

God Promises His Presence

Devotional Reading: Exodus 33:12–23
Background Scripture: Joel 1:1–4; 2:18–31

Joel 2:21–27

21 Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice: for the LORD will do great things.

22 Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field: for the pastures of the wilderness do spring, for the tree beareth her fruit, the fig tree and the vine do yield their strength.

23 Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the LORD your God: for he hath given you the former rain moderately, and he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.

24 And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the fats shall overflow with wine and oil.

25 And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.

26 And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you: and my people shall never be ashamed.

27 And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed.

Key Text

Ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed. —Joel 2:27

From Darkness to Light

Unit 2: God's Promises

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List elements of cause and effect.
2. Compare and contrast the positive and negative imperatives in today's text.
3. Express confident assurance of God's presence in his or her life now.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. Rebuilding After Loss

B. Lesson Context

I. God's Renewal (Joel 2:21–25)

A. Fearless Occasion (v. 21)

B. Fruitful Land (vv. 22–25)

The Year Without a Summer

II. God's Reminders (Joel 2:26–27)

A. His Wondrous Work (v. 26)

Wrong Ingredients

B. His Commitment (v. 27)

Conclusion

A. Total Restoration

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Ethanim *Eth-uh-nim*.

Joash *Jo-ash*.

Nisan *Nye-san*.

Pethuel *Peth-you-el*.

Tishri *Tish-ree*.

Tyre *Tire*.

Zidon *Zye-dun*.

Introduction

A. Rebuilding After Loss

In 1874, swarms of grasshoppers swept through parts of the Great Plains of North America and laid waste to crops, wood, paper, and even people's clothing. These kinds of insects measure no more than one-and-a-half inches long, but when numbered in the billions, they have the potential to destroy thousands of acres of crops. The result of the destruction was total; people reported that land appeared as if it had been ravaged by wildfire.

Immigrants to Kansas were among the hardest hit by the swarms. People's livelihoods depended on bountiful crops, but the crops had been devoured and were no more. The

renewal of the land and the restoration of the people took years and required assistance from the entire nation.

A natural disaster of this level feels foreign for modern readers who have never experienced it. However, many people in today's world still suffer hardship because of destructive plagues of insects. The people of Judah and the prophet Joel could report on this type of destruction firsthand. Both the people *and* their land needed wondrous and miraculous renewal.

B. Lesson Context

Several uncertainties surround the composition of the book of Joel. The book opens by stating that what follows is “the word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel” (Joel 1:1). The name Joel was common in the Old Testament era (examples: 1 Chronicles 4:35; 5:4, 12; 6:33, 36; 7:3; 11:38; 15:7; 27:20; 2 Chronicles 29:12; Ezra 10:43; Nehemiah 11:9). Beyond the prophet's name and the name of his father, other personal details regarding this specific Joel are unavailable to us.

Several possibilities exist regarding the composition date of the book of Joel. Traditional interpretations date it to the ninth century BC. The era of King Joash (ruled 835–795 BC) is frequently listed as a possible backdrop for Joel's prophecy (see 2 Kings 12; 2 Chronicles 24).

However, other theories place the book in a postexilic context, after 538 BC. If Joel wrote in this context, then he was lamenting what had happened to Jerusalem (Joel 3:17) and held hope for God's vengeance against foreign aggressors (3:1–16). Some details behind the composition of the book of Joel may never be discovered. That fact should not dissuade modern readers from taking seriously the prophet's warnings and promises.

Joel directed his prophetic message to the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem (Joel 2:21). The book opens by describing a plague of insects that destroyed the crops of Judah (1:2–12, 17–20; 2:1–11). The once fruitful land of Judah became barren by the destructive insects. Because of the land's desolation, the people of Judah lived in famine and in want. Joel interpreted the destruction as the consequences of Judah's sin, and he called his audience to return to the Lord and repent (2:12–14; compare 2 Chronicles 6:28–31; Amos 4:6–11).

The Lord saw the turmoil in the land and the suffering of His people. Though the people had sinned, He had compassion for them (compare Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:17). The Lord was “jealous for his land” and showed “pity” for His people (Joel 2:18). He demonstrated His care by promising His people renewed sustenance (2:19) and protection from foreign enemies (2:20). His renewal would cause His people and their land to prosper. Because of His compassion, His greatness would be on display for His people and the whole world.

I. God's Renewal

(Joel 2:21–25)

A. Fearless Occasion (v. 21)

21. Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice: for the LORD will do great things.

The command to *fear not* appears at least 50 times in the Old Testament. Sometimes this command came directly from God (Genesis 15:1; 21:17; Joshua 8:1; Isaiah 41:14; etc.). At other times, the command came from God's prophet (Exodus 20:20; 1 Samuel 12:20; etc.). Despite

the people's hardship, they could take comfort in knowing that God was present; they had no reason to fear their situation (Isaiah 41:10–14; 43:1, 5; 54:14; etc.).

However, the command was not directed toward a person, but toward the *land* of Judah. The land had become distressed through a series of disasters (Joel 1:4, 6–7, 10–12; see Lesson Context), brought about on “the day of the Lord” (1:15; 2:11). God's promised redemption, however, would undo the results of those disasters and bring renewal to the land of Judah.

Though the land's desolation was evident, it was commanded to *be glad and rejoice* (compare Zephaniah 3:14–15). The greatness and might of *the Lord* would be on display through His acts of restoration (see 3:16–17). God had done *great things* for the people as they came out of bondage in Egypt (Exodus 7–14; 2 Samuel 7:21–23; Psalm 106:21). God would continue to do the same for His people and their land.

What Do You Think?

What are some of the great things that God has promised for you?

Digging Deeper

How will you “be glad and rejoice” in light of these promises?

B. Fruitful Land (vv. 22–25)

22. Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field: for the pastures of the wilderness do spring, for the tree beareth her fruit, the fig tree and the vine do yield their strength.

Joel described how the beasts of the field “groan” (Joel 1:18) and “cry” (1:20) because of the destruction of their habitats. Fire, drought, and swarms of insects had destroyed the land; *the pastures* and the fields were laid waste (1:10). The land was uninhabitable for all of creation (compare Jeremiah 9:10–11).

However, the Lord's great work of restoration (Joel 1:20, above) would come to the creatures of the land—they had no reason to fear! The Lord's restoration of *the wilderness* reflects the connectedness among God's creation. Only a fruitful land could sustain animals, livestock, and humans. Centuries later, Jesus taught that God provides for all of His creation, even the smallest animals (see Matthew 6:26; Luke 12:24–28).

Previously, vines were wasted and dried up, while the bark of the fig trees was stripped, leaving the trees to decay (Joel 1:7, 11). However, the land's restoration brought renewed provision for the people. A fruitful *vine* and *fig tree* showed that the people lived in safety and flourished (see 1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10). An ideal and good land easily supported grapevines and fig trees (see Deuteronomy 8:8). The agricultural renewal would bring about a settled population and would mark the end of the season of destruction (see Joel 1:11–12, 16–20).

What Do You Think?

How can believers praise God for His care over creation?

Digging Deeper

How can believers engage in creation care as an act of worship to God without worshipping creation itself?

23. Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the LORD your God: for he hath given you the former rain moderately, and he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.

This verse and the surrounding verses do not merely provide information regarding the climate and planting practices of the time. Instead, this verse directed the celebration of the land and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. *Zion* is another name for the city of Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 8:1; Joel 2:1).

Because of the Lord's restoration, the people would experience joy and gladness, feelings that were lost because of the turmoil (see Joel 1:16). The *Lord ... God* who seemed absent during disaster would deliver His people and be present with them as their true king (see Psalm 149:2).

The underlying Hebrew word translated *moderately* is translated elsewhere as "righteousness" (example: Amos 5:7) or "justice" (example: Isaiah 56:1). God showed justice to His people by allowing the return of the rains, thus bringing an end to the drought. When the people returned to God, His justice would be fulfilled, and He would show compassion (Joel 2:13).

The types of rains described in this verse reversed the land's harsh drought (Joel 1:17). The previously described agricultural growth (2:21–22, above) would be the result of renewed seasons of rain (see James 5:7). *Former rain* came in the late fall season during the month of Tishri (also known as Ethanim; see 1 Kings 8:2), and it helped soften the ground for sowing new crops. *Latter rain* fell during Nisan, *the first month* of Israel's religious calendar (corresponding to parts of March and April). This springtime rain brought necessary moisture to the ground prior to the harvest season. The land would return to a natural cycle of rainy and dry seasons and would experience no more drought (see Leviticus 26:4; Deuteronomy 11:14).

What is in view here is drought that came as a result of the people's failure to follow God (compare Jeremiah 50:38; Haggai 1:11). Drought results in famine, which was also a consequence for the people's failure to follow God (Ezekiel 5:17; Amos 8:11). By promising a return to consistent rainy seasons, God showed that He is faithful to care for His people and their land. He would treat His people rightly, as His justice poured down on the people and led to salvation (see Isaiah 45:8).

The Year Without a Summer

The year 1816 has been declared the Year Without a Summer. Mount Tambora, a volcano located in Indonesia, had erupted violently a year before. The resulting volcanic ash circled the globe and obstructed sunlight as far away as Europe and North America. Daily average temperatures dropped. A New York newspaper noted that parts of the state saw hard frosts during every month of that summer. Food shortages were unavoidable, leading some people to call that year "eighteen-hundred and starve-to-death." The world would recover, but only after several years passed.

During the time of Joel's proclamation, the people of Judah experienced a locust plague and famine. However, the prophet proclaimed that God's people should rejoice. Restoration would come and rains would return to the land.

Joel's words were intended as comfort to God's people—their restoration was at hand! What prevents you from hearing God's promises? Might your own sinful attitudes stand in the way?

—C. R. B.

24. And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the fats shall overflow with wine and oil.

Rather than experience famine, the people would see tangible examples of the Lord's blessing (compare Deuteronomy 7:13; Jeremiah 31:12).

A person would separate usable grain from husks and chaff at threshing *floors* (see commentary on Luke 3:17, lesson 3). Grains like wheat and seed like corn supplied the people with the means for sustenance. The land's restoration would be evident as the people contrasted previously "wasted" fields (Joel 1:10) with threshing floors *full of wheat*.

The underlying Hebrew word translated here as *fats* elsewhere speaks of presses for *wine* (Isaiah 16:10; Jeremiah 48:33). The first step in the creation of both olive *oil* and wine was to crush the fruit by a press or underfoot (Micah 6:15). The presses would *overflow* because of the bountiful harvest (see Proverbs 3:10). No longer would God's people have to live hand to mouth. Malachi prophesied of a similar blessing as God promised to "pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:10).

Wine and oil were an important part of everyday life of God's people. The two liquids were used for offerings to God (Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 23:13; Ezra 6:9) and indicated the presence of His blessing (Deuteronomy 7:13). They were also used at military defenses (2 Chronicles 11:11), perhaps for their medicinal properties (see Luke 10:34). The goodness of the Lord was displayed for His people through wine, oil, and wheat (Jeremiah 31:12).

What Do You Think?

How can you share with your neighbors from the overflow of your life's blessings?

Digging Deeper

How can believers avoid a "we won't have enough left" mindset in regard to such sharing?

25. And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.

Joel's prophecy began by describing the land's destruction by several types of insects (Joel 1:4). In the ancient Near East, as in the current day, invasive insects could number in the billions as their swarms came on a particular land. These swarms would "spoil" the land by eating the entirety of a land's vegetation, before swarming elsewhere (Nahum 3:16). Complete destruction followed these swarms: vines destroyed, vegetation ruined, and tree bark stripped (Joel 1:7). As a result, the people living in these lands frequently experienced famine (see Psalm 105:34–35).

The text's distinctions regarding the insects are not entirely clear to modern readers. Students have proposed that *the cankerworm*, *the caterpillar*, and *the palmerworm* are all different stages of *locust* development. Another interpretation is that the described insects may be distinct species of invasive creatures, like "worms" (Deuteronomy 28:39) and "locust" or "grasshoppers" (1 Kings 8:37).

Through the imagery of a *great army*, Joel described two major invasions: destructive insects (Joel 1:6) and foreign armies (2:20). Scripture is unclear regarding the exact identity of the foreign invaders, "the northern army" of Joel 2:20 (compare Jeremiah 1:14–15). Joel describes God's warning to Tyre, Zidon, and "all the coasts of Palestine" (Joel 3:4). Along with Egypt and Edom (3:19), these nations received a warning because of their action toward Judah (3:21).

Although Joel portrayed two destructive forces, insect and human, these may very well be two descriptions of the same locust plague. God's people could rejoice because God had not disregarded their suffering.

For God to renew the land and the people involved the people's receiving restitution for the *years* that they had lost. A form of the Hebrew verb translated here as *I will restore* appears in the Law of Moses to instruct a person who has harmed another person to make restitution for the wrongdoing (Exodus 22:1–14; Leviticus 24:18, 21).

God did no wrongdoing—the people were experiencing the consequences of their sins (compare 2 Chronicles 7:13–14, lesson 5). But God, “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:13), acknowledged their suffering and pitied His people (2:18). When God's people repented of their sinful and selfish ways, then they would experience comfort and restoration (see Isaiah 40:1–2).

II. God's Reminders

(Joel 2:26–27)

A. His Wondrous Work (v. 26)

26a. And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you.

The famine would be reversed. A time of celebration would follow as the people gathered to *eat in plenty* and *be satisfied*. The atmosphere would be like that of a celebration following a successful harvest season. The people would gather to *praise the name of the Lord* who provided the harvest (see Leviticus 26:5; Deuteronomy 16:10–15).

The restoration followed God's history of working *wondrously* for His people. Though the people experienced harsh and dehumanizing treatment while living as slaves in Egypt, God dealt miraculously with the Egyptians to free the people (Exodus 3:20; see Psalm 78:12; Micah 7:15). Isaiah described how God would complete a marvelous work to confound the ways of sinful humans (Isaiah 29:14). God demonstrated His covenant love to His people—despite their sinfulness—through marvelously kind ways (see Psalms 17:7; 31:21).

26b. And my people shall never be ashamed.

In the Old Testament era, to be *ashamed* had a communal dimension. Shame was not merely an individual's feelings of inadequacy or worthlessness. Instead, it was a social state in which a group of people were considered by others as lacking honor or dignity. Famine, drought, and infertile crops were shameful occurrences (see Jeremiah 12:13; 14:4) and were frequently the result of covenant disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15–24). The land's destruction put the people in the shameful position of not being able to take care of their basic needs.

Further, shame had a spiritual component. Prophets warned that shame would be experienced by those people who practiced idolatry (Isaiah 42:17; 44:9–11; 45:16) and opposed God (41:11; Jeremiah 17:13) and His word (8:9). The psalms, however, frequently declare the deliverance from shame as one of God's blessings (example: Psalm 25:2–3, 20). The people of Judah could be encouraged that, despite their shameful circumstances, God had not left them.

What Do You Think?

How do you differentiate feelings of guilt from feelings of shame?

Digging Deeper

How can focusing on Jesus' promises (2 Corinthians 12:9–10), provision (Philippians 4:19), forgiveness (1 John 1:9), and humility (Hebrews 9:26) serve to break the power of shame?

Wrong Ingredients

My sugar cookie dough looked like cake batter—slightly runny and less dense than cookie dough should be. I added more of the contents from the flour tin to the dough, hoping to thicken the runny mixture. After adding several heaping spoons from the tin, my cookie dough had not changed.

I tasted the dough and realized that I had made a horrible mistake! I had switched my tin of powdered sugar with my tin of flour. No wonder the cookie dough was the consistency of cake batter; it contained almost no flour and over twice the intended amount of sugar! Only after I threw out that batch of dough and remade it with correct ingredients did the cookies turn out as I planned. I ate *plenty* of those cookies!

The people of Judah failed to follow God's commands. They tried to add the wrong ingredients of idolatry and selfishness. After they experienced the consequences of their sin, God worked wondrously and gave them the opportunity to start over. They were to be a renewed people with plenty. What "wrong ingredients" prevent you from noticing God's wondrous work? Are you ready to throw those out and follow Him?

—M. L. E.

B. His Commitment (v. 27)

27. And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed.

At the center of the relationship between God and the people was the reality that God was present and active *in their midst* (see Leviticus 26:12; Deuteronomy 23:14). When their suffering was reversed and they saw the renewal of their land, they would *know* that God was present as He promised.

The uniqueness of this relationship was its exclusivity. *None else* could rightly claim Israel's allegiances and worship (see Exodus 20:3; Isaiah 45:5–6, 18; Hosea 13:4). God's presence with His people led to their rejoicing (Isaiah 12:6) for His mercies (Hosea 11:9). The people were to live without fear of being *ashamed*, because "the king of Israel" was in their midst (Zephaniah 3:15).

What Do You Think?

What do you need to remove from your life so that you will be better aware of the Lord's presence?

Digging Deeper

Who will you invite as an accountability partner to help in this regard?

Conclusion

A. Total Restoration

A plague of destructive insects with the accompanying feelings of terror—like the one described in this lesson’s text—might be incomprehensible to modern audiences. Therefore, the feelings of joy from God’s promised renewal might seem equally as foreign.

However, modern audiences of Joel’s prophecy can take away two applications. First, the text serves as an ancient reminder regarding a present reality: the importance of maintaining hope during seasons of suffering. Joel’s words, directed to a people in the midst of hardship, reoriented their expectations. Disaster and shame changed to flourishing and celebration, all because of God’s great work of renewal. Joel promised the people that hope was possible in the midst of disaster and suffering.

Although sin brings consequences, as it did for the people of Judah, God will not ignore or disregard His people. Instead, God can bring joy to replace sorrow. His timetable may not be ours, and He may not immediately bring joy or fix our suffering. However, His people can take comfort in knowing His presence.

Second, this passage serves as a reminder of God’s promises to renew all creation. Joel promised that not only would the people be restored, but creation—the land and the animals—would also be restored. God’s plan of restoration is not only focused on the spiritual realm but also the physical realm (see Romans 8:18–21). All things—spiritual and physical—belong to the God who created them. Joel calls us to embrace all aspects of God’s restoration and renewal. As a result, God’s people of all eras can celebrate His presence in their midst.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we trust that You will bring restoration to our world, despite our sinful actions and inactions. Renew us so that we might better follow and praise You. Show us how to live as Your people, free from shame. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God’s people need not be ashamed—He brings renewal!