

Joel 1

Introduction

It is difficult to pin down when or where Joel lived and prophesied. His prophecy contains no autobiographical information at all apart from his father's name – Pethuel (פְּתוּאֵל *p'tû'ēl*) – who is only mentioned here by Joel himself. The name Joel (יֹאֵל *yô'ēl*) – Yahweh is God – is found 19 times in the Old Testament, but none of these is listed as the son of Pethuel apart from Joel's own introduction.

Since the prophecy lacks any internal historical context, the applicability of the prophecy to any historical events is questionable. It seems very likely then that the fulfillment of the prophecy remains for the future. Certainly, some of the major catastrophes foretold in Joel's prophecy (like the sun and stars ceasing to shine) have never yet happened. As with most prophetic writings, whether various aspects are symbolic or should be taken literally is also debatable.

All of this begs an important question. Should we simply disregard Joel's prophecy altogether given the difficulty of finding any handle by which to interpret and apply it? I think not. The book of Joel contains some amazing and encouraging promises for the future “Day of the LORD,” given by God through Joel to help us face the catastrophes we already find in the world and those the prophecy foretells.

CAVEAT – The interpretation of Joel that I will share is based on my own personal beliefs. I hold to an eschatological (end-times) belief system known as “pre-tribulation dispensational pre-millennialism.” That's a fancy way of saying I believe in a literal seven-year period of tribulation that will precede a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth prior to the final judgment, destruction, and re-creation of the world. The “pre-tribulation dispensational” part of this phrase means that I believe the Church of Jesus Christ will be carried out from the world into the eternal presence of our Lord prior to the tribulation in an event – the so-called “Rapture” of the Church – prior to the beginning of the seven-year tribulation. This eschatological belief system is by no means the only way of interpreting end-times prophecies. I would argue that it is the correct viewpoint, but that's just my personal opinion. You can find a more thorough analysis of these various interpretations on my website – <https://huppobrian.us/all/notes/overview-of-eschatological-traditions/>. Better yet, Pastor Dave Rolph of Calvary Chapel Pacific Hills taught a succinct lesson on eschatology as part of his Basic Theology series – <https://www.ccpacifichills.org/messages/> To find the Pastor Dave's Eschatology lesson, select **Basic Theology** from the **Browse Series** pull-down menu and then choose to watch or listen to the **Theology 101: Eschatology** lesson.

I believe the events foretold in the various end-times prophecies we have examined will take place in the following rough order:

1. Anytime starting today, Jesus will gather His church to Himself in an event popularly known as the rapture of the church (taken from the Latin word *rapiō* in Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation of the New Testament Greek manuscripts) described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. This event will be sometime just prior to the events known as the Great Tribulation outlined in Revelation 6-16, and probably before the assault(s) on God's Land foretold in Joel 1 and Ezekiel 38-39.
2. Satan's proxy – called “The Beast” in Revelation and the “Prince who is to come” in Daniel – will first make a peace treaty with God's people and then break it to set himself up as the only

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authorized entity to be worshipped under the satanic religion he will establish and enforce. (Daniel 9, Matthew 24, Revelation 13-16)

3. All the nations of the earth will gather at Armageddon under the leadership of the beast to do battle with the Lamb (Jesus). This may also be the invasion by Gog of Magog foretold in Ezekiel 38 and likened to a swarm of locusts in Joel 1.
4. God will miraculously defeat the forces of the beast at Armageddon. This will result in the final fall of Babylon – the satanic economic, political, and social system under which the world now suffers. This may also correspond to Gog of Magog’s defeat detailed in Ezekiel 39. The fall of Babylon is also foretold in Isaiah 14.
5. The battle at Armageddon may or may not coincide with the return of Jesus riding on a white horse leading the armies of Heaven reported in Revelation 19 and the splitting of the Mount of Olives when He sets foot onto it as reported in Zechariah 14.
6. The beast and the false prophet who were Satan’s (the dragon’s) proxies will be cast eternally into the lake of fire. Satan will be bound while Jesus reigns on earth for 1000 years. This may be the restoration that Joel speaks of in Joel 2:21-24.
7. Satan will be released temporarily. He will then gather all the nations to do battle with the Lord one final time (Revelation 20:7-10). **Note** – Revelation 20:8 refers to Gog and Magog. Therefore, this final battle and defeat of Satan may or may not be the same as the invasion of God’s Land by Gog of Magog reported in Ezekiel 38-39. It may also be the assault of all the nations of the earth likened to a swarm of locusts in Joel 1. Note that this final battle will certainly be separate from (1000 years after) the defeat of satan’s proxy the beast at Armageddon.
8. Satan will be cast into the eternal lake of fire along with his demons – the angels who followed him in his heavenly rebellion reported in Revelation 12 which Jesus remarked about in Luke 10:18 – “**...I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.**” This final defeat of Satan was also prophesied in Isaiah 14:12.
9. All mankind will be judged at God’s Great White Throne. Those of us who have our names written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will enter into eternal life in the presence of the Lord. Those who do not will be cast into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Revelation 20:11-15).
10. God will create a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem free from the curse of sin forevermore.

¹The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel: Joel 1:1 (ESV)

Unlike many of the other prophecies in God’s Word, Joel gives us no clue about when and where the word of the LORD came to him. Therefore, it’s tempting for us to be skeptical about Joel’s call. We must assume since we have this prophecy handed down to us, that God intended for us to have it. Therefore, the book has applicability to our own lives. The presence of the book of Joel in the canon of the Old Testament challenges us to remember what the apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy.

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16All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV)

Furthermore, God tells us that He has given us His Word for His own specific purposes.

10“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:10-11 (ESV)

That said, let's delve into the text of the prophecy.

2Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? 3Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. Joel 1:2-3 (ESV)

The overarching theme of Joel's prophecy is the coming "Day of the Lord." This topic alone would make a worthy and lengthy study. The phrase is found 24 times in God's Word – 19 in the Old Testament (one of which refers to the weekly **נַפְשׁ שַׁבָּאֵת**). Jesus also spoke of the coming Day in response to His disciples' question regarding the signs of His coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24), saying only that no one except God the Father knows when exactly it will be – not even Jesus Himself in His human form. We'll look at how Joel's prophecy interlocks with other end-times prophecies, with Jesus' own teaching in Matthew 24, and with Paul's and Peter's commentaries on it.

Joel 1:2-3 foretells a tremendous catastrophe for all the inhabitants of the land the like of which has never been seen by any of them. The question then is what land Joel means. We have no way of determining where and when Joel prophesied. Therefore, this question must remain unanswered. Most likely, God intended the prophecy to be heard by His chosen people Israel, but as with many other prophecies, Joel's applies beyond Israel and beyond a specific time.

4What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. Joel 1:4 (ESV)

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Locusts are found many times in God's Word as symbols of inexorable devastation. Of these, the plague of locusts God brought upon Egypt that we read about in Exodus 10 and Psalm 105 is the only one that reports an actual, historical locust infestation. Elsewhere in God's Word, invading human armies are likened to swarms of locusts due to their sheer number.

Joel speaks here of the complete destruction left behind by locusts. Of course, there aren't specialized kinds of locusts in the swarm – no cutting, swarming, hopping, and destroying locusts. The point Joel makes here is that once the locust onslaught begins, it continues wave-after-wave until nothing whatsoever is left in the swarm's wake.

Joel uses locusts as symbols of the destruction that will be left behind the coming catastrophe he foretells. Yet, even in our everyday lives, the troubles that beset us might be compared to a locust infestation. All of us experience seasons in our lives during which it seems we just can't catch a break. Despite our best efforts to obey and follow God, "the hits just keep on coming." The classic example of this in the Bible is the story of Job. But although the troubles which beset us might never rise to the same extreme that Job experienced, all of us experience troubles we believe are undeserved, and beyond our ability to handle.

Tragically, sometimes we ourselves bring about or exacerbate ongoing troubles in our lives through our own poor life decisions and attitudes. Such of course is the case with Israel who have continually broken their covenants with God ever since Moses descended from Mt. Sinai.

***5Awake, you drunkards, and weep,
and wail, all you drinkers of wine,
because of the sweet wine,
for it is cut off from your mouth.
6For a nation has come up against my land,
powerful and beyond number;
its teeth are lions' teeth,
and it has the fangs of a lioness.
7It has laid waste my vine
and splintered my fig tree;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches are made white.*** Joel 1:5-7 (ESV)

God has brought various chastisements upon Israel over the years in response to their rebellion – often through invasions from surrounding nations, but sometimes through oppressions and attacks by the Gentile societies dwelling alongside them in Canaan. Without any internal signature regarding the time and place of Joel's prophecy, it is impossible to determine whether or not Joel's prophecy refers to an invasion that was still in the future when Joel prophesied but has since come about – as with the Babylonian captivity foretold by Jeremiah and Ezekiel which was then fulfilled during the prophets' own lifetimes.

Possibly, Joel too prophesied about a coming invasion that has since taken place, but the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy may also be still in the future as with other "end-times" prophecies – e.g., the coming invasion by Gog of Magog foretold in Ezekiel 38-39. Since God says here in Joel 1:6-7 it is His land, vine, and fig tree which will suffer these devastations, it seems clear that the prophecy speaks of

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a coming invasion of the land of Canaan. It also seems clear from Joel 1:6 that the prophesied invasion will come from outside the land of Canaan – “...**a nation has come up against my land...**” Of course, this has happened many times throughout the history of Israel from ancient times right up to the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Yet none of these invasions throughout history has brought the utter destruction of God’s land foretold by Joel here.

***⁸Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth
for the bridegroom of her youth.***

***⁹The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off
from the house of the LORD.***

***The priests mourn,
the ministers of the LORD.***

***¹⁰The fields are destroyed,
the ground mourns,
because the grain is destroyed,***

***the wine dries up,
the oil languishes.*** Joel 1:8-10 (ESV)

In God’s Word, we often find God’s people – Israel and the redeemed of Christ – likened to betrothed virgins awaiting our Bridegroom – Jesus. In Revelation 19:6-10 we read about the consummation of our betrothal to our Bridegroom at the marriage supper of the Lamb. In His Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) Jesus contrasted those betrothed to Him who have the oil of His Spirit dwelling within the lamps of our hearts, with others who are betrothed but are not being continually filled with His Spirit – perhaps truly born again in the Spirit, but not partaking in devoted fellowship with Him or with His Church and in service to His Gospel. But here we find the hearers of Joel’s prophecy likened to virgins betrothed to a bridegroom whose betrothal has been cut short by the death of their bridegroom, so they mourn and lament. Obviously, in this case the bridegroom can’t possibly be Jesus who was indeed dead but is now risen out of death forevermore!

Furthermore, in Joel 1:9 we read that the offerings in the house of the LORD are cut off, so the priests who made them and the Levites who served in the temple will mourn. This might refer to the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC, the looting of the temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 BC, the destruction of Herod the Great’s temple by the Romans in 70 AD, or possibly the ending of sacrifice in a future temple by the “prince who is to come” foretold in Daniel 9.

²⁴“Seventy weeks [שבעים *sābūa* - sevens] are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. [or most holy One] ²⁵Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. ²⁶And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. ²⁷And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for

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half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator. Daniel 9:24-27 (ESV)

The precise timetables set forth in Daniel 9 and 12 have been called into question, not because they were not fulfilled, but ironically due to their total accuracy in foretelling historical events that have happened since the prophecy was written – particularly the advent of Jesus, His earthly ministry, and His death on the cross. Some have proposed that the precision with which the prophecy was fulfilled implies that the prophecy must have been written after the fact and then inserted into the scriptural canon – possibly by the theologians brought together at Nicaea by the Roman emperor Constantine in 325 AD to resolve various theological controversies within the early church. Of course, that idea was laid to rest by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid-20th century because the scrolls were archived in Qumran some centuries prior to the Nicæan council. Furthermore, Jesus Himself clearly recognized and taught the validity of Daniel’s prophecy. Note that when Jesus taught on Daniel’s prophecy over 500 years after Daniel wrote it, Jesus continued to refer to it as a future event as we shall soon see.

Daniel also wrote of a further atrocity that will be committed to profane the temple in addition to the ending of the daily sacrifices.

³¹Forces from him [the prince who is to come] shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate. Daniel 11:31 (ESV)

Some have proposed that this prophecy of Daniel was fulfilled when the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes plundered the temple, erected a statue of Zeus at the altar of burnt offering, and sacrificed a pig upon it in 167 BC. But Jesus Himself spoke nearly 200 years later of the profaning of the temple as a yet future event in answer to His disciple’s question regarding the signs of His second coming and the end times.

¹⁵“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. Matthew 24:15-21 (ESV)

The prophecies of Daniel 9-12 clearly pertain to future end-times rather than any historical events. The angel from whom Daniel received the vision said so.

⁹He said, “Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end. Daniel 12:9 (ESV)

Furthermore, notice that Jesus’ own teaching in Matthew 24:21 about a “...***great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now...***” closely parallels the question that Joel asked his hearers at the beginning of his own prophecy – “...***Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?...***”

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(Joel 1:2b). Although it is certainly possible that Joel's prophecy has been fulfilled in the meantime, most likely it foretells a "Day of the Lord" that is yet in the future. The abomination standing in the holy place foretold by Daniel will lead to the utter desolation foretold by Joel.

***11Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil;
wail, O vinedressers,
for the wheat and the barley,
because the harvest of the field has perished.***

***12The vine dries up;
the fig tree languishes.
Pomegranate, palm, and apple,
all the trees of the field are dried up,
and gladness dries up
from the children of man.*** Joel 1:11-12 (ESV)

American humorist and author Mark Twain visited the Holy Land in 1867. Writing in his book The Innocents Abroad, he remarked that a herd of sheep and goats he saw must have been eating gravel because there was nothing else around for them to eat. Canaan is indeed a desert. Since the return of the Israeli people starting just a couple of decades after Mark Twain's visit, they have transformed the land into a fertile and productive land. It remains a desert, but the transformation since the Jews returned is remarkable. Yet even through the centuries of neglect and abuse of the land under Ottoman rule, it was never utterly desolate. Herdsmen were still able to graze their herds and flocks (even during Mark Twain's visit). The land continued to produce dates, olives, and wine. The devastation foretold by Joel will be complete – such as has never been seen before in **any** land since Noah's flood.

***13Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests;
wail, O ministers of the altar.
Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,
O ministers of my God!
Because grain offering and drink offering
are withheld from the house of your God.***

***14Consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the LORD your God,
and cry out to the LORD.*** Joel 1:13-14 (ESV)

Throughout God's Word, tearing one's garments and wearing sackcloth are symbols of mourning and remorse. In this case, the mourning of the priests will be due to the ending Joel foretells of the daily sacrifices and offerings to God ordained in the Law of Moses. These sacrifices and offerings performed by the priests in the temple were used as temporary recompense for the sins of Israel until Jesus' own sacrifice on the cross brought permanent and eternal atonement for the sins of **all** mankind, rendering the temporary restitution for sin under the Law obsolete. The people's remorse is due to our

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sins which brought the need for the animal sacrifices and ultimately Jesus' own sacrifice in the first place.

Fasting is used in God's Word as a symbol of repentance along with heartfelt cries to God for mercy. Notice that Joel calls for this repentance not only from the priests, but "**for all the inhabitants of the land.**"

***15Alas for the day!
For the day of the LORD is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.
16Is not the food cut off
before our eyes,
joy and gladness
from the house of our God?
17The seed shrivels under the clods;
the storehouses are desolate;
the granaries are torn down
because the grain has dried up.
18How the beasts groan!
The herds of cattle are perplexed
because there is no pasture for them;
even the flocks of sheep suffer.*** Joel 1:15-18 (ESV)

The world has suffered through many famines (and paper goods shortages) since the time of Joel. But none of them has yet risen to the degree of utter devastation foretold in this prophecy. In Revelation we read about the severe calamity that will bring the final destruction of Babylon – the perverse and ungodly economic and political system under which the entire world now languishes.

***7As she glorified herself and lived in luxury,
so give her a like measure of torment and mourning,
since in her heart she says,
'I sit as a queen,
I am no widow,
and mourning I shall never see.'
8For this reason her plagues will come in a single day,
death and mourning and famine,
and she will be burned up with fire;
for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.*** Revelation 18:7-8 (ESV)

Thus, I believe all the prophecies we have looked at are interconnected – each referring to the same Day of the LORD – the final calamity that will bring a final end to rebellion against God and purge the curse of sin from His Creation.

***19To you, O LORD, I call.
For fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness,***

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*and flame has burned
all the trees of the field.
20Even the beasts of the field pant for you
because the water brooks are dried up,
and fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness.* Joel 1:19-20 (ESV)

There are many prophecies that foretell the way God will bring about His final judgment upon sin. To the scoffers of his time who denied God's coming judgment at the return of Christ the apostle Peter gave this response.

*5For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago,
and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of
God, 6and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged
with water and perished. 7But by the same word the heavens and earth
that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment
and destruction of the ungodly.* 2 Peter 3:5-7 (ESV)

But frightening as this prospect might be, notice that Peter says that the destruction will not be for all mankind, but only the ungodly. This then immediately begs the question – how is a “godly” person rescued out of the coming destruction? To answer that question, we read the remainder of Peter's admonishment.

*9The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is
patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all
should reach repentance. 10But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,
and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies
will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are
done on it will be exposed.*

*11Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought
you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12waiting for and hastening the
coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire
and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13But
according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth
in which righteousness dwells.* 2 Peter 3:9-13 (ESV)

This still doesn't answer the question though of how we can live in holiness and godliness. If we honestly examine our lives – our thoughts, words, and deeds (or the lack of them) – we find that of ourselves we are neither holy nor godly – far from it. No matter how good we might be, we will always fail to live up to God's standard of perfection. We need rescue out of the coming destruction that is not dependent on anything of ourselves. We need God's own holiness and righteousness to make us godly so that we can escape the coming judgment. God has known that since before He even began His work of creation. Therefore, He made the way of our redemption by coming in the flesh of Jesus who was and is Immanuel – God with us whose coming Isaiah foretold (Isaiah 7:14). Being God in the flesh of a man, He was able to live the perfectly sinless life that we cannot, and thus He was qualified to be the required spotless Lamb of sacrifice to atone for the sins of all mankind. He gives us His godliness in place of our own ungodliness simply for our belief in His Gospel.

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²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:21-26 (ESV)

All that is left for us is to call out to God for His mercy and rescue as Joel proclaims here in Joel 1:19.

Looking Ahead

God willing, next time we will continue our study of Joel's prophecy concerning the coming Day of the Lord.