
Day 164 - June 13

The Divided Kingdom (930-725 BCE)

The Prophecy of Joel

Readings: *Joel 1:1-3:21*

Reflections:

- The prophecy of Joel introduces into the story a radical twist. Remember that to this point everything Israel could have ever wanted was there for them. They had their Torah (clear understanding of what the rules are and harsh consequences when you deviate), their own Temple (a way to be forgiven for when you mess up and a priesthood to represent your needs to God and help you know God's thoughts about your major decisions), their own Territory (land to provide physical security and freedom to live life the way you want), and their own Tribes (sense of national identity and King to give them a clear sense of leadership). Every environmental issue had been provided by God and as we can see in the most recent events in the story, the nation was in chaos and complete sin before God. As Joel comes on the scene he begins what will be a long process of prophetically introducing why none of this works to change the human heart. Dishing out rules and consequences, having a system of forgiveness, enjoying peace and freedom and prosperity, and even having community and leadership to guide your life...none of this will ultimately work to change the human heart. Joel pulls back the current and begins to introduce what God will one day do begin the new act in the drama, "The story of what DOES work!"
- The image of the locusts of judgment is horrible to imagine. The Promised Land, Israel's Garden of Eden (Joel 2:3), is consumed by locust so that they are left with nothing. The idolatrous indulgences of Israel have positioned them under God's judgment and an army is promised to descend on them and ravage them even as a massive swarm of locust wipes out the vegetation in its path.
- The call for repentance is outlined very carefully (Joel 2:12-17). The first important point to note is that people are not called to go to the temple to offer sacrifices! They are called to "rend your heart." Similar to David's confession in Psalm 51, the issue is the heart, not our adherence to religious ritual. God is seeking a heart that is humble before him. As expressions of repentance, the people were to stop everything. The image is a couple to be married abandoning their wedding on its very day is a striking image. Then, the priests are to lead the way and as we see they are called to "weep between the

temple porch and the altar.” The priests are to leave the place of “hanging out and chatting” (aka the temple porch) and to draw near to the place of sacrifice, the altar. Are they to offer sacrifices? Again, no. They are to weep before God. Here we see the prophet call the leadership to leave their shallow approach to God and to press into the place of sacrifice as they weep with broken hearts for their sin.

- Here are three important notes to consider. First, we must remember that God is ultimately looking at our hearts, not on our outward religious actions. Second, being right with God is more important than anything. It doesn't even matter if it is your wedding day or the funeral of your parents, if there is something God wants you to do right then, God must take first priority. Jesus echoes this very same thing (see Luke 9:57-62). Third, leadership must guard against living with a “temple porch” approach to their role. They are not just called out to socialize and be popular with people. They play an important role of drawing near to God and modeling/shepherding people into intimacy with God. At this point in time, their role was to lead the way in repentance through weeping but this principle is something that is foundational for all seasons of leadership.
- God promises to send new wine and oil of blessing, “enough to satisfy you fully.” Here is another important truth to note. The pagan idol worship of that day was based around drunken orgies that offended God. When God promises to bless them he is going to pour out new wine. God was into partying, he just wanted to be at the center of it. He was not against them having a good time, he was standing against the idolatry. Again as Jesus will model, the best parties are the Father's parties.
- Embedded in this prophecy is one of the great passages foreshadowing the coming reign of the Messiah. “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” Young and old, male and female will receive the power of the Spirit. All people will be able to hear God speak. Dreams and visions are the language of God as he relates to us through our imaginations.
- This is an important promise. Up until this point, only specific people received the Spirit for specific purposes. This promise declared that all people would be intimately and powerfully filled with the presence of God himself. This is a radical prophecy that we find will be expanded in the years to come by other prophets. In time we will discover that the reason for this outpouring of God's Spirit is so that people will be changed from the inside out, starting with new hearts and minds that can hear God speak and can feel and think like he does. The curse of sin and the fall would only be broken in the human heart as God himself enters in and changes us with the power of his love and truth. Now having said this, a new radical form of forgiveness is needed to open the way for this kind of permanent intimacy between a holy God and a fallen race.
- God's promise of restoration is complete and full. “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” For anyone who has suffered under sin, their own or another person's sin, this is a wonderful passage to hang on to. God does not just enable a

person to survive the destructive power of sin. He wants to completely wipe out the impact of that sin so that all that is left is His blessing. In fact, the nations that ravaged Israel will be brought to severe judgment because of their abuses against God's people (see Joel 3:1-8).

- Joel ends with a detailed outline of how God will judge the nations for their brutal treatment of Israel. The day of the Lord is clearly something to be feared. Now there is a phrase in this passage that becomes important for future prophecies. Joel states "Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weakling say, 'I am strong!' Come quickly, all you nations from every side, and assemble there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD! Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the alley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side." This is a frightening image of war and judgment. What is fascinating is that both Isaiah and Micah reverse this exact image to declare a coming day of radical peace coming to the nations through Israel (Isaiah 2:3-4; Micah 4:2-4). Although we remain in the story of "what doesn't work" we see again the seeds are being planted for what will one day be fully revealed through God's Messiah, the story of what does work!