

Rend Your Hearts

2025-06-29

Sermon on the book of Joel

One of the great things about being a pastor is that it encourages you to keep on learning. My Bible knowledge continues to increase because preaching keeps me digging deeper and deeper into God's word. Here at First Baptist, I have been blessed to be able to work with a team of preachers. Do you realise what a blessing it is to have this crew of people who preach here? There are the regulars of Mark, Troy, and Katelyn, and then you have those who preach from time to time like Kyle, Faye, Anna, and others. What a rich blessing to have all these Bible scholars who dig into the word every week to help us know more about the Bible. I have learned much from working with them and we all learn much as we hear their sermons.

And, I am going to remind us, that it is not enough for us to hear these great sermons, we must continue to study on our own and then apply what we have heard. Today, I have been assigned to speak upon the book of Joel, and I am happy to do so because the book of Joel has something to say about making certain we internalise the message of God. So, let's dive into the book of Joel together.

As Pastor Mark told us last week, we are studying the minor prophets. The book of Joel is one of the twelve books called the minor prophets. They are sometimes called The Book of the Twelve. They can be read individually, but they can also be taken together and read as one book with one message for God's people. Most of the twelve books speak of very specific hard times that the people of Israel have been through. They speak of various conquering people who oppressed the people of Israel.

But Joel is much more general and does not address a specific time in the life of the people of Israel. It is philosophic in its presentation of the problems of Israel.

Joel 1:2-4 says,

² Hear this, you leaders of the people.

Listen, all who live in the land.

In all your history,

has anything like this happened before?

³ Tell your children about it in the years to come,

and let your children tell their children.

Pass the story down from generation to generation.

Let me just pause here for a moment and remind us that these words are for us as well. The people of Israel, not just the leaders, are encouraged to reflect upon their history and how God has blessed them. They are to keep telling the story to the next generations. That is true for us now too. We are to keep proclaiming God's message for the world and keep doing his work.

About three weeks ago, we saw something like 380 students come through our doors for an ice cream float as an end of year celebration for them. Who was serving the students and visiting with them? Seniors, baby-boomers, gen xers, millennials. Multiple generations seeking to pass on the love of God from one generation to the next to the next. Well done First Baptist.

Now, after Joel tells the people they are to continue to pass on God's message, he speaks of dark times in the life of the people.

⁴ After the cutting locusts finished eating the crops,
the swarming locusts took what was left!
After them came the hopping locusts,
and then the stripping locusts, too!

Joel speaks generally of what has happened to the people of Israel and does not give us a context for the events to which he is referring. The question he asks at the start is "In all your history, has anything like this happened before?"

There are two possible answers to that question: yes or no. On the one hand, we could certainly answer with a "yes." Joel is likely referring to how God's people have been repeatedly conquered by the Assyrians who swarmed upon them like locusts and the Babylonians who destroyed like locusts and many other peoples who have from time to time conquered and taken captive the people of God.

Or they might answer "no," because this current situation is more severe than others we have experienced.

But Joel is also speaking more philosophically and pondering why it is that God's people continue to be invaded. If they are truly God's people, why do they have so much suffering?

Joel speaks poetically of locusts that invade the land, but this would have brought many things to mind for the original readers and hearers of these words. They would remember that locusts had been one of the plagues that had come upon the people of Egypt that allowed the people of Israel to escape their bondage from the Egyptians. Now they would see that they had been plagued with literal locusts and metaphorical locusts in the form of invading armies. Joel is asking the question, "Why do these things keep happening to us?"

It is much like we might ask ourselves in our own time, when will all these bad things stop happening to us? We might ask that about our individual lives, like when will this illness be gone, or when will these disasters stop happening in my life? Or we may think about it on a broader scale and think when will these catastrophic world events stop happening? Depending upon how far back your memory goes, you may think of September 11, 2001, and the chain of events set in motion by that day of terrorism, the global pandemic of 2020 to 2023, the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, the war in Iran, or the tariff wars of 2025. We ask these

questions, and we cry out to God for relief from the terror and suffering. What is the answer from God?

Joel 2:1, 2 says,
Sound the trumpet in Jerusalem!
 Raise the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let everyone tremble in fear
 because the day of the Lord is upon us.
² It is a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of thick clouds and deep blackness.
Suddenly, like dawn spreading across the mountains,
 a great and mighty army appears.
Nothing like it has been seen before
 or will ever be seen again.

The people of Israel are crying out, why is this happening to us, and Joel's answer is "prepare yourselves, for something worse is coming!" The Day of the Lord is coming. In the Hebrew Bible, the Day of the Lord can be a day of rescue as it was when the locusts and other plagues came upon Egypt and rescued the people from slavery.

But, in this case, the people of God are on the wrong side of the Day of the Lord. God is pronouncing judgement on the people of Israel and not on their oppressors.

Why? Because the oppressed have become the oppressors. Many of the other eleven minor prophets will give the specifics of how Israel has oppressed the poor and the slaves in their land.

Amos 2:7 is one example of how God's people have become the oppressor, "They trample helpless people in the dust and shove the oppressed out of the way."

Amos 5:11 says, "You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent."

Amos 5:12 says, "You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts."

Amos 8:5 says, "You can't wait for the Sabbath day to be over and the religious festivals to end so you can get back to cheating the helpless. You measure out grain with dishonest measures and cheat the buyer with dishonest scales."

Joel on the other hand, is non-descript and God's word leaves it to other writers to give the specifics. Joel instead tells the people what they must do to be saved. Some would say that Joel is the key to understanding all the other minor prophets.

In Joel 2:12-14 we read,
That is why the Lord says,
 "Turn to me now, while there is time.
Give me your hearts.
 Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

¹³ Don't tear your clothing in your grief,
but tear your hearts instead."

Okay, now verse 13 is a key verse and I want to make sure we understand what this is about. Some translations say, "rend your hearts and not your clothing." What does it mean to rend your clothes or tear your clothes.

Well, the Jewish people would literally tear their clothing in times of mourning for the death of a person, in times of persecution and destruction of God's law, in times when someone would claim authority over God (that is, blasphemy), and in times of repentance, which is relevant in this passage.

In any of these situations listed, a god-fearing Jew might tear their clothing in such a way that it could never be repaired and could not be worn again. Most likely one would tear the collar of a piece of clothing down to somewhere on the higher part of the chest. It was a dramatic act to show extreme unhappiness with a situation.

At the trial of Jesus before his crucifixion, Caiaphas the High Priest tears his robes to demonstrate his belief that Jesus had blasphemed by calling himself the Son of Man who would sit at the right hand of God. [Matthew 26:65](#), [Mark 14:63](#) is an instance of the rending of garments for blasphemy.

In this case, it is an outward show of repentance.

Joel goes on in verse 13,

Return to the Lord your God,
for he is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.
He is eager to relent and not punish.

¹⁴ Who knows? Perhaps he will give you a reprieve,
sending you a blessing instead of this curse.
Perhaps you will be able to offer grain and wine
to the Lord your God as before.

But, like many other laws of God, the religious leaders instructed the people on the outward show, more than the internal change of heart.

Joel takes exception to this and tells the people to rend their hearts, not just their clothing.

God does not just want outward shows of repentance. On top of the outward acts of repentance, like perhaps taking communion together, he wants internal, spiritual repentance that leads to true external acts of repentance. He wants the people of God to stop the kinds of things that Amos and other prophets point out such as stopping "trampling helpless people in the dust and shoving the oppressed out of the way." He wants internal repentance that leads to a change in behaviour.

Let's think of a couple of examples:

When Jesus was crucified, there was a thief being crucified on each side of him. One thief mocks him, but the other thief, rends his heart. His outward life had been exposed. His body had been humbled. Yet, there was one more thing for him to do – rend his heart. He turns to Jesus and says, I am a sinner, forgive me. And Jesus promises a reward for him.

I have seen people in our congregation rend their hearts. People who wonder, "How should I live?" "Am I living as God wants me to live?" These are the questions of a rent heart. These are the questions of a heart that is asking for God's wisdom. And he will give wisdom.

Hearts that are torn in two, seeking to know God's will, will look at their life and consider how to live in relation to other people in the world. When our hearts are torn, we will look at how our privilege affects others. We will seek to right the wrongs of our world.

I had a bit of an insight just the other day as I was reading the autobiography of Dr. Anthony Campolo. He was speaking of a time in his life when he was approached by a group of dairy farmers in New Jersey to help them with their plight. The state government of the day was controlling the price of milk so that families in the general public would be able to afford milk on their cereal and cream in their coffee and cheese on their tables. This was in the 1970s. The problem was that the price of milk was kept so low that the farmers couldn't make any money and couldn't afford to produce the milk and many of them were going bankrupt. To make matters worse, Canada had a subsidy program at the time that helped pay farmers for producing milk and people of the United States were buying subsidised milk from Canada. Campolo helped the New Jersey dairy farmers to organise a protest at their state congress building and got the state to raise the price of milk. It was a good story of how an oppressor, in this case the state government of New Jersey, was called to account for their oppression of dairy farmers and a wrong was made right.

But it occurred to me that we must be very careful how we view oppressors and the oppressed. Which one is the oppressor, and which one is the oppressed can be missed in the moment. In this story I have just told you, Canada was part of an oppressive system that prevented the American dairy farmers from being paid a fair price for their milk. Our subsidised Canadian farmers were making a living while the American farmers were being oppressed by systems that included the dairy farm on which I lived in Canada.

In our current world of tariff wars, one of the sticking points in trade agreements between Canada and the US is the fact that we still have a subsidised dairy industry in Canada. Is a tariff against our dairy products coming from an oppressor or are we Canadians the oppressors in this dairy story. The question is not easy to answer.

That is one example, but another might be here in our own city when we see people who are caught up in drugs and mental health issues. We might want to say, "Why God is our city having such a problem with drugs and mental health?" And God might say to us, it is because some minority groups in your city have been mistreated and oppressed for so long. A day of the Lord is coming upon your city. Who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed?

We must have true internal repentance that leads us to change our behaviours toward those who we have been oppressed.

What of other minorities in our culture who are oppressed and being shoved aside? Who are they and what is our part in shoving them aside? How would God have us repent of the things we, as a society, have done? Does he want us to rend our clothes, or does he want us to rend our hearts? Does he want us to have an external response or an internal response to the problems of our world? Will our internal response lead to real external change or will we simply tear our clothes in disgust?

Okay, now that the prophet Joel and I have given you some sobering things to think about, let's turn to the hope that Joel offers. Certainly, we will remember these words of hope from Joel because Peter quotes them in his sermon that is recounted in the book of Acts.

For, in Joel 2:28, 29 we read,
²⁸ "Then, after doing all those things,
I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.
²⁹ In those days I will pour out my Spirit
even on servants—men and women alike.

Joel looks forward to a day when the people of Israel will truly rend their hearts, truly repent, and follow the Messiah. On this side of history, we know the Messiah to be Jesus. And we also know who the Spirit is, it is the Spirit that lives in every believer. We live in this time when God has written his law on our hearts, and we are to be guided by the Holy Spirit, which will lead to us following God's law. We don't rely upon governments or pharisees or religious gurus to tell us what is right and wrong. We have the Bible, and we have the Holy Spirit that lives in us to help us understand what is right and what is wrong. But knowing right and wrong in any given circumstance requires a humble spirit that listens and bends and makes sure we are hearing the true Spirit and the true Word of God and not a cultural or even a churchy facsimile of the Word and the Spirit.

We must truly seek out answers to the question, "Who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed?" We must ask ourselves who it is that we ourselves might be oppressing. And have true empathy for the oppressed and true sorrow for our own

part in the oppression. We must not only rend our clothes in repentance but rend our hearts.