

Rejoice, for the Lord has done Great Things

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 16th of May 2004. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Rejoice, for the Lord has done great things. It is based on Joel 2.28-3.3 O God, we pray, speak to us from your word this morning.

Write it on our hearts by your spirit poured out in us, that we may believe it, do it, and know you as our God, and serve you for Jesus' sake. Amen. When the drought bites deep, when crops fail, when fruit trees wither, when the grain dyes a seed in parched land, when locusts devour everything in sight, when the barns are empty, when economic ruin stares a nation in its face, when the wine supplies dry up, when fire destroys the wilderness pastures, when animals cry out in hunger and thirst, and when our tables are bare, and our food is cut off, then what?

How do we respond? Oh, it doesn't happen to me, because I can go up to Coles 24 hours a day. Maybe we blame the government for their lack of subsidies for the farming community.

Or we blame George Bush, he's a good one to blame these days, for the war, it's all the war's problem. Or maybe we explain it as the latest El Nino cycle, so it'll improve in a year or two or five.

[1 : 5 7] Or maybe we just complain, and whinge, and grumble, and murmur, and all these things that are happening against us. And maybe we give up on God.

Or maybe as Christians we pray, and we pray things like, God, please give me enough, and a little bit more. God, I'm suffering, please help me.

Even pagans pray prayers like that. You see, so often, when things go wrong, whether it's a locust plague, a drought, a fire, or some other crisis, or grief, or sorrow, or strife in our life, then our first prayer, our instant prayer, may well be to God.

Please give me what I want. Please take away the pain, and the suffering, and the problem. Please give me plenty, so that I can be satisfied. They're so often our first prayers.

And yet really, selfish prayers, self-centered prayers. You see, so often, even for us as Christians, our whole worldview turns on, pivots on, is focused on, ourselves, me, and my needs, or my wants, my desires.

[3 : 1 1] And sometimes we cloak our self-centeredness by a sort of theology that says, God's going to give me plenty, that's what he promises, I want God's blessing, that's why I pray for it, and ask for it.

Sometimes under the guise of a sort of Christian prosperity doctrine. But really, it can just be a pious excuse for greed. So often, those sorts of prayers show an ignorance of understanding of the Bible and God's ways, not least in the Old Testament as well.

The prophet Joel was called to speak to a people who faced the sorts of things I outlined at the beginning. They faced a severe locust plague, worse than any in memory, and worse, they were told, than any that would come.

On top of that, they faced a severe drought and the ravages of bushfires. The nation was crippled, agriculturally and economically. And the prophet Joel was sent by God to speak into that situation, into that crisis.

But what he does, in the passage before us today, is to teach us how to respond right to those sorts of crises. And in response to the havoc wrought by locusts, to the drought and the fire, that we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at chapters 1 and the first half of chapter 2, God called the people, through the prophet Joel, to a national day of lament, of mourning and grief, of sorrow, of fasting and of prayer.

[4 : 42] And he called the priests to lead the people in such prayers as they gathered at the Jerusalem temple. No one, if you remember rightly, from back in chapter 2, was to be exempt from such a day. So if you turn to Joel in page 741 in the Bibles in the pews and have it open in front of you, you'll be helped by that.

And remember these words from three weeks ago, from chapter 2, verse 15. Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the aged, gather the children, even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her canopy. And then come the instructions for the priests, that between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.

And let them say, Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations.

Why should it be said among the peoples, Where is their God? Do you remember those words from three weeks ago? Those commands to the people and to the priests to gather for that solemn fast and assembly.

[5 : 57] We're not told in the book of Joel whether or not they did, as we're instructed, but the implication is that they did. Because from today's passage, verse 18 of chapter 2 onwards, we find that the book has, in a sense, turned on a hinge.

From woe now to weel, from destitution to restoration. And the hinge comes in verse 18. We're not told that they gather, but we presume that they did, because verse 18 tells us, Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

So the implication is that the commands of God through Joel for the people and the priests, as I just read from earlier in chapter 2, were heeded and heard. And they gathered and they fasted and they prayed.

And now in response to that, God speaks. And he says, Well, we're told firstly, that he became jealous for his land. That is, not a jealousy that is an envy, a sin, but a jealousy that is a righteous jealousy, that of a husband for a wife, that is rightly jealous for the exclusive attention, in effect, of a spouse.

That is God's jealousy for his people. It implies that they've gone off after other gods and idols. And God is jealous to have them back in an exclusive relationship with him.

[7 : 21] And we're told that he had pity on his people, or mercy on his people. Pity and mercy is never deserved. Otherwise, it's not pity or mercy.

What this is implying there, is that the resolution of the problem that this verse is now beginning to hint at, is not because Israel came and prayed, and can therefore claim to God, by right we must have plenty and be satisfied.

Not at all. Even when the people of God pray, the answers to prayer are God's grace, and mercy is pity for his people.

And so too when us, when we pray. If we're praying for God to bring some relief or situation improvement, God's grace or mercy might answer that prayer.

It's not something that we can demand of right of God. And so this verse is telling us that the answers to the prayer that follow, the restoration of the land, the end of the locusts and the drought and the fire and so on, that we'll see in a few minutes, all of that is the mercy or the pity of God.

[8 : 30] Not something that the people deserve as of right. Well, God's answer to this prayer is immediate here. Verse 19 begins, that in response to his people, the Lord said, I am sending you.

And the sense of that verb is that they're on their way. I've already put the check in the mail, so to speak, although God means it. And so often people use that expression these days, they don't.

He says, Already on the way, in effect, is the grain, the wine and the oil and you will be satisfied. Earlier in the book, chapter 1, verse 10, the grain, the wine, the oil, they'd all dried up and failed.

But now we're told in chapter 2, verse 19, new supplies are coming and sufficient supplies for satisfaction are coming. Not just a little bit of grain or a drop of wine and oil, but enough grain, wine and oil that you will be satisfied, verse 19 says.

And where in their prayer, chapter 2, verse 17, the people were fearful of being made a mockery, a byword among the nations because of the crippling economic agricultural problems that they faced, God says to them at the end of verse 19, I will no more make you a mockery among the nations, answering explicitly their very request in their prayer of verse 17.

[9 : 56] Earlier in the book, we saw the rampaging locusts devouring everything in their sight, wave upon wave of locusts or maybe different kinds of locusts, perhaps in chapter 1, verse 4. But now God says, I'll remove them, verse 20.

I'll remove the northern army from you. Maybe he's referring to an enemy army on the border, but maybe just to the locusts that have come down from the north, ravaging the people of Israel.

And he says, I will drive that army of locusts into a parched and desolate land, that is, into the desert further south or perhaps further to the east. It's front into the eastern sea, probably referring to the Red Sea, its rear into the western sea, the Mediterranean.

And so severe was the locust plague, and that's reflected now in its removal and death, that its stench and foul smell will rise up. As indeed happens when locusts all suddenly die and get washed up in the waves of the shore of the Mediterranean, perhaps the stench of rotting locusts from such a severe plague will be rather off to the nose, to an extreme.

Surely God has done great things, verse 20 ends. In all of this so far, God is the subject. I will do this. I am sending. I will remove.

[11 : 17] God is the one who's answering prayers. God is the one who's powerful in all of this. And so as a result of this promised answer of prayer that is promised to be immediate and indeed on the way, the people are now bid to praise God.

Indeed, not only the people, but the animals and the land as well. All of it is to bow down in praise to God. So verse 21 addresses the soil.

Do not fear, O soil. The same ground that earlier in the book, in chapter 1, was groaning and mourning, now is urged not to fear and to rejoice and be glad, for the Lord has done great things.

The same animals that cried out in grief and mourning and hunger and thirst in chapter 1, verse 20, they're now told not to fear, in verse 22. Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green.

The tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and the vine give their full yield. And the people of Jerusalem that were in mourning back in chapter 1, now are told in verse 23, Be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God.

- [12 : 32] Why? Partly because the locust plague has been removed, but partly now because the drought is being removed as well. And so verse 23 finishes with a description of the rain that is promised by God.

For God has given the early rain for your vindication. He's poured down for you abundant rain. The early rain, that is the autumn rain, and the later rain, the spring rain, as before.

This is not just a bland description here. There's a sense in which these words, there's four words here used for rain, is as though God or Joel is reveling in the rain that is promised.

From the parched and dry land and the effects of the drought that the people are suffering from, here comes promised rain. And you know, after a long hot spell of dry weather, you almost want to run outside into the pouring rain and rejoice and jump around and splash in the puddles.

That's the sense of what's going on here in verse 23. Reveling in rain, lovely rain. And that will bring the pastures to be green, as verse 22 said.

- [13 : 42] It will mean the fruit trees give full yield of their fruit at the end of verse 22. Here is the ground, the animals, and the people reveling in the answers to prayer.

And there's hints here, it seems, of going back to the beginning of the Bible, where after the first sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and before their expulsion, the land, and indeed the animals and the people, there's a sense in which they are all brought down in some form of suffering or struggle as a result of human sin.

And now perhaps here those three brought together with the promised restoration of soil, of animals, and people, maybe just a hint that what's going on here is like a new creation all over again where the trees will bear their fruit and there will be plenty for all.

What follows then is a further picture of abundance. It's not just that God will bring just a shower of rain one day and then quickly you revert back to drought conditions.

No, this is complete restoration and it's full and it's overflowing, it's abundance in its description. Verse 24, the threshing floors shall be full of grain and the vats for the wine and the oil they'll overflow with wine and oil.

- [15 : 09] Not just a bit but overflowing and being filled. The same threshing floors and vats and receptacles for grain, wine and oil that were falling apart because they were idle and empty earlier in the book, they'll now be full and overflowing and moreover, verse 25, I'll repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer and the cutter as we saw in chapter 1, verse 4, my great army which I sent against you.

All of it now reversed and so the result, beginning of verse 26, you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied. Isn't that a lovely picture?

A lovely picture of answered prayer, a lovely picture of struggle and strife and deprivation gone, a lovely picture of satisfaction, contentment, as though at the beginning of verse 26, you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, you can put your feet up in front of the TV, you can burp and belch to your heart's delight.

What a lovely answer to prayer. And that's where it'd be a nice place to stop. It's where most of our world would like to stop. The book of Joel, probably.

Answered prayer, crisis over, belly full, content, satisfied, that sort of dopey afternoon glazed look in your eyes as you doze off for a little post-lunch nap.

- [16 : 33] All's well that ends well. But if that is the end, then it's very selfish, very self-centered.

It would actually just end up being a humanist philosophy and not a biblical theology. Joel doesn't end with people content and satisfied.

That's not God's goal. It's not the goal of Joel. It's not the goal of the Bible, either. It might be our goal in praying for relief from suffering.

But this is where from now on our worldview might begin to be corrected. Maybe now we see some rebuke in the way that we might pray for an end to struggle or strife or suffering of different sorts.

Because in the end, you see, the real problem was not a locust plague. The real problem was not a drought or a bushfire. All of those things were there. They were God's punitive or remedial steps against his people because of their waywardness.

[17 : 41] The real problem lay with the people, not in the agricultural plight of the nation. The locust plague was just a symptom. The root cause of the problem lay in the people of God.

You see, their problem was ignoring God. Their problem was disobedience of God's laws. Their problem was turning their back on God and showing disdain to his word and his purpose.

We saw a hint of that in verse 18 where it talks about God's jealousy for his land and people, implying, fairly strongly it seems, that they were going off after other gods, turning their back on God and he wanted them back.

That's God's goal. Not just that his people can put their feet up with contentment and satisfaction. That might be our goal in praying so often, so selfishly, but it's not God's goal.

God's goal was not Israel's contentment. God's goal is his people back with him. And that's why Joel doesn't end at the beginning of verse 26, you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied.

[18 : 47] But continues on for a while yet. Verse 26 continues, that not only shall you eat in plenty and be satisfied, but you shall praise the name of the Lord your God who's dealt wondrously with you.

that might seem obvious, but it's not always obvious that we do that. For we're quicker to pray in asking for things than we are in giving thanks and praising for the supply.

You see, we're so quick to grumble and complain to God and we're so slow to give him thanks. We're so eager to ask God for something and so reluctant to praise and give thanks.

See, God's goal is not just our contentment and satisfaction. God's goal at least is that we live lives of thankfulness to him. And that's where verse 26 ends.

But more comes because verse 27 goes on to say that you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I the Lord am your God and there is no other and my people shall never again be put to shame.

[20 : 02] That's where God's goal lies. That God's people know three things. One, that God is in the midst of Israel. Two, that God is their God. And three, that there is no other God.

That is what God's goal is for his people here is not just that there will be an end to the locust plague, the drought and the fires, but that as a result of those things, the deprivation and the answered prayer for restoration, that God's people know God, are in a relationship with God, are harmonious or right relationship with God, that they acknowledge that God is God, that God is in their midst.

There is no other God. That they're in an exclusive relationship with God of the Bible and God alone. That's God's goal. It's still God's goal. It's God's goal all through the Bible.

Not just that we will find an answer to our prayer so that we can be content and satisfied, but rather that we know God well. That's his goal.

It's why he sent the locust plague. It's why he sent the drought and the fire in the book of Joel. And it's also why he answered the prayers to take them all away again. Not for their contentment, but that they would come back to God.

[21 : 20] God brings people to their knees in order to bring them to God himself. And that's his goal here. You see, in the crisis that ancient Israel was facing in the time of Joel, the locust plague, the drought, the fires and so on, they were so blind to the real cause of the problem.

That they needed a prophet to come from God to show them what was really happening and how they ought to respond. You see, they needed Joel to cajole them into praying and fasting and lamenting.

That shows how ignorant they were of God. Because it ought to have been plain to them, as we saw three and four weeks ago in chapter one and the first half of chapter two, that all the things that were facing ancient Israel, the locusts, the drought, the fire, etc., all of them were predicted in the early parts of the scriptures that they would have known well or ought to have known well.

They're all there. And the reason they're all there is that if you disobey God, if you walk after other gods, if you don't follow God's laws and give him the exclusive devotion that is his alone, then these are the sorts of things that you can expect.

Locusts, drought and fire are named explicitly. But they are so ignorant of God's word that they are bewildered and confused when things happen against them.

[22 : 44] And so for ancient Israel they needed the prophet Joel to come to push them to God's word, to explain to them the situation. That's a very striking thing about ancient Israel and yet, surely it is exposing to us as well our same, we make the same mistakes.

Because so often it seems to me, we Christians face bewilderment and confusion when things seem to go wrong. And we get confused, we give up on God, we pray selfish prayers if at all, we just grumble and complain.

But you see, our very own bewilderment and confusion when things go wrong, whether it's locust plagues, drought, fire or other sorts of grief or sorrows or strife or deprivations, our bewilderment and confusion exposes our own ignorance of God's word and his purposes.

Now we need no prophet like Joel for we have the full scriptures before us. The fullness of the Old Testament, they had just some and we've got the New Testament as well.

But our own bewilderment and confusion when things go wrong show that we're so ignorant of God's scriptures. How seldom do we turn to them? How rarely do we plumb their depths in order to expand our view of what God is on about for us.

[24 : 05] How infrequently we search out the scriptures to know God's ways. How reticently we recite the psalms of lament and lamentations when things go wrong to give voice, biblical voice to what's happening in our life.

Our own prayers, so often selfish, expose our own ignorance and folly like ancient Israel. The book of Joel you see is a corrective to our poor understanding of God and his word, his ways and his purposes and our dominant thinking that pivots on us and our wants and desires.

To underscore that the real issue in the book of Joel is the deficiency of God's people, God goes on to make further promises at the rest of chapter 2. He's showing us here that the real problem is not locusts and drought and fire.

The real problem lies in the hearts of the people of God. And so he promises there's something beyond the agricultural restoration later on in history.

And he promises them in effect a whole new age or era yet to come. He says in verse 28 and 29, God promising, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.

[25 : 25] Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves in those days I'll pour out my spirit. You see, the real problem is ignorance of God.

And so God will promise and promises to pour out his spirit. Yes, there is reference to prophecy, to dreams and to visions, but all of those are the basic ways of revelation of God's word in the Old Testament scriptures.

That is the whole point of this pouring out of the spirit of God is so that the people of God, without distinction or discrimination, young and old, slave and free, will have direct knowledge of the revelation of God's word and God's purposes.

No longer will the spirit of God be limited to special kings or judges or prophets in the Old Testament. But rather, all of God's people will have all that they need of God's spirit to know God.

Now, this is not an immediate outcome. The end of the drought and locusts, that would be immediate. But this comes afterward, verse 28 begins. And it will be accompanied by all sorts of what we might call cosmic convulsions.

[26 : 38] Verse 30 and 31, I'll show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood. before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

The day of the Lord was the day that the people of God in the Old Testament expected the enemies of God to be defeated and them to be vindicated. This is a day to bring history to an end and the new era of God's kingdom inaugurated.

And this is the age when God's spirit will be poured out on God's people. And all those cosmic symbols show just how significant this promise is, how climactic it is in the purposes of God.

Now we don't know when Joel prophesied. He doesn't give us clues to the date in the book. It could be 600 BC, it might be 300 BC. Whatever is the case, at least three centuries, if not six or more centuries later, God finally fulfilled these words of prophecy.

It was a day in probably about May, probably 30 or 33 AD. And on that day, some of the followers of Jesus were gathered together in one place.

[27 : 56] And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of the violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues as of fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability. And then a crowd gathered. But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them.

Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and listen to what I say. Indeed, these people are not drunk as you suppose for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and smoky mist.

[29 : 04] The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. And thus Peter preached, if you like, the first Christian sermon because he understood that the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled on that day, the day of Pentecost, which in our church calendar occurs in two weeks' time.

After Peter's sermon, the people who had listened to it, several thousand it seems, were cut to the heart and asked what they must do in response.

And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That sermon is recorded for us in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. Peter tells them to call on the name of Jesus Christ.

Joel had said in verse 32, call on the name of the Lord. That is the name Yahweh, the name of God. So when Peter says call on the name of Jesus, he's making a very striking statement about Jesus' divinity as the God of the Old Testament.

[30 : 23] These words of promise here in the book of Joel were fulfilled 300 years later and we, or more, later. Notice too how God is pouring out his spirit on all his people without distinction that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not for special Christians, for mature Christians, for people who've moved on in their Christian life to some advanced state, not at all.

Joel goes to lengths and Peter goes to the same lengths to make it clear that every Christian is a recipient of God's spirit. And it's not that God is mean or niggardly and giving out a drop of his spirit here or there to each person, but he pours out his spirit on each of these people, of his people, indiscriminately.

We are all recipients of God's spirit, abundantly poured out in us, if indeed we are believers and have called on the name of the Lord Jesus to be saved.

And fundamental to the role of the spirit here as well as in the acts of the apostles is that he is leading us into a right relationship with God where we know that God is in our midst, we know that God is our God and we know that there is no other God.

The very thing that Joel expressed as his purpose in chapter 2, verse 27. So when the drought bites deep, when the crops fail, when the trees wither, when the wine dries up and your table is bare before you, when locusts devour everything in sight, but when any other sort of grief or strife or suffering confronts you in this life, what then?

[31 : 59] Don't just pray for instant relief. Don't pray for satisfaction and contentment for that's not God's goal. God's goal lies deeper and bigger than that.

God brings us on our knees in order to bring us to him. God's goal is to pray. We're to pray that through whatever suffering, illness, grief, sorrow, poverty, or whatever that we face, that we grow closer to God, that we know that God is our God, there is no other, that God is in our midst, and that we call on the name of our God, Jesus Christ, to be saved.

For that is God's goal for us, as it was for ancient Israel. Amen.