

A Holy *and* Just God (Joel)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Joel 1; 2:28, 29; Acts 2:1–21; Joel 2:31, 32; Rom. 10:13; Matt. 10:28–31.*

Memory Text: “The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?” (*Joel 2:11, NIV*).

Key Thought: God can use crises to make His people sensitive to both their dependence on Him and their need for spiritual renewal and reformation.

In the massive locust plague and severe drought devastating the southern kingdom of Judah, the prophet Joel—a contemporary of Amos and Hosea—sees a sign of a “great and dreadful” day of judgment (*Joel 2:31*). Confronted with a crisis of such intensity and proportion, he calls all people in Judah to renounce sin and return to God. He describes the locusts as the Lord’s army and sees in their coming God’s punishment upon unfaithful Israel.

Joel prophesies that God’s future judgments will make the locust plague pale by comparison. But that same judgment will bring unparalleled blessings to those who are faithful to the Lord and who obey His teachings; that is, no matter how severe, judgment can lead to salvation and redemption for those whose hearts are open to the leading of the Lord.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 20.*

A National Disaster

Read Joel 1:1–12. What is happening to the land of Judah?

The prophet, who lived in an agricultural society, calls here upon the farmers to be dismayed at the loss of their grain and fruit harvests. The ecological destruction could cripple the nation's economy for years. In addition to the loss of food, shade, and wood, there is a threat of topsoil erosion. For example, some fruit trees in Palestine take twenty years to grow before they become productive. In fact, agricultural devastation and deforestation were typical tactics of invading armies seeking to punish those they conquered by making impossible any prospect of a short-term recovery.

Read Deuteronomy 28:38. How does that help us to understand what is happening to Judah?

Joel uses four different terms for the locusts (*Joel 1:4*) in order to express the intensity and the totality of the plague. But the destruction caused by the locusts was made even worse by drought. All of the crops that the farmers had expected have withered, and the farmers despair because they have nothing to eat or sell; they do not even have seed for replanting. A calamity of such proportions was unheard of by their ancestors and was something to tell future generations about. The fact that a similar disaster had never happened before further heightens the importance of the situation.

The prophet also announces the destruction of the dietary staples in the land of Israel, such as grapes, grain, and oil (*Deut. 14:23, 18:4*). Wheat and barley are the most important grains in Palestine. Vines and fig trees in the Bible symbolize peaceful living with an abundance of God's blessings in the Promised Land (*1 Kings 4:25, Mic. 4:4, Zech. 3:10*). The idyllic image of peace and prosperity is to be able to sit under one's own vine and fig tree. All this now is threatened by divine judgment brought about because of the people's sins.

Harvest was a time of rejoicing (*Ps. 4:7, Isa. 9:3*). Although the land in Israel was a gift from the Lord, it still belonged to God. Israel was expected to be a faithful steward of the land. Above all, the people were expected to worship and obey God because He was the One who had given them the land in the first place.

Blow the Trumpet!

When natural disasters occur, they provoke many questions, such as, “Why did God allow this to happen?” “Why have some people lived while others have died?” “Is there a lesson here that we could learn?” Joel had no doubt that the locust plague could lead to a deeper insight into God’s universal plan. In chapter 1, under divine inspiration, the prophet relates the national crisis to the spiritual situation in the land. The locusts have left nothing that could be offered as sacrifice to the Lord. The grain offering and the drink offering were part of the daily offering in the temple, in accordance with the instructions recorded in Exodus 29:40 and Numbers 28:5–8. The cutting off of the sacrifices was severe, but it should have served as a warning to the people of their grave condition. The loss of opportunity even to offer the sacrifices symbolized the breaking of the covenant between God and Israel. But, unlike many of the other prophets, Joel did not spend much time making an analysis of people’s failings. He was interested far more in dwelling on the cure as prescribed by Israel’s divine Physician.

Read Joel 1:13–20. **What is Joel saying to the people? However unique the circumstances, in what ways is that which is being said here a plea that is commonly seen throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments?**

The prophet urges the spiritual leaders to call a nationwide day of prayer and fasting so that the people can search deep within their hearts, renounce their sins, and return to their God. In this way they will come out of the experience with a renewed trust in God’s love and justice. In the end, this disaster might lead the believers into a deeper relationship with their Lord.

Throughout Scripture, God is described as the Lord of nature, the One who created it, sustains it, and also uses it for His divine purposes. In this natural disaster, instead of having them rend their garments, the prophet Joel says that the people should rend their hearts and make them open to God’s grace and compassion.

Disasters may strike us in many forms. When they do, regardless of our understanding of them and their causes, what Bible promises can we cling to for the hope and the strength to endure? What promises are especially meaningful to you?

The Gift of God’s Spirit

Read Joel 2:28, 29 along with Acts 2:1–21. How is Peter interpreting the prophecy of Joel here?

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter announced that the Lord had fulfilled His promise, as given through Joel, regarding the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Accompanying the outpouring of the Spirit, and as a visible sign of God’s supernatural intervention in the history of humankind, God will cause extraordinary phenomena to be seen in nature, both on earth and in the sky.

“In immediate connection with the scenes of the great day of God, the Lord by the prophet Joel has promised a special manifestation of His Spirit. Joel 2:28. This prophecy received a partial fulfillment in the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost; but it will reach its full accomplishment in the manifestation of divine grace which will attend the closing work of the gospel.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 11.

In the immediate context of Joel, repentance will be followed by a great outpouring of God’s Spirit. This will bring a wonderful renewal. Instead of destruction, God’s gift of blessings will follow. The Lord reassures His people in this book that His creation will be restored and the nation delivered from oppressors.

The Spirit is poured out upon God’s people, just as the anointing oil was poured upon the heads of those who were elected by God for a special ministry. The Spirit is also a gift of power bestowed on the recipients so that they might do a particular work for God (*Exod. 31:2–5, Judg. 6:34*). Only this time the Spirit’s manifestation will assume wide proportions. At that great point in history, salvation will be available to all who seek God. God’s Spirit will fall on all the faithful—irrespective of age, gender, or social status—in a fulfillment of Moses’ wish that all the Lord’s people become prophets and that the Lord put His Spirit upon them (*Num. 11:29*).

What are things you can do in your own life that can make you more receptive to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Proclaiming God’s Name

“The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the remnant whom the LORD calls” (*Joel 2:31, 32, NKJV*).

The darkening of the sun and the changing of the moon to blood should not be understood as natural disasters, but as supernatural signs of the approaching day of the Lord. In Bible times, many pagan nations worshiped heavenly bodies as their gods, something that Moses said the Israelites should never do (*Deut. 4:19*). In this sense, Joel’s prophecy is predicting that the idols of the nations will begin to fade away when the Lord comes in judgment. Joel 3:15 adds that even the starry host will lose its power and will no longer give its light because the presence of the Lord’s glory will outshine everything.

While Christ’s appearance will terrify the unrepentant, how will the righteous welcome their Lord? What is the crucial difference? See *Isa. 25:9, Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, Rom. 10:13*.

In the Scriptures, the expression to “call on the name of the Lord” does not only mean to call oneself a follower of the Lord and to claim His promises. It also can mean to proclaim God’s name—that is, to be a witness to others about the Lord and what He has done for the world. Abraham built altars and proclaimed God’s name in the land of Canaan (*Gen. 12:8*). To Moses on Mount Sinai, God proclaimed His goodness and grace (*Exod. 33:19, 34:5*). The psalmist calls on the faithful to give thanks to God and call on His name by making known to the nations what He has done (*Ps. 105:1*). Lastly, the same words are found in a song of salvation composed by the prophet Isaiah (*Isa. 12:4*).

Thus, to proclaim the Lord’s name means both to be messengers of the glad tidings that God still rules the world and also to call on the people of the world to view everything in the context of God’s deeds and character. It also means to tell everyone about God’s generous gift of salvation that is offered to every human being.

**What does it mean to you to “call on the name of the Lord”?
How do you do it, and what happens when you do?**

The Refuge in Times of Trouble (Joel 3)

Biblical prophets compare the coming judgment from God to the roaring of a lion, a sound that makes everyone tremble (*Joel 3:16, Amos 1:2, 3:8*). In the Bible, Zion designates the location of God's earthly throne in Jerusalem. From this place God will punish the enemy, but at the same time He will vindicate His people who patiently await His victory. They will share in His triumph when He renews creation.

To some people Scripture's portrayals of God's final judgment are difficult to comprehend. It is good to keep in mind that evil and sin are very real and that their forces are strong in trying to oppose God and to destroy every form of life. But God is an enemy of evil. That is why Joel's words invite us to examine our lives in order to be sure that we are on God's side so that we can be sheltered on the day of judgment.

Read Matthew 10:28–31. How do these texts help us to understand, even during calamitous times, what we have been given in Jesus?

The Lord sustains those persons who persevere in faith. He may bring desolation upon the earth (*Joel 3:1–15*); yet, His people should not fear His acts of sovereign judgments because He has promised to protect them (*vs. 16*). He has given them His word of assurance. His sovereign and gracious acts demonstrate that He is a faithful, covenant God, who never again will allow the righteous to be put to shame (*Joel 2:27*).

Joel's book ends with a vision of a transformed world where a river flows in the midst of the New Jerusalem, the very presence of the eternal God among a forgiven people (*Joel 3:18–21*).

This prophetic message challenges us to walk in the Spirit, to pursue Christian living wholeheartedly, and to reach out to all who have not yet called on the name of Christ. As we do, we claim the divine promise of Christ's abiding presence through the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of His faithful people.

“We must know our real condition, or we shall not feel our need of Christ's help. We must understand our danger, or we shall not flee to the refuge. We must feel the pain of our wounds, or we should not desire healing.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 158. What is your understanding of your own “real condition”? What pains are you suffering? How have you experienced the “refuge” promised to us in Christ?

Further Study: The prophet's name, Joel, was common in Bible times. It means "The Lord is God." This name is appropriate to the overall theme of the book: only God is completely holy and just, and His work is sovereign on earth. The history of His people, as well as that of the nations, is in His hands. The same holds true for the life of every human being.

"The tremendous issues of eternity demand of us something besides an imaginary religion, a religion of words and forms, where truth is kept in the outer court. God calls for a revival and a reformation. The words of the Bible, and the Bible alone, should be heard from the pulpit. But the Bible has been robbed of its power, and the result is seen in a lowering of the tone of spiritual life. In many sermons of today there is not that divine manifestation which awakens the conscience and brings life to the soul. The hearers cannot say, 'Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the Scriptures?' Luke 24:32. There are many who are crying out for the living God, longing for the divine presence. Let the word of God speak to the heart. Let those who have heard only tradition and human theories and maxims, hear the voice of Him who can renew the soul unto eternal life."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 626.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are the ways in which Joel's message is especially important to us, who live at the end of time when serious and sobering events undoubtedly await us?
- 2 Read the whole book of Joel in one sitting and answer the following questions: To what extent did Joel's message apply to his generation, and to what extent did it have a future application?
- 3 Joel's book describes various types of divine blessings poured upon God's people. Does this prophecy make a distinction between material and spiritual blessings? If so, how?
- 4 How does our understanding of the great controversy help us also to understand the terrible trials and calamities that the world faces?
- 5 The Ellen G. White statement in Friday's study discusses an "imaginary religion." What might that mean? How can we know whether our religion is real or imaginary?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Joel 2:11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the meaning of the day of the Lord as the day of judgment. It can be experienced either as condemnation or salvation.

Feel: Encourage people to encounter the day of the Lord as joyous deliverance.

Do: Help others to be aware of Christ's coming by guiding them to walk with Him and be filled with the Holy Spirit, and thus preparing them to be ready.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Nearness of the Day

- A** On what basis do you know that Christ will come?
- B** Why can you claim that the Second Coming is near?
- C** Why should it not be thought of as a dreadful day for believers?

II. Feel: Dreadfulness of the Day

- A** What is your first thought when you hear that God will judge us?
- B** Why is Joel so serious when announcing the day of the Lord?
- C** What emotions and behaviors arise from the recognition that those who call on the Lord will be saved?

III. Do: Day of Deliverance

- A** Why can you not make yourself ready for the Lord's coming?
- B** How does the Lord make you ready?
- C** At the center of the book of Joel is the call to return with all of one's heart and the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Why is that enough to enable one to endure the Day?

► **Summary:** The eschatological day of the Lord is approaching. This greatest historical day will be a day of deliverance for those who call upon the Lord and are guided by His Spirit.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Joel 2:11–17*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God wants to help His people out of their spiritual crisis by calling them to a genuine repentance. They need to be aware that God’s judgment is not partial and will cut off all the wicked. However, God will be a refuge for those who in trust and confidence call upon His name. He is their stronghold and will equip them to stand firm during the world’s final events.

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson focuses on the message of Joel, who lived at a time during which the whole community of believers was in a worship crisis. Instead of worshiping the Creator God, people bowed down before Baal and his demands. But Joel was a revivalist, and he reformed the people’s spiritual lives by turning their attention to the only true Lord.

Opening Discussion: At the center of the book of Joel is a call to repentance: “ ‘Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning’ ” (*Joel 2:12, NIV*). How can we be sure that our repentance is genuine? What is the difference between true and false repentance? Why, and from what do we need to repent?

Questions for Discussion:

- 1 How can natural catastrophes and disasters—for example, a locust plague (as in Joel’s time), earthquakes, fires, floods, tsunamis, and so on—lead people to repentance?
- 2 How do life’s crises create faith or reveal faith?
- 3 What does the apostle Paul mean when he asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” (*Rom. 8:35, NIV*). Some people become very bitter when experiencing the things that Paul mentions in this text. Why are there such huge differences in people’s reactions to similar troubles?

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. God Acts and Calls for Genuine Repentance *(Review Joel 1:15, 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14 with your class.)*

The plague of locusts was to remind God’s people of Joel’s warning regarding the day of judgment. The disaster would be like the destruction associated with the day of the Lord. This local judgment was intended to point the people’s attention to the eschatological day of judgment when everyone would be righteously judged and no one person would have an advantage over another.

God’s appeal is clear: “Return to Me.” It is a call to action with the purpose of helping the believers to come to God Himself and enter into a personal relationship with Him. It is important, then, not only to embrace His teaching, laws, truth, and lifestyle but to enter into a close and intimate fellowship with Him.

Additionally, God invited: “Rend your heart and not your garments” *(Joel 2:13, NIV)*. It was customary in biblical times to tear one’s clothes in mourning. However, God points out that true mourning is not just an outward show done through the tearing of robes, but a “rending of the heart.” It is as if God is saying: “I want you to mourn, and not just through the outward appearance of tears or the expected and required signs of mourning, but from the heart. I want your mourning to be real and to come from within.”

Consider This: What is wrong with the skewed idea that we should sin more in order to receive more grace? Why is it so important for God’s judgment to be impartial?

Questions for Discussion:

- 1 How can God become a stronghold in your life, especially when all external security collapses?
- 2 How can you “rend your heart”?

II. God Sends His Spirit Before the Day of Judgment *(Review Joel 2:28, 29 with your class.)*

Before the dreadful Day of the Lord, God will send His Spirit *(Joel 2:28, 29)* and will perform great signs in nature *(Joel 2:30, 31)* in order to pre-

pare the people for the final events. Joel assures that “ ‘everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved’ ” (*Joel 2:32, NIV*). So, we do not need to fear those final events because deliverance is in close association with our mighty God. When we walk with God, we are hope-oriented because those who love God are not fearful people but people oriented in God (*Isa. 35:4; Dan. 7:22; John 5:24; Rom. 8:28; 1 John 2:28; 4:17, 18*). God must always be the focal point of all our thoughts and behavior (*Ps. 1:1, 2; Col. 3:1–4*).

Both the Spirit of God and rain play a dominant role in Joel’s imagery, mainly in the second part of chapter 2. When the land is dry, rain is needed. As the water brings life to the ground, so the Spirit of God makes spiritual life vibrant again. The Spirit of the Lord needs to be poured out on people so that the dryness will be changed into an abundance of God’s blessing (*John 7:37–39, 10:10*).

There is also a pun (or double meaning) in the Hebrew text with the phrase “the autumn rains in righteousness,” which may also be translated as “the teacher for righteousness” (*Joel 2:23, NIV*). The Qumran sect expected, on the basis of this verse, the coming of the “Teacher of righteousness” as the fulfillment of this prophecy. This means that only acceptance of the teachings of the Teacher Jesus Christ, as well as of the Holy Spirit, will prepare us to worship God in truth and Spirit in order to be delivered on the day of judgment.

Discussion Questions: Why is the Holy Spirit so important in our lives? What does it mean that God will pour His Spirit on His people in order that they might be filled with Him? (*See Ezek. 36:26–28, John 16:7–15, Rom. 8:13–17.*)

III. God Will Judge All Nations in the Valley of Decision (*Review Joel 2:32 with your class.*)

The book of Joel speaks about the last judgment in the valley of decision. The same valley is called the valley of Jehoshaphat, which means “The Lord Judges.” This valley is not a literal, geographical valley somewhere in Palestine (no valley is large enough to contain all the nations of the world). It is a symbolic place but with a real judgment in which God will judge the whole world. One can clearly see this truth from the symbolic name of the valley. Its name signifies that God’s final, executive decisions will take place, and the divine judgment will reveal the decisions that people have made (*Dan. 7:9, 10, 22, 25, 26; Matt. 16:27*). God’s judgment is neither fabricated nor capricious.

Discussion: The crucial question is, Who can endure God’s judgment and how? Explain to your class members what it means to call on the name of the Lord (*Joel 2:32*).

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Explain to your class how it can be filled with the Holy Spirit by being baptized by the Spirit every day.

Every sincere believer desires to have a meaningful, intimate, and true relationship with God. However, this relationship cannot be sentimental; rather, it must be biblical in the sense that the whole human personality is involved: intellect, feelings, and will. How does Christianity, as a religion, engage or involve the whole personality in this way? On the other hand, how do Eastern religions compare with Christianity, and what does Christianity offer that Eastern religions do not?

Life Application: Joel appeals to everyone—adults, children, the newly married—to genuinely return to the Lord with fasting and weeping. How can pastors and church leaders help church members to call everyone together in order to experience true repentance? What roles should fasting and the studying of the Holy Scriptures play in true revival? What do fasting and the study of the Scriptures have to do with repentance?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The plague of locusts was an event of enormous dimensions, which played the role of a type pointing to God’s universal judgment of all the nations at the end of time. This eschatological event is called the antitype. Conduct your own research on typology and explain it to your class, following the guidelines in the following activity.

Activity: Help the members of your class to understand what a *type* is, how it works, and its purpose. Implement various examples of different kinds of types and clearly explain why an understanding of a type is important. If supplies are available, draw different charts to help them to visualize the relationship between *type* and *antitype*. For a background to the meaning of *typology* and how it works, see Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, pp. 58–104, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2000).