

Loss & Lament

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. It's good to be here with you in person and online. Before we jump into our sermon text, let me just say at the start, thank you for your prayers for me and Beth and the kids as we were on sabbatical this summer.

You know, we often see in the Gospels how Jesus would pull away during his earthly ministry to rest and to pray and then to re-enter into that ministry. So we are very thankful that we had the time to do just that this summer, to pull back, to rest, to pray. So we're feeling refreshed by that time and we're grateful for it. And this morning, it's good to see you all again. It's good to be back.

So now I'm excited to open up the Bible this morning and for us to hear God's word together. So would you turn with me to the prophet Joel? We're starting a new sermon series today in the book of Joel. Joel is a small book toward the end of the Old Testament canon in the section of the Bible called the Minor Prophets. Now they're called minor not because they're less important, but just because they're shorter in length than, say, Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel. And there are 12 of these books in the collection of the Minor Prophets. Joel is the second one right after Hosea.

That's where we're going to be for the next five weeks as we kick off this new sermon series, as we begin another fall semester together. Now one of the unique things about the book of Joel is that he doesn't give us any direct information about when in Israel's history he was preaching and writing. But as we'll see, that doesn't create any major difficulties for understanding and applying the book today. Joel's message, as we'll see, is timeless and it's, in a striking way, particularly relevant, I think, for our situation right now. So let me pray and then I'll read Joel chapter one and then we'll unpack what Joel has to say to us. So let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we are grateful for the fact that you choose not to remain unknown and far off, but you have chosen to reveal yourself to us. God, what good news it is that you, the source of life and our ultimate happiness, God, what good news it is that you've chosen to make yourself known.

[2 : 3 9] And thank you for sending your spirit that we might know you. And thank you most of all for sending Jesus so that we can know exactly what you're like in him and through him and united to him. So help us now as we come to your written word. Help us to understand what your spirit is saying to us that we might know you better, trust you more deeply and love you more fully, we pray.

In Christ's name, amen. So let me begin by reading the first 12 verses of Joel chapter one. Joel chapter one, the word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel.

Hear 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? Tell your children of it and let your children tell their children and their children to another generation. What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten.

What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. Awake, you drunkards and weep and wail all you drinkers of wine because of the sweet wine for it is cut off from your mouth. For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number. Its teeth are lion's teeth and it has the fangs of a lioness. It 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. Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.

[4 : 2 4] The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord. The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes.

Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil, wail, O vine dressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is perished. The 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.

Well, one of the big questions facing the church today, facing everybody today, is how do we deal with unprecedented loss? How do we deal with loss?

Of course, dealing with loss has always been a problem for us, hasn't it? The economy takes a turn and we lose a job. A marriage falls on hard times and we lose a spouse.

Loss. Sickness comes unexpected and we lose a child. We say something careless and we lose our reputation. Loss has always been a human problem and a searching and a challenging problem.

[5 : 45] But it feels particularly poignant today, doesn't it? As the pandemic grinds on. Just in the last few months, think of all that's been lost.

Lives have been lost still. Jobs continue to be lost. The ease of just connecting with another person goes on being lost. Even milestones, in a sense, have been lost.

Think about graduations earlier in the summer, weddings, birth celebrations. All these have been significantly and unchangeably altered by the pandemic.

What do we do in the face of all this loss? How do we deal with it? How do we handle it? Well, that's what Joel chapter 1 is about.

Joel's message comes in the midst of a devastating crisis of unprecedented loss. Verse 4 describes a locust invasion where not just one or two or three, but four waves come through the land of just grinding desolation.

[6 : 58] Even today, you know, locust swarms in some parts of the world can still cause massive destruction. But imagine in the ancient world. Imagine the ancient world, a world with no pesticides, in an economy, a whole society, completely dependent on agriculture.

And you have a situation where a tiny little bug can bring a whole world to its knees. One tiny organism bringing a whole world to its knees in desolation and loss.

Well, that sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? So what is God's word to us when we experience this sort of loss? Well, there are two things God will say through Joel here in chapter 1.

And the first thing is found in the first 12 verses that we just read. And Joel says here, Look at verse 2 again.

Joel says, Hear this, you elders. Give ear, all inhabitants of the land. Verse 5, he says, Wake up, drunkards. Joel will go on to say in these 12 verses, Lament. Be ashamed.

[8 : 16] Pay attention. Tell it to your children. Don't deny what's happening right before your faces. Acknowledge it. On the one hand, acknowledge how wide the loss is.

Notice the different groups of people that Joel mentions in these verses. He mentions elders and children. And then he mentions drunkards and priests. And he mentions priests and he mentions farmers.

In other words, Joel's saying, Young and old. Religious and irreligious. The professional class and the working class. In other words, everybody is impacted by this loss.

We need to acknowledge how wide the loss is. And at the same time, we need to acknowledge how deep the loss is. Joel just piles up the language of loss in this section, doesn't he?

Verse 4, he talks about things being eaten. In verse 7, things are laid waste. They're stripped bare. In verse 10, they're destroyed. In verse 12, they're dried up.

[9 : 26] And notice how deep the loss goes. It's, you know, it's not just sort of a social inconvenience, right? As the drunkards and the party goers have no more wine to drink.

Well, that's kind of inconvenient. It's not just that. And it's not just an economic loss. As the farmers have seemingly lost every crop that they could have harvested.

But it's not just an economic loss. It's, it's, it's, and it's not just an ecological loss. You know, the ground here, Joel says, is just mourning and languishing.

It's not just social. It's not just economic. It's not just ecological. It's also even, Joel says, with a lot of insight. It's a spiritual loss. There's a spiritual loss happening.

Verse 9, the regular offerings of the temple are cut off. That kind of regular fellowship with God that the people were meant to have through the practices of the temple are being shut down.

[10 : 29] Because of what they've experienced. So Joel says, acknowledge in the face of loss. Acknowledge how wide it is and acknowledge how deep it is.

Don't deny it. But why is it so important that we don't live in denial, but we acknowledge our losses? Now, there are lots of things we could say, maybe.

Living in denial, of course, creates all sorts of emotional and social problems and exacerbates them. No one wants to live in denial, right? But I think perhaps the most important thing we could say is this.

If we live in denial of what's happening before us, we remain closed off from what God is doing in the midst of the loss.

If we don't wake up and acknowledge what's happening, we are missing what God is doing right in our midst. If we shut it down and push it away, we're also pushing away the work of God.

[11 : 33] You see, friends, the reality is the sovereignty of God doesn't end where our losses begin. Even in loss, God is sovereign and God is working out his purposes.

But if we deny the loss, if we turn away from it, if we try to stuff it or ignore it, or what most of us are trying to do today, if we try to just entertain ourselves through it, watching whatever happens to be streaming, if we just try to entertain ourselves until it goes away, we're going to miss what God is doing in the midst of it and the change he's bringing about.

Now that, of course, is a very vulnerable thing to do, isn't it? Acknowledging our loss.

Because when we acknowledge our loss, when we stop denying it and we start acknowledging it, that's very vulnerable because we have to admit at that moment that we're not in control.

And we have to admit that we're not as strong and we're not as self-sufficient as we imagine ourselves to be. We have to confess that we're weak and that we're needy.

[12 : 45] And that is all very, very hard for us to do. But you see, friends, there, in that very place, Jesus reminds us, in that place of weakness and vulnerability, that's where the kingdom of God starts to break through.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus said, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. So we must not deny, but we must acknowledge our losses.

That's the first point here in chapter one. But you know, here another danger starts to present itself, doesn't it? Having overcome our denial, having acknowledged how wide and how deep our losses are, we may slip from denial only to go headlong into despair.

Seeing all that we've lost, we can lose ourselves in hopelessness, in self-pity, in feelings that all is lost. Having turned away from denial, we end up headlong into despair.

And what does God say to us at that point? Well, the rest of Joel chapter one tells us. He says, in the face of loss, we must not despair, but rather, we must lament.

[14 : 15] Lament. Now, maybe that's a little counterintuitive, what you thought I was going to say. Maybe you thought Joel would say, have hope, people of God, it's going to be okay.

But actually, the first thing Joel tells them to do is to engage in the practice of lament. Look at verses 13 and 14 with me. We'll pick up where we left off.

Verse 13. Put on sackcloth. Those were clothes for mourning. Put 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. Consecrate 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. Now, one way to think about this practice of lamenting is that it's the act of grieving in a direction.

[15 : 18] Of grieving in a direction. It's bundling up all our losses, all our pains, all our discouragements, all our disappointments, and taking them honestly, without reserve, to God.

It's grieving in a direction. And it's the psalmist who paved the way for God's people to pray prayers of lament. Think about Psalm 10, verse 1.

Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? Or think about Psalm 13, verse 1. How long, Lord?

Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Or Psalm 6, verse 3. My soul is in deep anguish. How long, O Lord?

How long? Now, I think we have to admit that we are not accustomed to this sort of praying, right? If one of the elders were to get up in the middle of the service and say, God, why do you keep forgetting us?

[16 : 21] You've turned your face away and we're alone down here. You would think, whoa. I don't know if he's qualified for the office of the elder. That can feel kind of improper, can't it?

To get up and pray a prayer like that. It can feel a little disrespectful. Where are you, God? Why aren't you answering? Don't you see how bad it is down here? And yet, that is where laments in the Bible begin.

With the raw honesty of grief and loss taken straight to God. And I want to point out three things about lament that we see here in the second half of Joel 1.

First, we see that it happens in gathered worship. In the verses we just read, God doesn't tell the priests to lament by themselves only. He tells them to consecrate a fast and call a solemn assembly.

He says, make a holiday, get everybody out of work, bring them all to the temple, and then we're going to lament together as one. The house of God is going to become the location where the people cry out to the Lord in lament.

[17 : 38] And so it should be for us today. Church gatherings are not only a place to express joy, but also sadness.

Church gatherings are a place and a time not just to celebrate successes, but to mourn losses. Church gatherings are a place and a time not only where we rejoice with those who rejoice, but where we weep with those who weep.

And historically, we've not been very good at this as the church. You know, we think we have to put on a happy face and lead happy services with a happy message so everybody will leave happy. But that is not actually biblical spirituality and is not biblical worship only. In Romans 12, Paul says, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

That's real genuine worship. In other words, Paul says, you have to give everything to God. And that means your joys and your sorrows. And that means your triumphs and your failures. And that means your peace and your deep-seated sense of unrest.

[18 : 56] Everything goes on the altar before God. Your whole life. Your whole body. And in times of loss, that means we do what Joel says here. We lament.

Now, initially, we might feel that lamenting, whether in private prayer or especially in public worship, is kind of offsetting or unsettling or sort of off-putting.

Or maybe it even displays kind of a lack of faith in God. But the reality is, praying prayers of lament are actually liberating.

Grieving in the direction of God means that we don't have to have all of the answers or the solutions.

It means we don't have to have all of the inner strength to tough it out. When we pray prayers of lament together, we're actually liberating ourselves from trying to be our own saviors.

[19 : 54] Because if we're not grieving in the direction of God, we're going to try to figure it out ourselves or end up in despair. So when we pray prayers of lament and we liberate ourselves from trying to be our own saviors, we're liberating ourselves from what ultimately leads to despair in the first place.

Because we can't save ourselves. And we can let God be God. And so to lament means to take all our griefs and all our losses to God with honesty, both in private prayer and in public worship.

And together. That's point one about lament. But to lament also means something else. It means another thing for Joel. To lament means to connect our losses to a bigger story.

Lamenting means taking our losses to God, even together, but then connecting it to a bigger story. Look at verses 15 through 18. Let me read those for us. Joel says, Now at this point in Joel chapter 1, Joel's actually beginning to model for us what lament looks like.

In the last couple verses he said, I want you all to do it together. Now he's kind of showing us a model of what it looks like. And notice in verses 16 through 18 of what I just read, we see what we already saw. That we're being led to an honest pouring out to God of all the losses that we've experienced.

[21 : 47] But look at verse 15. In other words, Joel sees in the present catastrophe, Joel sees in the present catastrophe, not just an agricultural or an economic crisis.

And he sees not just a spiritual disruption of temple worship. He sees something even more. For Joel, this magnitude of the locust invasion, this unprecedented loss, is a reminder.

It's sort of a beacon. It's even a foretaste of an even greater crisis to come. What Joel calls the day of the Lord in verse 15.

Now the day of the Lord was a theme that developed throughout the prophets. And it took on multiple interconnected meanings.

The day of the Lord could speak of the day when God would judge Israel's enemies. And the day of the Lord could also speak of the day when God would judge Israel's own sinfulness. But ultimately, the day of the Lord spoke of a day when God, the creator of all, would judge his creation with perfect justice once and for all.

[23 : 17] Every idol would be torn down. Every heart exposed. Every evil and every wrong made right. So when Joel says in the midst of his generation's unprecedented loss that the day of the Lord is near, he's reminding the people that this experience of loss is part of a much larger story.

The story of God, the creator of heaven and earth, who will one day judge this fallen world in perfect righteousness. Now in Joel chapter 2, next week, Joel's going to unpack the day of the Lord theme in terms of repentance.

That is, in the face of loss, the people must turn from their sin and turn back to God and God's mercy. But here in chapter 1, Joel's focus isn't so much on repenting just yet, but it's on lamenting. And in that key, in the key of lament, to invoke the nearness, the sort of impendingness, the pressing in of the day of the Lord, is to be reminded that the whole story of humanity is a story of loss.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, we lost our original glory. We lost our original fellowship with God.

[24 : 52] Creation lost its original harmony and peace. So our ongoing losses now connect us in a profound way to the deep story of God and his creation and to every other human being who also experiences loss.

We find ourselves caught up in a much bigger story. And that means something important when it comes to the practice of lament.

Our laments naturally and rightly begin with me, don't they? My losses. But when we connect them to the larger story of the Lord and the day of the Lord, those laments that begin with me become laments that expand out into we.

Don't they? We stand before God in our loss. We stand with a humanity that is lost and lost and lost.

And we stand with a creation that is groaning under loss. And that means we aren't alone before God in our grief.

[26 : 10] That means we stand together in desperate need of God. So you see, what the practice of lament does, because loss often so often makes us feel alone, when we lament, it actually brings us together so that we know that we're not alone.

So lament connects us to the bigger story of God. And that not only connects us to one another, but that also opens the door for hope.

The third and last thing we see in Joel's lament is a door beginning to open of hope. Look at verses 19 and 20.

To you, O Lord, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. Flame has burned all the trees of the field. Even the beasts of the field pant for you.

Because the water brooks are dried up and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. In these verses, as chapter one comes to an end, Joel himself prays to the Lord.

[27 : 28] And this prayer is coming from a place of having lost everything. Did you notice there? Pastures? Gone. Trees? Gone. Water? Gone.

It's all burned. It's all dried up. And what does that mean? God is now their only hope. In fact, all of creation is panting, isn't it?

Even the beasts of the field pant for you or as Romans 8 would say, Paul would write, creation's groaning. For the Lord. But you see, if my story is connected to the story of creation and its losses, then it is also connected to the Lord's story of liberation from this bondage to decay.

Why can Joel turn to God with such confidence in the midst of loss? because Joel knows that God keeps his promises.

And friends, how much more today do we know that to be true? From the perspective of the New Testament, we see that at the heart of the Bible is the story of the Creator God, the one true God who is willing to enter creation in the person of Jesus and to lose everything.

[28 : 59] Jesus is the one who's stripped bare. Jesus is the one who's cut off for us in our place. and at the heart of the cross, in that moment of being stripped bare and cut off, comes a cry and a prayer of lament.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And in that moment, Jesus' identification with us in our sin and in our loss couldn't be more profound or real.

And Jesus' own lament on the cross, you know, it not only invites us to lament with Jesus, but it allows us to lament with hope and with trust, with the kind of trust that Joel has in verse 19 when he says, to you, O Lord, I call.

Because you see, friends, the gospel, the good news is this, that Jesus lost everything for us so that even if we lose everything, we'll never be lost.

No matter how dark it gets, our Heavenly Father will not abandon His children. in Jesus, God has kept His promise to save. Christ lost it all to regain us and bring us home.

[30 : 20] And so now, in the midst of loss, rather than despair, we lament. We grieve in a direction.

And we do that together. together. And we do that in line with God's story. And we do it with confidence, even with hope. Because ultimately, you see, Joel is a book not just about loss.

Joel is also a book about hope. As we'll see as this book unfolds, it's about a God who can restore the years that the locusts have eaten.

And it's about a God who will pour out His Spirit to restore our lost fellowship. And it's about a God who one day will put an end to evil and loss and He'll dwell with His people forever. That's where this book is headed.

But in the meantime, Joel is telling us right now not to deny our losses but to acknowledge them. And not to despair in the midst of our losses but to lament them.

[31 : 25] And then, in God's timing, our losses will become the place where God's mercy and God's kingdom break through. Let's pray.

Father, there's much to lament this morning. So let's take a moment now, and even in the quiet of our hearts, just bring to God the griefs and the losses of this past week, of this past season.

Father, thank you for hearing the prayers of your children.

Thank you for Jesus' death and resurrection that allows us to come before your throne of grace with confidence, with all of our griefs, with all of our joys, with all of our triumphs, with all of our failures.

Thank you that because of Jesus and the covenant that he kept, we can come with confidence.

Father, we pray that you would continue to pour out your spirit upon your church.

[32 : 48] Help us, we pray, to walk faithfully in these days. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.