

The Minor Prophets

Lesson 1

Joel - The Day of the Lord

Throughout recorded history, there have been continual occurrences of various forms of natural disasters, which have caused horrific destruction of property and loss of life. I was just reading about a powerful earthquake that struck Portugal in 1755. In six minutes all the buildings of Lisbon were destroyed, and 12,000 homes were demolished. Sixty thousand people were killed, and almost everyone else was injured. After the earthquake, huge tidal waves struck the coast of Africa, and covered all the islands in the area.

It seems that in my lifetime every time there is an earthquake, flood, hurricane, or volcano eruption, people start wondering if they mean the end of the world. Many controversial televangelists are quick to draw a cause-effect relationship to some specific sin or improper lifestyle, and they believe God is punishing us with these disasters. Almost everybody wonders how a good God could allow such evil things to happen. The Portugal earthquake even happened on "All Saints Day" so many religious people were gathered in churches when the quake struck and collapsed the buildings upon them. This happened during the age known as the Great Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. People were beginning to put a great deal of thought into the relationship between natural disasters (which played no favorites), and God.

The Enlightenment was the era that emphasized philosophy and reason. The idea was that everything could be explained naturally. It was a movement advancing science and reason at the cost of Christianity. The reasoning about disasters was that "If God was good, He must lack the power to prevent disasters, and if He had power to prevent them, He must not be good." Christians responded by seeking reasons that Portugal deserved the destruction. Protestants said they were bad Catholics, and Catholics said it happened because Lisbon allowed Protestant heretics to live there. Meanwhile, non-Christians made fun of both sides. Voltaire used it to further his argument that religion was irrelevant, and he said within fifty years Christianity would be forgotten altogether. That didn't happen, and we know that God will always have for Himself a remnant of believers no matter how bad things seem.

For us today, who believe that God is both all-powerful and He is perfectly good, the question about evil remains. Surely this issue is beyond our limited finite minds, but the Bible gives us many stories in which horrible things happen to biblical characters, but somehow in the end, God works it all out for good. We read the story of Joseph whose brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. For being loyal and true to his master, Joseph is falsely accused and thrown

into a dungeon where he remains for untold years. He helped a guy in prison be released with the understanding that the guy would help him, but the guy forgot. Nevertheless, God enabled Joseph to foretell the impending terrible famine so that Egypt could avoid disaster. Finally, Joseph rises to be the Prime Minister, and in his new role saved the entire family of Israel. When his brothers came before him in all fear of reprisal, Joseph was quite aware that the sovereignty of God had directed all these circumstances for the preservation of Israel. He told his brothers, “you meant it for evil, but God used it for good.” Most of the stories in the Bible have an element of adverse circumstances that God sovereignly used to bring about a desired outcome. Still we are left with questions about why it was necessary for Joseph to spend years in jail, or why David had to be a fugitive living in caves for like 12 years. We get a very good clue from Jesus in Luke 13:2-5 about what God’s perspective is on natural disasters. Jesus said that when people ask the questions about why these things happen, or why the people deserved them—they are asking the wrong questions. They forget that we are all (the human race) sinners so that in that sense we all deserve the discipline of God. Another way to say it is we are all undeserving of being exempted from disasters. Could it be possible that it might take a disaster for some of us to wake up and repent? If so, then we can say that the disaster, though painful, brought about good. In Luke 13, people were asking Jesus why certain Galileans were killed, and why eighteen people died when the tower in Siloam fell on them. Jesus said, “Do you suppose that those eighteen were worse culprits than all the other men in Jerusalem? I tell you no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Instead of asking unanswerable questions about why them, they should have been focused on the important thing that all of them needed to repent and come to Christ before a building falls on them too. It doesn’t matter when or how because they all were going to meet a similar fate, as will we all. The only thing that matters is our fate eternally.

The Locust Plague

The opening chapter of the book of Joel in the Bible describes the effects of a plague of locusts, which swept through Israel causing all the agricultural produce to be wiped out. Then chapter two describes another terrible time of destruction in the future that Joel called “the Day of the Lord”. The first locust plague that had already wiped out the crops and vineyards of Israel during Joel’s day was a foreshadowing of a future day of total destruction. The prophet Joel saw his current plague as a sign of the future event. Most theologians see the army and battle in Joel 2:1-11 as eschatological, meaning that they pertain to the “end times”. I believe Joel is predicting the same events that Zechariah 14 describe as well as what Jesus described in Matthew 24:29-31. In the future, before the return of Christ, there will

be terrible judgments and cataclysms that God will inflict upon the earth, and then Jesus will descend back to the Mt. of Olives in Jerusalem. Revelation 16:14-16 calls this event Armageddon. Many of the Old Testament prophets refer to this time period before the Messiah arrives as “The Day of the Lord”.

Joel opens his message with a call to Israel to think long and hard about the locust plague that they just went through. In Joel 1:2, he asks a rhetorical question, “Has such a thing as this ever happened before?” Of course not, nothing in their experience could match it. It was a swarming invasion of hungry insects that ate everything. It looks like in Joel 1:4 that it came in three waves, and the leftovers from the first wave were devoured by the next two. By this we can be certain of how complete was the devastation. In Joel 1:5-13, he issued a call for all to mourn. We have a bit of humor injected there as one of the groups called to mourn the losses were the drunks in 1:5-7. I can think of a lot of friends who like their wine with dinner (I’m sure you limit it to just one glass), who won’t find this so humorous. Joel calls for all drunks to weep and wail because the locusts laid waste to all the vineyards. There will be no wine dated that year, and the price of wine just went way up. The real significance of the plague is given in Joel 1:15-20. The day of the Lord is coming in the future. It will be a day of destruction from God. The prophet saw his plague of locusts as a harbinger warning of a future day of judgment that would mark the end of the world as we know it.

Joel 2:1-11 develops the idea of a future day of the Lord by describing an alarm that will go out announcing the ominous day of the Lord as a “day of darkness and gloom” in which a huge army will invade and leave nothing but destruction. This section ends with the warning that the coming day is “great and very awesome and who can endure it?”

The Need for Repentance

The appropriate response to such an approaching day is to turn immediately to the Lord in repentance. Joel 2:12-17 gives two appeals for such repentance. The Lord is calling us to repent now before it is too late. If we will return to the Lord, He will be gracious and merciful to us. The second appeal is for mourning and prayer, “let the ministers of the Lord weep and pray that God will spare His people.” Then in Joel 2:18-27 we are given God’s response to repentance and His comforting words to His people.

The End Times

The remainder of Joel develops the end time theme of Joel and the promise that God will deliver His people. The Lord will intervene for His people, and He will severely judge their enemies. The Apostle Peter actually quoted Joel 2:28-32 as applying to the events that occurred in Acts 2 when God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Apostles on the Day of

Pentecost and the church was born. I think what Peter meant was that the last era before the end of the world had come. That last era is the church age, which was previously a mystery and will end with the destruction of the world and the second coming of Christ.

The predictions of Joel 2:30-32 about the last days are very similar to those of Jesus in Matt. 24:29, and John in Revelation 6:12-14, and Isaiah 13:9-10, along with many other prophets like Ezekiel and Amos. Isaiah said "Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath...to make the land desolate, and to destroy sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light."

Conclusion

From God's viewpoint, the natural disasters that occur throughout history should serve as a wake up call to those who will listen that a future major event that will trump all of history is coming. These previews of the big judgment, like Joel's locust plague, may then be for our good that we might repent. The good news is that we have a glorious refuge in Christ, and if you take refuge in Christ, He has faced your judgment for you.

CHARLIE TAYLOR