

The Bible's Big Story



Joel

Joel serves as a fitting introduction to the prophetic books for three reasons: its undated setting highlights the broad, timeless applicability of its message, it exemplifies major themes and patterns common across prophetic literature, and its brevity pairs well with the introductory material on prophecy.

Introductory Information

Title: The book is named for its author, Joel, meaning “Yahweh is God.” While some see the name as symbolic given the book’s undated setting, it seems to be his actual name, since he further identifies himself as “the son of Pethuel” (1:1).

Authorship: Little is known of Joel beyond the book’s opening superscription. Internal clues (references to Judah and Jerusalem, and the absence of any mention of the Northern Kingdom) indicate he prophesied in the southern kingdom under the theocratic nation of Israel.

Date: The precise date of Joel’s prophecy is unknown. Arguments for a post-exilic date point to the absence of a named king and the lack of any mention of idolatry; arguments for an early date point to the absence of any mention of Assyria or Babylon. Both positions rest on arguments from silence and are therefore inconclusive. The Hebrew canon’s placement of Joel among the pre-exilic prophets is interesting, though not decisive.

Theme & Purpose: Joel calls the southern kingdom to repentance amid a national calamity. The focus centers on the “day of the Lord”—a period of divine intervention marked by both judgment and salvation. The book weaves together the themes of, judgment, salvation, and restoration as both a solemn warning and a certain hope. Its purpose is to provoke national repentance so that the people might escape judgment, experience restoration, and receive salvation at the coming day of the Lord.

Theme Summary: Joel describes a devastating locust plague that serves as a prophetic warning of the coming Day of the Lord. The prophet calls Israel to genuine, wholehearted repentance and promises that God will respond with mercy—restoring abundance, pouring out His Spirit on all people, and executing judgment upon the nations.

Redemption Revealed In Joel

Joel emphasizes that true repentance is a matter of inward transformation, not merely outward conformity.

Joel calls Israel to a repentance that goes beyond circumcision or ceremonial observance, since God looks upon the heart. This emphasis is consistent with the broader trajectory of Old Testament revelation going back to Moses, who foretold both Israel’s covenant failures and God’s future intervention in a new covenant that would circumcise His people’s hearts. (Deut. 30:6) Joel’s call to “rend your hearts and not your garments” (2:32) reflects this same demand for a Spirit-worked, inward repentance.

Joel anticipates the removal of ethnic boundaries, prophesying a future outpouring of the Spirit on “all flesh”.

Joel’s prophecy points to a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh, not signaling the Spirit’s absence in the Old Testament (since Romans 5:8 makes clear the Spirit was necessary for salvation then too), but describing a change in the breadth and intensity of His work. Whereas the Spirit came upon specific individuals for particular tasks in the Old Testament, Joel foretells an abundant outpouring on all God’s people, which the apostles recognize in Acts as extending beyond Israel to every nation, now that Christ has come and fulfilled God’s redemptive purpose through Abraham’s line.

Joel reveals that all people face one ultimate decision: call upon the name of the Lord for salvation, or face judgment.

Joel’s prophecy anticipates a future time when all people everywhere are called to repent, described poetically as, “Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision!” The choice set before Israel in Joel’s day mirrors the choice facing every person in the last days: call on the name of Jesus for salvation, or face judgment at the coming day of the Lord.

Closing

Joel’s message transcends its original time and place: the day of the Lord is near for all, and death and judgment are certain. (Hebrews 9:27) Every person stands in the valley of decision and must choose whom he will serve.

The Structure of Joel

Missed a class?
Scan to download handouts
and book structures.
www.teachingthetext.org/bbs-ot



THE DAY OF THE LORD		THE SALVATION OF THE LORD	
First Cycle: Judgement & Call to Repentance	Second Cycle: Judgement & Call to Repentance	RESTORATION	Judgement on the Nations

1

2:1–17

2:18–32

3

Notes:

Who Were the Prophets?

Within Israel the prophet functioned alongside the priest and king as one of three offices modeled first by Adam in Eden. Though Adam failed to fulfill these roles perfectly, God continued to raise up prophets throughout redemptive history. Old Testament vocabulary for “prophet” centers on the idea of communication: the prophet spoke only what God revealed, carrying the authority of “Thus says the Lord” rather than any power of his own. Their fourfold role was to preach to the heart, call for reform, intercede for the people, and warn of judgment as watchmen. Peter’s words confirm that the gospel was already central to the prophets’ own hope and preaching. (1 Pet 1:10–11)

Predictive Prophecy and its Goals

Predictive prophecy makes up only a small part of the prophetic writings, yet draws disproportionate modern attention. It was never meant to satisfy curiosity about the future but to communicate truth to the prophet’s original audience. In his book *Old Testament Introduction: Back to the Basics*, Michael Barrett identifies four goals of predictive prophecy:

1. To Glorify God
2. To Encourage Believers
3. To Intensify Desire for God's Will
4. To Motivate Sinners to Repentance and Saints to Purity

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Old Testament prophets functioned as messengers, reformers, intercessors, and watchmen. Which of these four roles do you find most challenging to understand or apply, and why?
2. Joel warns that the “day of the Lord” was near in his own day, yet the book also points forward to a final, ultimate day of the Lord. How does understanding this pattern of near and far fulfillment influence how you read prophetic warnings elsewhere in Scripture?
3. Joel insists that true repentance before God requires “rending your hearts and not your garments”. Where in your own life might you be tempted to settle for outward compliance instead of genuine heart change?
4. Both Peter at Pentecost and Paul in Romans 10:13 quote from Joel 2:28–32. How does seeing this passage fulfilled progressively, at Pentecost, in the ongoing spread of the gospel, and at the final day of the Lord, shape your understanding of God’s redemptive purpose?