



# Joel Bible Studies

## (LEADERS' NOTES)

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### Purpose

The key verses in the book of Joel (2:12-13) point to the most important thing in the life of God's people in the light of who God is and the coming Day of the Lord - living as people willing to continue to return to the gracious and compassionate Lord your God.

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### Introduction

The book of Joel is probably best known to Christians because of Peter's sermon at Pentecost in the Book of Acts, where he quotes Joel to explain the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all people. But the main emphasis in this book is the Day of the Lord.

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### The major theme

The dominant theme in the prophet Joel is the Day of the Lord, which is basically a time when the PRESENCE of the Lord brings Judgement and/or deliverance and blessing, depending on the circumstances. This understanding of the main theme brings in the motif of God's presence that we see at the beginning ("The word of the Lord that came to Joel..." 1:1) and end of the book ("The Lord dwells in Zion!" 3:21) which also permeates throughout the book. In this light, the prophet highlights the need for repentance. All of these things converge in the promise of the future outpouring of the Spirit in 2:28-32 (cited by the Apostle Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2:17-21).

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### The bigger picture

Even though God chose Israel to be His people and his witness to the world, they failed time and again to fulfil their mission to represent and reveal God to the world by the way they lived and worshiped. They ended up being no different to the other nations in the way they lived (the rich and powerful oppressed the poor and vulnerable) and worshiped (at its best was nothing more than religious rituals; at its worst it was a complete rejection of God and a turning towards the idols and detestable practices of the nations around them). Which is why on the Day of the Lord judgement would begin with God's own people. The Day of the Lord is a day of judgement for all people, everywhere. And yet in judgement there is salvation! God's promise to rescue and rule His people - all people of all nations - anticipates the saving work of Jesus, the true King over all. See 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 where we are told that the day of the Lord will come "like a thief in the night" (verse 2) but pay attention in particular to what the Christian can look forward to in verse 9: "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

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## STUDY ONE Joel 1:1-20

How easy is it to get your attention? Can you think of a time when there was something wrong, or broken, that you were doing your best to ignore, but then it got to a point where you could ignore it no longer? What happened to make the difference?

In October 2019 in Chile, the worst civil unrest since the end of the reign of the dictator Pinochet took place. The result was an estimated 3.5 BILLION dollars worth of damage and 300,000 job losses, which meant that the government could not ignore the situation. What sparked it was a 30-cent rise in train fares, but the tinder for the explosion was 30 years of increasing social inequality and injustice. By the end of October, the President sacked 8 of his cabinet ministers. By the end of November, the government agreed to hold a referendum to establish a convention to rewrite the entire Constitution. By the end of his term, his political party was replaced by the youngest ever President who represented the Communist party, voted in by the largest recorded turnout of voters. The mantra in Chile was “Chile has woken up”. Despite many years of peaceful protests, it was only when there was widespread destruction of infrastructure, looting and burning down of many businesses, that the government was forced to pay attention.



It is possible that what we are about to look at in the book of Joel is God getting the attention of His people, who were trying to ignore the fact that their relationship with God was broken.

### Read Joel 1:1-20.

Compare Joel 1:1 with Hosea 1:1 and Zechariah 1:1.

What do you notice is different in the way the book of Joel starts?

*Whilst it is introduced with the same formula “The word of the Lord came to...” there are no details in the introduction to help us place it in its historical context.*

What are the effects of this difference?

*It makes it difficult to know when it was first written. But this directs our attention away from the prophet himself to the actual prophecy and the divine source of the words.*

There is no clear winner in the debate of the dating of the book, but that is not essential to its message. In the first half, we get the description of the present distress (invasion, drought, desolation) and in the second part we get the future deliverance (return from exile, defeat of the enemy and final judgement of the nations). These things do not depend on a correct understanding of the date of the writing.

Who it is addressed to in verses 2 & 3 and what is the message for them?

*The rhetorical question is directed firstly to the 'elders', but also 'all who live in the land', and also for it to be recounted to the children of successive generations. The message is to remember the great disaster, the unparalleled disaster that is connected to the Day of the Lord (see 2:15, 2:1).*

What is the effect of the description of the four locust plagues in verse 4?

*The successive waves are presented in a poetic way to highlight the intensity of the destruction. Note that each wave cleans up the leftovers of the wave before. That which one lot of locusts "have left" the next lot "have eaten". (Personally, if there is any leftover pizza at our house, a breakfast of cold pizza will leave no trace of what has been left uneaten from the night before - you can forget about a third and fourth wave of eating leftovers!). There also might be a connection with Exodus 10:5 where the locusts were going to eat everything not destroyed by the hail.*

There are three groups of people singled out in verses 5-12 to show how the plague directly affects them. Complete the table below:

VERSES	WHO IS BEING REFERRED TO?	WHAT ARE THEY TO DO?	WHY?
5-7	<i>Drunkards</i>	<i>Wake up, weep, wail</i>	<i>New wine snatched from their lips. No hope of more as the vines are laid waste. (Note that the 'new wine' may be super concentrated because it is left a shorter time to ferment, or it could be just the first ready to go; either way, it's bad news for the drunkard!) It's interesting that he singles these people out first, who possibly didn't normally care about religion, or anything else going on around them. But these are the first group called out for the national lament.</i>

8-10	<i>Priests</i>	<i>Mourn</i>	<p><i>Offerings are cut off from the house of the Lord., with ruined fields meaning no more any time soon.</i></p> <p><i>(Note that the 'husband of her youth' was probably her fiancé, thus the mourning is for a future life lost, as well as the fact that there will be no heir and the son's name may well die out. These were two terrible examples of mourning in Ancient Israel.)</i></p> <p><i>Also, that the three staples of Palestinian life were mentioned (compare Psalm 104:15): grain, wine, olive oil - which also happen to be the three things used for the grain and cereal offerings - indicates that Israel have no way of remaining in relationship with God.</i></p>
11-12	<i>Farmers</i>	<i>Despair, wail, grieve</i>	<p><i>All of the staples for life itself, the three groups of harvested food are represented here to highlight the complete devastation of all the produce in the land.</i></p>

How is the impact of this loss summarised at the end of verse 12?

*They have lost 'the joy of mankind'.*

Have you ever experienced such total devastation either personally or as part of a community or nation? What was it like for you to endure such devastation?

Imagine you and your community have lost absolutely everything. What do you think your first reaction would be if you were told it was because you have ignored God?

*(Don't get distracted too much by people who might want to declare current national disasters as God punishing us here in Australia for our desertion of Him as God's people are no longer bound/identified by territory or politics under the New Covenant. On the other hand, maybe we go too far the other way and fail to recognise God's sovereignty over all things and so leave him out of our discussion of how we react during times of national disasters. The point is that most of us would not immediately go to God in humble repentance.)*

So how are these people told to react to this loss in verses 13 &14?

*The priests are to mourn in sackcloth, which is the symbol of repentance for sin. They are then to declare a 'sacred assembly' and declare a holy fast, which is again usually a symbol of repentance. Finally they do this so that they all may 'cry out to the Lord', which as we have seen in Judges is usually what they did when they could no longer bear the consequences for their rejection of God (i.e. sin).*

Just as the disaster was universal, so too the repentance must be universal. That is to say, this affects everyone because everyone needs to repent!

This is a lament based on the catastrophe of the invasion of locusts. Whether they are literal locusts or a way of describing an invading army (you can read the various arguments for both points of view in various commentaries) the point seems to be that they have lost the opportunity to offer God the sacrifices due to him (1:13). Loss of food is bad (1:16) but loss of sacrifice is worse because not only is physical life endangered, but also continuing in the covenantal relationship with God. Thus, what we essentially have is the lament over their situation which leads not to a complaint against God, but a call to repentance.

What conclusion does all this lead to in verse 15?

*The Day of the Lord is near.*

Verses 15-20 seem to be the content of their lament in the light of the coming Day of the Lord. Verse 19 in particular is the language of lament we find in the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 28:1, 30:8, 86:3), calling out to God in times of great distress for comfort and restoration (compare also the language of verse 20 with Psalm 42:1).

One of the points of the details may well be that if even wild animals call for God's help, how much more should his chosen people call to Him for help?

Joel does not name the sins of the people he is talking or writing to, but in the light of Deuteronomy 28 (the warning that locusts will consume everything), the call to repentance after the description of the catastrophe, and in the canonical context of being part of the Book of the Twelve, point us towards this national disaster being the judgement of God on the people.

Look at **Romans 8:18-25**.

What is the difference for Christian people in comparison with the Old Covenant people of God in the book of Joel?

You might like to share with each other how God first got your attention. That is to say, what was it that made you first turn to Him in repentance and faith in Jesus to restore your broken relationship with Him?

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## STUDY TWO Joel 2:1-17

Throughout history, we find all sorts of ways that societies have “sounded the alarm” to alert their people to a serious and immediate danger.

From bonfires on hills, to church bells in the Middle Ages, to sirens and alarms in different places that face different risks (e.g. shark alarms at the beach), to these days alerts sent to smart phones in affected areas, we have sought ways of sounding an alarm to warn of impending danger. Did you know that in 2007 in the Sydney CBD an ‘emergency CBD warning system’ of almost 100 sirens and 13 variable message signs was set up?



Tsunami warning alarm in Patagonia, Chile.

What other alarms do we have in place these days? What are you supposed to do when you hear them?

Have you ever been somewhere when an alarm has sounded? If so, what did you do?

Today we are looking at the first 17 verses of chapter 2 in the book of Joel. We are going to break it down into two sections in this study. The first section is Joel 2:1-11, which describes the unstoppable invasion that signifies the Day of the Lord, and ends with the question, ‘who then can endure?’ The second section, from verses 12-17, is the answer to that question.

### Read Joel 2:1-17.

Compare verse 1 with verse 15. Three things to consider:

(i) What is the significance of blowing the trumpet?

*It was a signal that the person on watch would use to warn of enemy invasion (see Hosea 8:1; Jeremiah 4:5; 6:1), or other types of danger (e.g. Amos 3:6), including the Day of the Lord (Zephaniah 1:16) - in this instance it is the Lord Himself who is doing the warning. Trumpets were also used to rouse and get God’s people moving, and to remember Him (see Numbers 10:1-10).*

(ii) What are the people to do in response to the trumpet call?

(iii) Why is this response necessary?

How is the coming Day of the Lord described in Joel 2:2?

It seems that God is using the past experience of a locust plague to describe the future invasion of a foreign nation's army. Read through Joel 2:1–10 and note all the ways in which the army is compared to a locust plague.

What are the effects of this invasion?

Can you think of anywhere else in God's Word where the effects of verse 10 are described in a similar way?

*For example: Psalm 18:7? Isaiah 13:10? Matthew 24:29? Mark 13:24-25? Acts 2:20? Revelation 6:12?*

What to you is the scariest part of verse 11?

*The Lord 'thunders'? The Lord at the HEAD of the invading army? The size and strength of the force (i.e. the awesome POWER)? The fear of who can endure the Day of the Lord?*

What is the picture we get in these verses?

In the entire book of Joel, the prophet doesn't give a reason for this invasion and destruction of the land, but surely the people of Israel already know why such an invasion might happen. I mean they should know the history of their nation: God had given them the land of Canaan, where they were to live in relationship with him and to reveal and represent him to the nations of the world. As the people prepared to enter into the Promised Land, God made promises to his people (Deuteronomy 28) that included blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The curses that God promised included such things as the locusts consuming their fields (Deut. 28:38), the crickets possessing their trees and fruit (Deut. 28:42), and the people being oppressed by a foreign nation (Deut. 28:36). The good thing (yet bad for them) is that God keeps his promises!

Read **Deuteronomy 28:45–51**. Why might this foreign army described in the book of Joel be invading Judah?

*God keeping his promise includes his promised curses for disobedience. Notice in particular how the curse described is similar to the prophecy in Joel.*

In light of Deuteronomy 28:47, why does Joel tell the people to rend their hearts and not their garments (Joel 2:12–13)? What does it mean to “rend” their hearts?

*Rending garments was a practice that went with mourning for sin (often with a fast). It may have become common practice for this mourning to be associated with suffering, because in times of prosperity they would not mourn their sin (as they thought prosperity = a blessing for obedience). So the issue is not their material devastation but a deeper problem: the heart of the problem was the problem with their hearts.*

*To rend your heart is thus to acknowledge your brokenness and need for God's forgiveness and restoration. It means a whole hearted surrender to God. To rend your heart, then, expresses internal spiritual brokenness, which is vastly more important than any empty, hypocritical act of ripping apart one's clothing. Rituals of repentance mean nothing if the heart is unchanged.*

In what way is this the key to the answer to the question of verse 11?

*See verse 12 where God offers the way to endure the Day of the Lord: return to him “with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning”. That is, in true repentance and faith. See the reminder of God's character in verse 13: “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”*

What is the motivation for God to do this, according to verse 17?

*So that the people that he has chosen to be his own will not be an object of scorn, because the implication is that the name of the Lord is scorned with that. He would be seen as a*

*powerless or uncaring god and it would make a mockery of the covenant name (Yahweh, or the LORD). It is described in various places in the Bible as for 'his name's sake', i.e. for the glory of the Lord.*

All of this obviously looks different to us this side of the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. What difference does Jesus make to our understanding of this, in particular of verse 13 and verse 17b?

In the good times in our lives we too can be tempted to leave God behind, or out of the picture. Our prayer should always be that we are not tempted to only turn to God when we can't find security in ourselves or in this world. Lord, "lead me not into THIS temptation", along with others.

In what areas of your life are you not serving the Lord your God "with joyfulness and gladness of heart"? What would it look like for you to "rend your hearts and not your garments" and to "return to the Lord with all your heart"?

Think and reflect on some of the things you have talked about in this study that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. You can share them with your group, or write them down for yourself to meditate on again, or just share them privately with the Lord. But stop now and take some time to reflect on all that has been discussed so far.

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### **STUDY 3 Joel 2:18 - 3:21**

If the global pandemic of the last few years has taught us anything, it is that life is full of uncertainties. Things that we once took for granted, like being able to see one another freely, or to travel, were suddenly not an option for most of us (unless of course you were a professional sportsman or a movie star - don't get me started!). We were even not able to meet face to face for church for quite a while.



Even in the midst of life uncertainties, there is a constant - we have God's voice and his promises in his word.

When God's nation of Israel were in their most uncertain of times, as we have seen so far in the book of Joel, the one thing that they needed most was to hear God's voice and hear of his promises. What we get in the last half of the book (and in this last study) is God's response to everything that has happened to his people so far in the book of Joel.

## Read Joel 2:18-32.

In what way is verse 18 the turning point for the entire book?

*From 1:2-2:11 the theme has been the locust invasion/real invasion with the frightening results. In 2:12-17 they get the offer of grace which is the transition from judgement to restoration. In verse 18 we get the first of the Lord's responses. So we have had the problem explained, the required response of the people, and now the possibility of 2:14 (who knows...) is becoming a reality (the Lord will...).*

What do you think might have happened between verses 12-17 & verse 18?

*Maybe what was commanded in verses 12-17 has been done, and so now the Lord responds to their obedience. Maybe not, but it surely is a likely option.*

What is the relationship between verses 19-26 and chapter 1:4 to chapter 2:11?

*Reverses the damage from 1:4 - 2:11 step by step.*

In what way is verse 27 the climax for this section (2:18-27) and a preparation for the final section?

*Gives the reason for his rescue:  
that they may know Him (uses his covenant name, Yahweh),  
that he is in their midst,  
to remind them of his absolute sovereignty,  
and that they might let these truths affect their lives (which is what it means to KNOW these things).  
It prepares for the next section by lifting their eyes from the recovery from what has happened to the Day of the Lord - and the days of even greater blessing.*

What big change is God announcing in verse 28-29?

*ALL people will receive the Spirit which in the OT was given for a time and a purpose, e.g. to judges, kings and prophets.  
It will be POURED OUT, indicating a completeness and a generosity not seen before.*

What poetic picture do verse 30-31 create?

Having promised in verse 17 that his people will never be shamed, how is that going to happen, according to verse 32?

What insight does **Romans 10:8-13** give us about what it means to call on the name of the Lord today?

**Read Acts 2:14-24.**

How does the Apostle Peter use these words from the prophet Joel?

*Note also the changes Peter makes: 'afterward' in Joel becomes 'in the last days' & 'dreadful day' becomes 'glorious day'. This is the difference that Jesus makes!*

**Read Joel chapter 3.**

The following table summarises the verses where God is saying what will happen.

What the LORD will do	What the people will do	What will be
Chapter 2: 19b, 20a, 25, 28a, 29, 30 Chapter 3: 1b, 2a, 2b, 7, 8, 12, 16a, 16c, 21	Chapter 2: 26b, 27a, 28b, 28c, 32a Chapter 3: 17a	Chapter 2: 20b, 24, 26a, 26c, 27b, 31, 32b Chapter 3: 15, 16b, 17b, 18a,b,c,d,e, 19, 20

Looking at chapter 3, what is the picture that we get of what is going to happen?

What is it that God's people are actually going to do?

What is significant about the final sentence of the book of Joel?

*Compare the first and last sentences. The book opens with the word of Lord coming to his prophet, basically his presence. The book ends with the promise of his presence.*

*The ultimate characteristic of the Day of the Lord is not so much the warfare and defeat of the enemies of his people, nor of the blessings for his people, but rather his presence with his people. They will be in a renewed and restored relationship with the Lord, and a relationship that will be a permanent one.*

The Day of the Lord then, is about the presence of God. Which for some will spell disaster, but for those who call on His name and seek refuge in Him, will be the day of blessing - the day of a permanently restored and renewed relationship with their God.

Check out **John 1:14** and **Revelation 21:3**. What is the great reality of the times that we are living in and the promised time to come?

We are living in times of great uncertainty. Maybe for you the levels of uncertainty have risen to a point where you need the encouragement of knowing for certain what the future will bring. But know that Jesus is present with us now.

Maybe you could pray together for the 'peace that passes all understanding' that comes from resting in God's promises in the light of who He is and what He has done and what He has promised to do.

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## Theological themes in Joel

### God's sovereignty

- God is seen to be control of everything, including the natural environment (2:23-24, 31).
- God uses locusts like soldiers (2:25)
- God is in control of the destiny of all nations (3:1-16)
- God is actively in the midst of his people (2:26-27)

### God's wrath & compassion

- The prophet has a serious warning about the consequences of sin, urging the Israelites to lament, mourn and cry to the Lord (basically REPENT, 1:13-14; 2:17).
- But in this repentance, the external religious acts are not enough, true repentance is a matter of the heart. In repentance, the people will receive compassion (2:13-14) yet the nations will suffer the consequences of God's wrath (3:2, 19, 21).

### God's judgement & vindication

- Because of their disobedience (not specified exactly what it was in Joel), Israel has lost God's protection and suffered foreign invasion.
- In spite of this, God has never abandoned them completely. Throughout chapter 3 where God's wrath will be poured out on the nations, he uses first person possessive pronouns when describing Israel (3:2, 5),

### God's Spirit

- In the Old Testament the Spirit of the Lord comes upon people at specific times and places to empower them for a specific role or task.
- Whilst Moses longs for the day all of God's people will receive this gift of the Spirit (Numbers 11:29), Joel seeing this pouring out of the Spirit as the curtain-raiser for the Day of the Lord (2:31).
- The Apostle Peter uses this prophecy to explain the events of Pentecost in Acts 2:14-21, declaring that in Jesus Christ, the Messianic age has arrived.