea of the animals’ looking to God found elsewhere in the Bible is also reflected here (for example, Psalm 145:15-16, as in the Small Catechism’s Table Prayer, and Jesus’s teaching about the birds, heard recently from Luke 12:22-31).

Because the water brooks are dried up: Another suggestion there is drought, for neither the locusts nor the fire would result in the lack of water.

What are you taking home from the prophecy considered tonight?

TLSB p.1448 emphasizes our carefully considering the book’s call to repentance and sharing its news of the coming judgment with those who have not yet believed, both God’s condemning the unrepentant and His declaring “not guilty” those who repent.

Closing Prayer & Benediction