

# NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE MINOR PROPHETS

## -PART TWO – THE BOOK OF JOEL

Joel is the second minor prophet in order. Whether it was the second book to be written after Hosea, we have no idea because there are no people or events by which we can identify the time of writing. From chapter one it is clear that there has been a locust plague but this was, and still is, a regular disaster in that part of the world. Locusts swarm in their billions eating everything green and living in their path and leaving at least the poor people desperate for food. What is obvious is that it would have had a big effect on the lives of the people among whom some at least might be asking questions about their relationship with God. Whenever people are searching for answers to life is a time of opportunity. Joel was sent by God to take that opportunity.

The theme of Hosea was redemption, illustrated powerfully by Hosea's own life and then applied to the spiritual 'adultery' of Judah and Israel. Through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ we can be redeemed from the slavery into which our sin has taken us. But once we are redeemed, forgiven and cleansed the question is 'what now?'. The book of Joel answers that question.

Hosea 6:2,3 left us with a clue to what comes after redemption, 'He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him. So let us know, let us press on to know the Lord. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; and He will come to us like the rain, like the spring rain watering the earth.' Jesus rose from the dead so that He could send the Holy Spirit, the one who gives us resurrection life. The Spirit is often pictured as water.(Jn.7:37-39) When we know we are forgiven, we are ready to know by what power we can live differently in future. The answer is by the Holy Spirit living the life of Jesus in us. The Bible calls it regeneration, new birth.(Jn.3:3; Tit. 3:5)

We saw in Hosea that often a key to an Old Testament book is in the way the New Testament quotes that book and applies it in proclaiming the gospel. This is a very effective approach in studying Joel. Peter on the day of Pentecost was answering the questions of the crowd as to what had happened when the Holy Spirit had been poured out for the first time in history into the lives of ordinary believers. He turned to Joel 2:28-32 for the answer.(Acts 2:17-21) His message was that now men and women, old and young, of any social class, could receive the Holy Spirit and be used by God to speak to others, like His prophets of old. The giving of the Spirit was linked to two important events. One had happened when Peter spoke. One was yet to come. Just over 7 weeks before Peter spoke, the sun had been turned to darkness,(Matt. 27:45) as Jesus hung on the cross, to illustrate how God the Father could not look on His Son as He carried the sin of the world. The other event was in the future, the coming of the great awesome day of the Lord. According to Peter,(Acts.2:17) the giving of the Holy Spirit began the last days of history which will climax in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to think about the work of the Spirit bracketed by 2 events in history - Jesus came to die and rise again, and Jesus will be returning when the work of the Spirit through us is done.

Joel referred to the sun and moon being darkened in two places, 2:10, where this event is linked to an earthquake,(Matt. 27:51-54) and again in 3:15. There is no way we can experience the work of Spirit in our lives that does not begin at the cross with repentance and redemption.

There are several references in Joel to other Old Testament passages which underline the same theme.

1. He talked repeatedly of Zion.(2:1,15,23,32; 3:16,21) Zion was another name for the hill on which the temple had been built. The temple was the place in the Old Testament where God lived in His house. In the New Testament, God's temple is us, as He lives in us by His Holy Spirit.(I Cor.3:16; 6:19)
2. He referred to the Garden of Eden,(2:3) where all was as God intended it to be. Regeneration is about restoring us to the condition God first planned for us.

3. The several descriptions of the sun being darkened parallel Isa.13:10,11. We have already related these to the time when Jesus hung on the cross but they are also linked to the day of Lord's return and judgement, suggesting that what happened at the cross may also be a foretaste of more awesome events still to come.

An outline of the book might be as follows:

1:1-3 This was a message not just for Joel's time but for the future. Unique events are going to happen. Are we ready?

1:4-7 Just as a locust plague leaves a land bankrupt so a people without the Holy Spirit are spiritually bankrupt, without the resources for life.

1:8-12 Life without food after the locusts have passed is dry and miserable, as in a greater sense it is without the Spirit. Spiritual leaders should be the first to ask whether they have His life within.

1:13-20 Our response to disaster and our inner emptiness should be one of repentance where we ask for Him to return and restore our joy and fruitfulness. Again the lead should come from spiritual leaders and those most mature. His future return should keep us aware of the urgency of our repentance.

2:1 But worse than a plague of locusts is to come, the day of the Lord!

2:2-11 Whether the sky was darkened by locusts, or by an invading army, the reason was the same, our sin. God's response will be the cross on the one hand to provide redemption, or His final judgement on the other to deal with those who refuse to repent.

2:12-17 It is still not too late to seek God's forgiveness and to escape judgement by true repentance.

Beyond forgiveness God has an even greater way to bless us. What is it? Again leaders should respond first so that they can teach others.

2:18-20 The coming blessing will bring forgiveness, restoration and victory over our enemies.

2:21-27 The blessing God has planned will make up for all the years of struggle and emptiness. The heart of this blessing will be God's presence in the midst of His people. But how?

2:28-32 The means of all God's blessings on His people beyond the cross will come in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. He will come to live inside all believers regardless of gender, age or class. He will now use all His people to tell of His love and the opportunity to call on Him before the final judgement.

3:1-8 The presence of the Spirit in our lives and the realisation of Jesus' return and the judgement to follow should motivate us powerfully to proclaim the gospel while there is still time.

3:9-17 We should expect people to come to Christ if there is a whole heartedness about our lives. There is a battle to be fought for the hearts of men.

3:18-21 When the Lord dwells within us as His Spirit there will be a richness about life comparable to the greatest harvest of all time.

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What events in our lives could be compared to a plague of locusts? How do people respond at such times? Who should particularly search their hearts in the face of such adversity? Does God send the locusts? For what exciting news were the locust swarms preparing the Israelites?(chapter one)
2. Why does the Bible repeat ideas such as the sun and the moon being darkened? What other examples do you know of events, places or people being repeatedly referred to for a similar purpose?(chapter two)
3. Prepare an outline from the book of Joel to answer the questions – Why do I need the Holy Spirit? Who is the Holy Spirit? Who can receive the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit do in the life of every believer? Is it possible to be a believer without having the Holy Spirit? What will happen to those who refuse to receive the Holy Spirit?
4. What help would Joel's book have been to the people of his time?