



Joel 2:28-32  
 Minor Leagues:  
 Insights from the Minor Prophets  
 The Gift of the Spirit

Rev. Brian North  
 June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Two weeks ago we started a series of messages going through the Minor Prophets. They are among the least read books in the entirety of the Bible, but have significant insight on living in a relationship of faith and trust in God. Last week we stepped away from the series as the youth led us in worship, we had 8 students publicly profess faith in Jesus as the culmination of their Confirmation process, with five of them confirming their baptisms from when they were much younger, and with three of them being baptized. It was a great Sunday! I'm telling you, if you missed last Sunday, you really missed a great service that was a witness to God's work in the lives of these middle school and high school students. It was very memorable and impactful.

And so today we return to our series on the Minor Prophets. Now, as I mentioned last week, **Biblical prophecy is not so much about predicting the future as it is to calling God's people back to a right relationship with God.** A prophet's role was to help keep God's people on the straight and narrow path, or to help them get back on that path if they'd wandered off (usually helping them get back on track). And so part of that was talking about consequences for continuing to wander off: "If you all continue walking down this path away from God, here's where it leads." The hope is that they'd come back to the path that leads to God, and so the dire consequences that are spoken of would not in fact come to fruition.

It's quite a bit like if someone were to speak to a married person and say, "Hey, if you keep interacting with people of the opposite sex in borderline kosher kinds of ways, it will have negative impacts on your marriage, and it could lead to crossing a line that will definitely negatively impact your marriage. You really ought to reign in your behavior and think about the kinds of situations you're letting yourself get into." That's being a prophet.

The climbers who had to get rescued off of Mount Rainier last week needed a prophet kind of person in their lives before they went. They needed someone

to say to them, “Hey look, the weather predicted for the next couple days is not so good, and if you go up on the mountain right now, there’s a good chance you’re going to get into a heap of trouble, even life-threatening situations.”

You see: **We need these prophetic voices in our lives sometimes.** This is why it’s so good to read the prophets and study them, because it reminds us that we need those kinds of people in our lives too. We need people who, because they love us and have our best interest in mind, will call a spade a spade (with kindness and love) and tell us when we seem to be headed off the rails. That is largely the role of the prophet.

Now the good news is that they would also paint pictures of how things could look when we’re on the right path with God. This is the prophetic word of what God will do. They’re like rays of sunshine in an otherwise cloudy/story message. They often give this positive motivation as well. And Joel has both of these themes – warning about consequences for sin, and a word of hope about what God will do for those who are in relationship with him.

Before we dive into those, let’s get a little background on Joel. First, let’s take about 15 seconds and talk about Joel, the person. And 15 seconds is literally all we need, because we know absolutely nothing about him other than what the first verse of the book of Joel says, **“The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel” (Joel 1:1)**. So here’s what we know about this person named Joel: His dad’s name is Pethuel. We don’t know anything else: what tribe of Israel he is from, we don’t know about his family - unlike Hosea who we looked at two weeks ago we don’t know if he’s married... maybe he’s a Husky, maybe he’s a Cougar, maybe he likes rock music, maybe he likes country, maybe he’s more intellectual or sophisticated than either of those and he likes jazz or classical. Who knows? All we know is that he’s the son of Pethuel.

What about when he wrote? We’re given scant information about this as well. No kings or any other leaders are named that would allow us to anchor this to a particular point in history. No events are named that can be tethered to a particular date or era of time. He’s not mentioned by any of the other Biblical

authors. He writes in the opening chapter about a plague of locusts that had devoured their crops, but that doesn't help a whole lot. That kind of thing happens occasionally in that part of the world. Many of us probably recall that one of the plagues that came to Egypt in the days of Moses, for example, was a plague of locusts. In fact, a few years ago locusts were swarming across the border between Egypt and Israel – appropriately, just three weeks before the Passover celebration. Here's what the New York Times reported on March 6, 2013:

**“By Tuesday, grasshoppers the size of small birds were reported on balconies and in gardens in central and northern Israel. But the largest concentration, an ominous black cloud of millions, settled for the night near the tiny rural village of Kmehin in Israel’s southern Negev desert, not far from the border with Egypt.**

**Potato farmers in the area complained that their fields were being ruined. Drivers said they could not see through their windshields for all the bugs flying in their direction” (New York Times, March 6, 2013).**

**(Picture)** The article went on to mention that an even worse invasion happened in 1950. Another significant one was in the spring of 1915 and another one in 1865 which was still remembered as “the year of the locusts” 50 years later in that 1915 invasion.<sup>i</sup> There have been others that weren't as significant in between those, and many before that were as significant. The point here is that, first of all, if we doubt the historicity of the Biblical account of locust invasions or because of other historical events it reports that seem beyond the scope of possibility...and if that casts any shadow of doubt on the trustworthiness of the Bible, we ought to give the Bible the benefit of the doubt. These locust invasions are legitimate and they still happen. But *when* this particular one happened is the second point (actually, where I started) about all this: and about that we have no idea. Joel is clearly writing soon after this locust invasion, but we just don't know when it was.



In fact, here's how wildly speculative scholars have been about when Joel was written. **Some believe he wrote in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. prior to the Jewish exile, some say he wrote in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., others in the 5<sup>th</sup>, and some as late as the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.** The trend in Biblical scholarship seems to place him in the late 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., like around 510 B.C. This would be pretty early on in the life of the nation of Israel after the Exile. John Calvin summarizes the dating of Joel with this statement, "As there is no certainty, it is better to leave the time in which he taught undecided; and as we shall see, this if of no great importance."

We *can* ascertain from the text that he most likely was in Judah, the southern portion of the nation of Israel. So at least there's a pretty high degree of certainty there. But where there is absolute certainty is in the themes of what he preached and the message that got recorded here in the book of Joel.

**One of the significant themes of Joel is "the Day of the Lord."** It's a "day" – almost certainly not a literal 24-hour period of time – that seems to stretch across the immediate future of Israel and into the distant far reaches of time. One commentator writes about his use of "The day of the Lord", "**Joel's vision and words have an elastic capacity, stretching the normal constraints of time, so that the present, the immediate future, and the distant future are all condensed as if contained within a small capsule of time.**"<sup>ii</sup>

So the "Day of the Lord" is a coming day that will bring God's judgment, though it may also not be a one-time occurrence. But unlike Israel's previous perception of God's judgment, where they thought God would condemn the nations around them and lift them up as exemplary and without stain, Joel – and other prophets as well – portrays a judgment that includes them. They are not so perfect. **Judah and the whole nation of Israel, is not without sin, and not beyond judgment.** Nowhere in Joel is the sin of the nation explicitly stated, but in several places there are verses that speak to their returning to God in the future. And so they seem to have abandoned a relationship with God.

And this idea that they're not so perfect and without fault and that they come under the judgment of God as well is a strong reminder to us not to be complacent in our faith and our own assessment of our relationship with God. Too frequently, we Christians live in a way that takes advantage of God's love and grace. **It may not be a conscious thing that we do, but we often live as if to say, "Well, Jesus died for my sins, so it's ok to do this sinful thing; God's judgment isn't for me."** And it's true: Jesus *has* died for our sins. He has taken the judgment of God upon himself. It's as if the Day of the Lord came on that Good Friday nearly 2,000 years ago, though even that isn't the final one, at least not in a chronological sense. Chronologically, there is another day of judgment coming.

And even though the cross of Christ covers us in that judgment, that doesn't excuse us from our pride, greed, lust, and other sins, that God calls us to turn away from. And so we see in Joel an invitation to live a different way. For instance in Joel 2:12-13, we read, **"Even now,' declares the Lord,**

**'return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting and weeping and mourning.'**

**Rend your heart**

**and not your garments.**

**Return to the Lord your God,**

**for he is gracious and compassionate,**

**slow to anger and abounding in love,**

**and he relents from sending calamity" (Joel 2:12-13).**

"Rend your heart and not your garments." In other words, confession and repentance isn't just an outward thing. You can't just say the right words and have the results be like spiritual Lucky Charms: Magically delicious. Confession isn't about saying a "magical" phrase. It's much deeper: it's a heart thing. And because God is gracious and compassionate and slow to anger and abounding in love as these verses say...his judgment on us will relent, as Jesus has taken the ultimate calamity upon himself.

And then a few verses later, in Joel 2:28-32, we get a look to the future that's one of these positive motivators I spoke of earlier. **It's a prophecy that is said with the hope that it *will* come true, when we read of what God will**

**do after people have “rent their hearts” and returned to the Lord, and that is that God will pour out His Spirit on all people.** Young, old, men, women...there isn't a limit here. And it's not just that His Spirit will come upon the Israelite men and women, young and old...it's on “all people.”

We may not appreciate the significance of this prophetic word because we kind of take it for granted that God's Spirit is universally available to people through faith in Jesus. But for them, this was ground-breaking and not probably fully comprehensible, because previously God's Spirit had only come upon certain people – like prophets, kings, or other leaders – and oftentimes for only certain periods of time. It would be a special anointing of God's Spirit upon someone for a particular season, and then leave.

**But this prophecy is clearly different: the Spirit is beyond the boundaries of Israel, and without respect to age or gender.** It's available for everyone. And if we fast-forward several hundred years from when Joel gave this prophetic word, we read of Jesus in the gospels speaking of the Spirit (often called the Comforter) that he will send...and then we read in Acts 2 that the Spirit was poured out upon the first disciples as they were gathered together, and some people who were watching and listening in on their gathering asked about what was going on as the Disciples started speaking in foreign languages and odd things were happening. In response to their inquiry, Peter stands up and these verses, and says that this prophecy is being fulfilled right there: that the Spirit is being poured out.

**And ever since, as His gift to us, God has been pouring out His Spirit upon those who call upon the name of the Lord.** If we rend our hearts – if we have a deep and honest desire to turn from our sin – if we do that, and call upon the name of Jesus, then God's gift is His Spirit. And it's a gift that is with us in this life and in the life to come. It's not temporal; it's eternal. Jesus demonstrates the eternal nature of this gift with his resurrection. Whenever the final Day of the Lord comes...when that final judgment comes...Jesus has taken that judgment upon himself, and the eternal gift of the Spirit continues to be enjoyed by those who call on the name of the Lord.

**So, where is the voice of a prophet needed in your life? Where might you**

**need a voice of warning and encouragement to get on track and in relationship with God your Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer?** What is off the rails, and needing a true rending of the heart? These are the key questions that Joel asks. And when we rend our hearts – not just a surface-y act of contrition, but a genuine repentance and desire to turn away from our sin – when we do that and recognize Jesus as the one who stands in our place on that Day of the Lord, God pours His Spirit out on whoever it is that makes that confession. Just as happened in Acts, just as we saw that last week with the students who proclaimed faith in Jesus, confirmed their baptisms, or were baptized in the service: May we *all* call on the name of the lord and receive the Gift of His Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. And may we continually bring glory and honor to him now, and evermore. Let's Pray...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Peter C. Craigie, "Twelve Prophets, Vol. 1" p. 86, where he cites a National Geographic article from December of 1915 that reports on this locust infestation and he mentions the 1865 one as well.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p. 87.