

“Decision Time” Joel 3:14-16
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This week we are looking at the book of Joel. Joel was a prophet in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Of Judah's 19 kings, Scripture marks about 8 as good kings who sparked revival. When the Nation slipped under the leadership of a bad king, God would send a prophet to call the people back to God.

The people of Judah had grown complacent. Taking God for granted, they had turned to self-centeredness, idolatry and sin. Having lost their spiritual focus, they were not turning *to* God, but *away* from Him.

Through his ministry, Joel reminded the people of God's love in the face of catastrophe; he forewarned of a coming time of judgment and encouraged them with the promise of salvation to those who called on the Lord.

This was a message the people of Judah needed to hear. They just had the worst natural disaster of their time.

Some of you have lived through times of disaster such as blizzards, hurricanes, tornadoes and such. We're familiar with the damage caused by fires, hurricanes and even a tsunami, but it can be hard to imagine something like a plague of locust..

In 1899 a swarm of locust crossed the Red Sea covering some 2000 square miles. In Joel's time there was a swarm was so large it blotted out the sun and stripped every living plant to the ground where they passed causing unprecedented destruction.

Joel describes it this way, (summary of Ch. 1) After the cutting locusts finished eating the crops, the swarming of hundreds of millions of locusts took what was left stripping everything bare. All the grape vineyards were ruined. Like a terrible army, too numerous to count with teeth as sharp as the teeth of lions, they destroyed all the grapevines and fig trees, stripping the bark, leaving the branches white and bare. There was no grain or wine, no olives or oil. The farmers were in despair, no wheat, no barley, their crops were ruined. No pomegranate trees, no palm, or apple trees, all the fruit trees dried up and all joy had dried up with them. There was nothing anyone could do; they were helpless to stop the insects. They watched as their food disappeared before their very eyes. No seeds would grow in the parched ground, the grain crops for the coming years would fail, their barns and granaries were empty and abandoned. The animals wandered hungry and confused because there was no pasture for them. There was a terrible drought even the streams dried up.

Joel says, "Hear this you leaders of the people! Everyone listen! In all your history, has anything like this ever happened before?"

Tell your children and grandchildren about it in the years to come. Pass the story down from generation to generation. The question is, what *would* they tell the children? It can be hard to know what to tell our children during times of crisis.

Often times when catastrophe strikes some people wonder if it was the hand of God.

After the tsunami a few years ago Oprah had a show interviewing survivors and there was a little boy standing in the rubble, he said his priest told them that God sent the mighty wave as an act of judgment.

After hurricane Katrina there were people on tv who said they thought God sent the hurricane to that area as punishment for sin.

Perhaps you have heard someone in the face of loss say that they think God is judging or punishing them for some thing.

I have a friend (who gave me permission to share this) who has been praying for help for the last few years with no apparent answer from God. Her mom died a few years ago, shortly after that she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and went through surgery, chemo and radiation. Then as a result of 9/11 her husband who's been working for a major airline for 35 years suffered a cut in pay, lost their insurance and all their retirement money. Afraid the day would come that they wouldn't be able to afford their house, she reluctantly put the home they loved up for sale. Confident it would sell they bought a smaller town house...only their house failed to sell so they've been carrying two mortgages for too long and now they were desperate. Then last year while cleaning the gutters on the larger two story house her extension latter collapsed and she shattered both wrists. Recently she learned she has a tumor on her thyroid gland and in two weeks she'll be having her thyroid removed. One day, in frustration, she said, "It feels like God is punishing me? What have I done wrong?"

Many of us ask that question in the face of suffering and what feels like unanswered prayer.

For Joel, the Locust symbolizes both past destruction and a future act of Judgment that would be visited upon the nations. He uses the locust symbolically to say, this is bad, but there is a day coming that will be worse. But even then, even in that day, there is hope for God's people.

A day will come the Lord says and, "I will cause wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon will turn bloodred before that great and terrible day of the Lord arrives. And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (2:30-32a)

"Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision. For the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will be darkened and the stars no longer shine.

The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem, the earth and sky will tremble. But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. (3:14-16)

It's interesting that the Joel calls that place of judgment, the "valley of decision." Sometimes the valleys we find ourselves in are the result of our own bad decisions, or decisions gone wrong.

When I was a senior in HS, my parents and I disagreed on the direction my future should take. One day, in anger and rebellion, I stomped out of the house and marched myself down to the local teen hang out to introduce myself to the one boy in town they had forbidden me to hang out with or date. We got married 3 weeks after I graduated HS.

Several difficult years later we wound up divorced. On the day I learned I was getting a divorce, the first thought I had was, "what do I tell the children?" Anybody who's ever gotten a divorce knows the whole divorce thing is awful. No matter what the reason, it's devastating. I was in a valley, a low point, but the Lord was in the valley with me and rescued me and brought me out.

Valley's can be scary. You feel alone. Everything looms above you. You can't see what lies beyond the immediate. Your vision is limited. It's hard to see the way out. Decisions about the next step are difficult.

Yet many of the most important decisions that we make happen in the valleys of life, when we're at our lowest point.

It may be times when we're facing loss; like the loss of a job, the loss of an important relationship, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a home, etc.,

Times of crisis can also be the most delicate times for faith testing what we believe about God. Some come through difficult times with their faith stronger than ever, while others become so disappointed in God that they walk away from their faith.

Faith always requires a decision and most decisions require faith!

In (2:12) the Lord says, "Turn to me now, while there is time! Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping and mourning. Don't tear your clothing in your grief; instead tear your hearts. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful. He is not easily angered. He is filled with kindness and is eager *not* to punish you.

In the face of crisis people often feel helpless, powerless. Joel told his people, "when you don't know what to do, turn to God." He told the priests to come to the Temple and the people to gather for a solemn meeting for prayer and fasting.

He invites everyone, the elders, the children, and the babies to come to worship and the priests who minister in the Lord's presence should stand between the people and the altar and pray. (1:13-15; 2:15-17)

Sometimes when personal catastrophe's happen, church is the last place we want to be. When I was going through a divorce, some of my Christian friends pulled away from me. I felt bad enough and I didn't want to go to church so I could feel worse.

But Joel is saying that's exactly where we need to be during the bad times. For the Lord is a refuge, a safe place in times of trouble. Verse 18 says the Lord will have mercy on his people and answer their prayers.

Now, I know you're going to get a kick out of this. You know my girlfriend with the two houses (who I spoke of earlier), since the first house still hasn't sold and she couldn't keep paying for two houses, in desperation she put the townhouse they were living in up for sale.

This past Friday she called to tell me that she accepted an offer on the town house...and guess who bought it? A woman named Mercy Midotah, (which sounds like mercy "my

daughter.”). They are moving back to the home they loved which is located on Grace St. We had been praying for God to extend his mercy and grace to my friend and her family. When she called me she said, “Mercy bought our house and we’re moving back to Grace! Does God have a sense of humor or what!

Joel tells his people that God will send them grain and wine and olive oil, he will satisfy their needs. He will protect them from the advancing devastation of the locust.

He says, “don’t be afraid, be glad now and rejoice because the Lord has done great things.” (2:20-24) The rains will come again and the threshing floor will be piled high with grain, for the Lord says, “I will give you back what the locust have eaten.” (v25)

So, what do we tell our children?

- Tell them about the good times and the bad.
- Tell them when they don’t know what to do, pray.
- Tell them about the mighty acts of God. Everyone has a story, look for the hand of God in yours and share your faith.
- Tell them about God so they *will* know what to believe.
- Tell them that when disaster of any kind strikes, whether it be natural disaster, personal disaster or from the hand of God, they can turn to the Lord who rescues.
- Tell them that God always hears our prayers and that he answers prayer,
- Tell them that he can meet their needs and even restore the years the locust have eaten.
- Tell them that the Lord is a shelter and a refuge, a mighty fortress and that all who call on Him will be saved.
- This, Joel says, this what you tell them.

Let’s Pray:

Dear Lord, thank you for your many blessings. Thank you for sending prophets like Joel to remind us to come to you at all times, especially when the bad times come. Thank you for the promise to be with us in the valley’s of life. If there are any here today who are in the valley and haven’t made up their mind about you and decided what they believe, I pray you will open the eyes of their heart and give them faith to believe. Lord, I pray for those who may feel like some aspect of their life has been stripped by consuming locust and they are experiencing emptiness, waste and loss, help them rebuild the ruins, renew their joy and restore the years the locust have eaten. Thank you that we can call on you to be saved, that we can run to you our mighty fortress and shelter from the storms of life.

In Jesus name, we pray and praise you. Amen.,

BLESSING: Psalm 78: 4-7 (Prayer & Confession)

⁴ We will not hide these truths from our children but will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the LORD. We will tell of his power and the mighty miracles he did.

⁵ For he issued his decree to Jacob; he gave his law to Israel. He commanded our ancestors to teach them to their children,

⁶ so the next generation might know them— even the children not yet born— that they in turn might teach their children.

⁷ So each generation can set its hope anew on God, remembering his glorious miracles and obeying his commands.

So be glad and rejoice, for the Lord *has* done great things! Amen.