

A Day of Disaster

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Andrew. It is good to be back with you. For those who might not know us, we were part of this congregation and left about a year and a half ago. I was invited to come and be an interim pastor at a church nearby. And our children who are in high school, late high school now, stayed at six o'clock church. And we've since about, I think, October, we're back at Holy Trinity, but we're back at the six o'clock church with our children. But it'll be nice to be here with you at least for January. If you'd like to open your Bibles, please, to Joel that we read, Joel chapter one. It's on page 909 if you're trying to find it in your Bible. And let me pray as we come to think about God's word that we've heard read for us. Our Heavenly Father, we do indeed thank you for your word that you have not left us in the dark. We thank you for the reading of your word that we've heard. We pray as we consider Joel chapter one now and Joel over the next few weeks, that you would help us to understand this part of the Bible and that by your spirit, you would impact us from your word so that we would take it to heart, believe it, obey you and become more like Jesus. And we ask it for his sake. Amen.

Well, we are no strangers, of course, in Australia to natural disasters. And if you've had the TV on at all in the last couple of days, you'll know about the terrible bushfires that are actually all up and down the east coast of Australia, but particularly the east coast of Tasmania, where many people have lost their homes. Thankfully, as far as I'm aware so far, nobody, I think, has lost their lives. But we're no strangers in Australia to bushfires, to floods, cyclones, tsunamis, all sorts of terrible natural disasters come to Australia. And it's not as if these are just theory either, of course, they actually do affect us or have affected us in the past or affect those who we know. At the church where I was an interim pastor, one of my friends there lost his house in the Victorian bushfires and lost everything that he owned. It's only four years ago since Black Saturday with the terrible Victorian bushfires. It's only two years ago since Cyclone Yarsi and the floods in Queensland. I think whatever you think and whatever theological persuasion you might be,

I'm sure that everybody would agree that these sorts of natural disasters are absolutely horrific. Eight years ago, there was a natural disaster which was almost on an unprecedented scale, and that was the Asian tsunami which took so many people's lives. And at the time, the Dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Sydney, Philip Jensen, said that such natural disasters are part of God's warning that judgment is coming. I'll say that again. He said that natural disasters are part of God's warning that judgment is coming. Not surprisingly, there were howls of protests in the media at what he had said. His statement, as is often the case, was taken out of context. What he had actually said was that you should do three things with natural disasters. First of all, you should pray. Second of all, you should give aid. And thirdly, later on, not at the time, but down the track, you should think about what it means. And as part of that, he said natural disasters are part of God's warning that judgment is coming. Well, is he right? Certainly the secular leaders and even religious leaders at the time all disagreed with him, as far as I could tell, at least in the media. They said you couldn't know what God was doing in the world. And of course, some of them said God had nothing to do with such disasters. But even at the time, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that we should factor God into our thinking with these things. So our secular society, of course, wants to cut God out of the picture, say he's got nothing to do with natural disasters. They're divorced from God, as far as they're concerned. Even some religious leaders would say something fairly similar. For them, God might be there, but natural disasters are out of his control. Now, I think, which is worse, to say that a natural disaster is under God's control, or to say that it's out of his control and he can't do anything about it?

I would have thought surely that second one is far worse. At least with the first one, that natural disasters are under God's control, then it could be that God might remove it as well.

Well, what do you think? What does God have to do with natural disasters? Nothing? Something? If something, what? How does he factor in?

[5 : 16] Well, this morning, Joel, as we look at it, raises this whole question for us. It's a great little book, the book of Joel, raises a lot of the themes that are in the Bible, but particularly Joel chapter one this morning raises for us this theme of natural disasters and what God has to do with it. So let's have a look at it together. If you've got your Bible in front of you there, I did do an outline and I forgot all about it, so I'm sorry if you normally have outlines. I'll try and make sure I remember it next week. Verse one is the introduction to the whole of the book, not just chapter one.

It says, the word of the Lord that came to Joel, son of Pethuel. So verse one tells us there, this is the word of God. It's the word of God given to us through Joel. Now, the Bible doesn't tell us anything else about the person of Joel and it doesn't tell us anything really about when this natural disaster happened that his book is talking about. The best guess that people have is that it's after the exile. So it seems that the book of Joel does talk about the exile and it looks like the temple is still standing, as we'll see. So people think it's after the books of Haggai and Zechariah, after the exile, but probably before Malachi, which is the last book of the Old Testament.

So the best guess is this probably happened somewhere around 500 BC after the exile. Now, in any case, of course, it doesn't really matter in one sense who Joel was or when this happened. If it did matter, God would have told us, of course, and he hasn't. What he has told us and what does matter in verse one is that this is the word of God, so that we're to hear it as God speaking to you and me. We're to take it to heart, believe it and obey it. Well, in verses two to four, Joel introduces us to the problem. He and his fellow Jews in Judah are suffering a natural disaster on an unprecedented scale. If you look at verse two, he says, hear this, you elders, listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors?

So Joel calls there on the elders who are the leaders of God's people and, in fact, on all who live in the land, all the people of God, to hear what he has to say. And what he asks is a question whether a natural disaster has ever happened like this.

And the answer implied is no and that this is a natural disaster on an unprecedented scale. So much so, verse three, he says, they're never to forget it and pass it down from generation to generation. And here it is in our Bibles. And verse four tells us what that natural disaster was, that it's a locust plague. What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten. What the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten. What the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten. So wave after wave of locust plague has come and devastated the countryside of the promised land.

[8 : 12] There are no crops left, no food. Now, I don't know what you might be thinking about locust plagues. At first, it doesn't sound like it's really all that bad, not like a tsunami or a bushfire, but actually it is that bad.

Just two years ago, I didn't know this until I was preparing this sermon, there was a locust plague in Victoria. One of the ladies at 8 o'clock church told me about her son and door-in-law who were on a farm in Victoria, who vividly remember this locust plague two years ago and were checking hour by hour to see whether everything they owned would be wiped out. It was the worst locust plague in 30 years. It didn't wipe everything out, fortunately, but it threatened billions of dollars off crops.

In 2004 in North Africa, there was a terrible locust plague. It cost, it said, \$400 million just to fight it and \$2.5 billion in the lost harvests. In Morocco, they said that the locust swarm there was 230 kilometres long and had 69 billion locusts in it. They say that one locust, a female locust that lays eggs now in January, by May this year can have up to 18 million descendants. And the problem, of course, is that they devastate the countryside, so there's no food and no crops. So in fact, it's very similar to something like a bushfire. In the very next book of the Bible after Joel, in Amos chapter 7, Amos is shown a vision by God of a locust plague which would wipe out the people of God and he cries out to God to relent, which God does. But here in Joel, the locust plague has come.

In verses 5 to 12, Joel singles out three different groups of people to describe the terrible effects that have come on them from this locust plague. The first group in verses 5 to 7 is perhaps not what you'd expect, quite surprising. It's alcoholics. Look at verse 5, he says, wake up you drunkards and weep. Wail all you drinkers of wine. Wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips. So drunkards, Joel says, and those who love wine will have nothing left because, of course, the locusts have devastated the vineyards. There are no grapes left. There's no grog. He tells them to wake up, therefore, from their drunken stupor, to face reality, to realise how bad their situation is and turn back to God.

Verses 6 to 7 explain why there's no wine. The NIV, it often drops out the word for, which kind of drives me nuts, but the word for is there in the original language in verse 6.

[11 : 05] For a nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number. It has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white. So here, like an army, a locust plague has invaded the promised land. It's devastated everything. There's so many of them that they are without number. They are like a nation without number. And they might be small, but he says, their teeth are like that of a lion, as they devour everything in their path. They lay waste the vines. There are no grapes left for those who drink wine. They even, he says, strip the bark off the trees, which is apparently true, so that it's like there's this white skeletons left off the trees.

It's a scene of utter devastation. So here, the first group in verses 5 to 7 of alcoholics and those who drink wine, Joel says, should weep and wail and turn to God. Verses 8 to 10 describe the second group affected by this locust plague. It doesn't actually mention a specific group here, but you can't really see it in English. The first word in verse 8, mourn, that command there, in the Hebrew is actually feminine and singular. And so people think it's referring to Jerusalem, which is feminine and singular. So it's speaking to Jerusalem to mourn. And priests are singled out in verse 9. So we're looking here at the temple, the priests and Jerusalem. They are affected by this locust plague and need to feel the impact of it and turn to God. So Joel calls on them in verse 8 to mourn over this disaster.

Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth, grieving for the betrothed of her youth. Jerusalem's to mourn like a young girl who has lost her fiancé. It's like an unspeakable tragedy of a young woman who was going to marry the man she loves and he's taken away from her. But the comparison to the disaster at the time, the real disaster like that, the unspeakable tragedy in verse 9, is that the temple worship has come to a halt. Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the Lord.

The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the Lord. Morning and evening at the temple, there were daily sacrifices and accompanying all the sacrifices were these grain and drink offerings. And these, verse 9 says, have been cut off from the house of the Lord, cut off from the temple. And verse 10, of course, explains why. Because the fields are ruined, the ground is dried up, the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails.

So grain and wine and olive oil are all the things that are used in these drink offerings and grain offerings that accompany the sacrifices. And now there's nothing left to offer God in worship.

[14 : 04] So the equivalent would be today of closing down every church in the country, all worship of God at an end. That's what the locust plague has done. And so verse 9, the priests are in mourning.

And though it doesn't say it, I think it's clear that God's people here have broken his covenant. And as part of that, God has then removed their worship off him.

Finally, in this section, the third group of people affected by this locust plague in verses 11 and 12, are the farmers, those who work the land themselves. He says, despair you farmers, verse 11, while you vine growers grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered, the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree, all the trees of the field are dried up.

Surely the people's joy is withered away. The farmers and vine growers here are singled out. And Joel as well calls on them to realise how dire their situation is to weep and to despair and wail over it because their harvest is destroyed.

All the trees of the field are destroyed, he says. Grapes, figs, pomegranates, palm dates, apples, everything gone. All the joy of people, he says, is gone.

[15 : 26] Verses 5 to 12 are telling us their food, their drink, their worship of God, all the blessings of God have been removed. Joel and his fellow Jews here are suffering a day of unprecedented disaster.

The locust plague has destroyed everything for them. So how should they think about it? How should they come to terms with this natural disaster? Well, first it seems Joel wants them to, I guess, feel the impact of it, to take it in, to mourn over it, he says, to weep, to wail, to let it impact them.

Unlike us modern people as well, people in the ancient world did not divorce God from natural disasters. And so no doubt they would have needed to think about, as the impact came on them, to think about how God factored in to this natural disaster.

And in fact, it's part of the covenant curses. If you want to look up later, Deuteronomy chapter 28, that's the chapter that lists out all the curses of the covenant, if God's people disobey him.

And a locust plague is one of those things. But I think what Joel is saying is, until they feel the impact and mourn over this disaster, they won't turn to God. One thing, I don't know if you picked it up, which is interesting, is that he never lists their sins.

[16 : 48] Doesn't mention any of their sins, like many of the other prophets. And my guess is, it's because it's too late. Judgment has already come. What they need to do then is simply feel the impact of it and turn to God.

People say that apparently after the 9-11 attacks in America, this is exactly what happened. People did, of course, feel the impact of that, very much so. And people flocked to churches, at least for a short time, after the 9-11 attacks.

Sometimes, sadly, God actually has to do things like this, to make people wake up and repent. I think the good news of the gospel today, often doesn't make sense to people, until they realise how bad their situation is.

We actually have to preach sin and judgement for people to realise how dire their situation is, so that they can see how good the news is of Jesus' death that brings us forgiveness and salvation.

Australians are now so comfortable, so wealthy, that the Word of God often makes little impact upon us. Some people resort to a prosperity gospel in desperation instead, I think, which emphasises how Christianity and being a Christian gives you so much blessing and a better life, and that's partly true.

[18 : 12] But for most Aussies, that's like water off a duck's back. It's not only unbiblical, but it's a strategy that won't work, because Aussies are already having a great life, so why turn to Christianity if things are already good?

But I think, if people realised how dire their situation is, that they are sinners in the hands of an angry God, then maybe they would turn to God and accept the good news of Jesus.

Joel here is calling on his fellow Jews to realise the impact of this disaster. And I think when natural disasters strike, we should feel the impact.

We should realise that we are dependent on God, that things are out of our control sometimes. We won't always have good wealth and health. We need to realise our need for God, our dependence upon Him, to feel our mortality.

And coming to terms with such natural disasters may well, we would hope, cause people to turn to God. Joel does exactly this in the second half of the chapter, verses 13 to 20, he calls on people, having felt the impact of this natural disaster, he calls on them to turn to God, because God has brought the locust plague and He is the one who can remove it.

[19 : 29] So when natural disaster strikes, we shouldn't blame God, we shouldn't leave Him out of the picture, we should turn to Him. He's the one who's brought it, He's the one who can take it away.

When disaster strikes, Joel calls on people here to turn to God in prayer, and he calls on the religious leaders to lead the way in verses 13 and 14. He says, verse 13, Joel commands the leaders, of religious leaders of God's people in verse 13, to put on sackcloth and mourn and spend the night mourning in the temple.

And verse 14, he calls on them to declare a holy fast, to have a holy gathering of God's people. So to summon the other leaders of God's people there in verse 14, and all who live in the land, that is all of God's people, to come to the temple and call out to God in prayer.

Now, declaring a holy fast is basically a call to repentance. In those days, fasting meant depriving yourself as you mourned over your sin, which was a sign of repentance.

And the priests here were to lead the way in mourning over their sin, to lead the way in repentance, and to call God's people, the end of verse 14 says there, to cry out to the Lord, to cry out to Him in prayer, to cry out to Him at the temple, to have mercy on them and take away the locust plague.

[21 : 15] God had brought it, God could remove it. So they needed to turn to Him in prayer. So the Dean of the Cathedral in Sydney, Philip Jensen, was actually right when he said the first thing to do with that tsunami was to turn to God in prayer.

It's exactly what Joel says here. And in fact, Christian leaders and probably all Christians, I would have thought, should lead the way in turning to God in mourning and then in prayer with natural disasters.

The New Testament makes it clear all of us who trust in Jesus are priests of God together. And so we need to lead the way in turning to God and leading others to turn to God in prayer.

Now this is about an unprecedented natural disaster in Joel. But what he goes on to say is that there is worse to come. I won't go into it, but the first reading we had from Revelation chapter 9 looks forward from Joel's time, way after Joel's time, looks forward using the language of Joel of the locust plague to describe worse judgment to come.

But here Joel in verse 15 talks about judgment day, the day of the Lord. He says, Now the day of the Lord is actually the key theme throughout the book of Joel, although this is the first time he's mentioned it.

[22 : 45] And the day of the Lord in the Old Testament is basically the day when God would come and defeat his enemies. And the people of God were looking forward to the day of the Lord because God would come and defeat their enemies and vindicate them.

But the Old Testament prophets then made it clear that when God came to do that, he would do a thorough job. He would not only deal with his enemies amongst the nations, but also his enemies amongst God's own people.

In fact, he would judge every sin amongst all people, which is why the day of the Lord is actually judgment day. And the Old Testament prophets made it clear that being born in Israel did not make you immune from that judgment.

Justice, of course, being born Christian today does not make you immune from God's judgment. The locust plague here has brought great destruction, but verse 15, Joel says, the day of the Lord, judgment day, will come like destruction from the Almighty.

The locust plague merely foreshadows the great day of God's final judgment. So again, Philip Jensen, the Anglican Dean of Sydney, was right.

[23 : 58] He was right when he said that natural disasters are a warning of greater judgment to come. So when we suffer natural disasters ourselves, or when we hear of natural disasters in the news as we are right now, we should turn to God in prayer.

We should give money to help people. But it should also make us and then turn to God in prayer and to repent. God is the one who has brought the natural disasters.

God is the one who can remove them. And we need to turn to him in prayer and we need to be reminded that there is greater judgment to come. But of course, we know far more than even the prophet Joel did.

The Apostle Peter talks about the Old Testament prophets straining and longing and looking ahead to the salvation which we now have heard about and have.

We know now that God in his love has actually sent his only son, Jesus, to die on the cross and there to take upon himself the judgment that you and I deserve.

[25 : 05] So that even though we deserve to face God's final judgment, Jesus took it on himself at the cross so that if you and I trust in Jesus, we are forgiven our sins, promised eternal life and we'll be spared God's judgment when it comes.

So the gospel is indeed great news but only if you realise how bad the situation was that you were in as a sinner facing an angry God.

When that impacts you then you realise how great indeed is the news of the gospel. I think a lot of people think that it sounds very harsh that God would send natural disasters to make people wake up and repent but I think it only sounds harsh if you don't realise how bad your sin was in the first place so that it might have needed that to make you wake up and repent.

I think that God would have mercy on us at all is simply astounding. Well I'm just not going to spend much time on the last verses verses 16 and 20 let me read them again Joel again reminds people of their dire situation he says has not the food been cut off before our very eyes joy and gladness from the house of our God the seeds are shriveled beneath the clods the storehouses are in ruins the granaries have been broken down for the grain has dried up how the cattle moan the herds mill about because they have no pasture even the flocks of sheep are suffering to you Lord I call for fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness and flames have burned up all the trees of the field even the wild animals pant for you the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness verse 16 there's no food left again he reminds them verse 17 talks about the barns and storehouses that there's nothing left in them so much so the farm animals are wandering about with nothing to eat and as apparently often happens after a locust plague verses 19 to 20 are probably talking about a fire or drought that has come through in the wake of the locust plague it's a scene of utter devastation well in our lifetime we might suffer from all sorts of disasters we might suffer from a natural disaster we might suffer from some sort of personal tragedy or disaster it doesn't mean if we do that we're particularly bad sinners

Jesus in Luke 13 talking about a disaster of his time made it clear that it doesn't necessarily mean that we're worse than the people around us if that happens to us or to somebody else but what it should do is remind us of the greater judgment of God to come and when disaster strikes then whether it's natural disasters or some sort of personal tragedy what it means is that we shouldn't blame God of course we shouldn't doubt God or think that he's not in control but we should turn to God as we mourn our loss we should turn to him in prayer for he is sovereign he is in control of all things he brings such disasters and he can remove them and so we need to look to him when disaster strikes and as Christians we need to lead the way in doing that and in turning to God in prayer and calling on others around us to turn to God in prayer as well and though I think our society hates to hear it these days the Bible is clear here that such disasters foreshadow a much greater judgment to come which is the final judgment of God the day on which you and I and all people who have ever lived will be raised from the dead to stand before God and face his judgment thank God then for the good news of

[28 : 59] Jesus that in his death on the cross he has taken that judgment on himself to forgive us our sins and spare us from the judgment to come so when natural disasters strike we need to turn to God to feel the impact to turn to him in prayer to call on others to turn to him in prayer as well for only God can save us we're going to have some time a couple of minutes to reflect on this part of God's word I'm going to lead us in prayer now and then you might like to continue to reflect or to pray yourself in silence our heavenly father we do remember at this time those who are suffering from the fires in Tasmania those who have lost their homes and lost everything we thank you that it seems so far that nobody has lost their lives and we pray that indeed aid would come swiftly and that you would comfort those who have lost we do pray

Lord that in their loss they would turn to you that they would be mindful of the greater judgment to come and accept the good news of Jesus and turn to you to be saved we do thank you so much for giving you a dear son Jesus for us and we pray Lord that when disasters come that people will turn to you and that it would cause them to receive your salvation and be spared from your judgment to come help us to lead the way in turning to you and we ask it in Jesus name Amen