

Intro: A tornado destroys a southern town and kills dozens of people. Earthquakes reduce third world cities to ruins and leave millions helpless. Tsunamis sweep hundreds out to sea and cause radioactive leaks. Such tragedy needs to be considered...as tragedy. Suffering needs to be seen as suffering and not swept under the carpet of fatalism, cast aside to the gutter of evolutionary Darwinism, nor simply ignored like that neighbor's dog, always reminding you he's still there by leaving presents in your lawn. Tragedy is more significant than that pettiness. In the book of Joel we see the response and call of a man who saw great tragedy, destruction, and suffering and called God's people to respond.

The LORD sends word with a list of imperatives:

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| 1. Listen everyone! Hear! (2) | 8. Lament! (v13) |
| 2. Tell! (3) | 9. Call a fast (v14) |
| 3. Awake, weep, wail! (5) | 10. Proclaim a solemn assembly (v14) |
| 4. Wail like a cursed woman! (8) | 11. Gather everybody together to the LORD (v14) |
| 5. Be ashamed! (11) | 12. Cry out to the LORD (v14) |
| 6. Howl! (v11) | |
| 7. Mourn in sackcloth (v13) | |

1. **Listen to the LORD in the Midst of Tragedy (1)**

- a. First of all, the LORD responded first. He brought His words to His servant, Joel.
 - i. Interestingly, it is in tragedy when we believe that God is the farthest, but here we see God moving toward His people to communicate, to instruct, to inform them, and ultimately to comfort them with hope
 - ii. The name Joel means "Yahweh is God." In a sense, when God chose Joel it was an affirmation that the locusts were not out of God's control, that He is still God even when He brings tragedy (Isa 45:7; Jer 23:12)
- b. Next, Joel calls for hearers: the elders (leaders of the people), and then all those who live in the midst of the suffering.
 - i. Listen! Hear!
 - ii. It is in these moments of our greatest pains and our greatest suffering when we need to hear the LORD
 - iii. How gracious that God is not distant, removed, but near and calling His people to hear Him, like a Father calling to his son in the darkness of a tunnel
- c. Joel points out the immense suffering of this particular plague. None like it was known to this generation or the last. It was a great tragedy.
 - i. It is clear that Joel, knowing that God is near and sovereign, does not treat this suffering with an attitude of fatalism or indifference.
 - ii. This suffering is great. It is significant. It is real. And God is near for a purpose that is greater than we can see from within the tragedy.

2. **Remember Tragedy and the Plight of Those With Tragic Loss (2-4)**

- a. Joel calls the people to remember the plague and tell it's story:
 - i. Pass on the story of suffering to your sons, grandsons, and on to the next generations. That's how great this pain was.
 - ii. It's important to remember tragedy as a means of repentance and faith in JC

- b. Joel now describes the story of the locusts' devastation: four waves of destruction that razed the crops and vineyards to the ground.
 - i. **Locust illustration from National Geographic, 1915**
 - ii. Four stages of locust devastation
 1. The “cutter” from the Hebrew root “to cut off”, used of locusts most likely in their larval or caterpillar form
 2. The “ambusher” from the Hebrew root “to ambush”, used of locusts that swarm out from hiding places
 - a. These locusts are known to “hop” along the ground, creating some appearances of jumping out of hiding?
 3. The “creeper” or “hopper” one who comes and goes, a locust that arrives and leaves showing the quick devastation that locusts bring, able to destroy entire crops in a matter of hours
 - a. After the larval stage the locust gets its wings, but still does not fly, moving from plant to plant by hopping along
 - b. They cover over ¼ mile per day on the ground, consuming as they go
 4. The “finisher” from the root “to destroy, or to finish”, used of locusts that completed the destruction and finished everything on their plates, so to speak
 - a. After molting up to 5 more times, they take flight
 - b. Making distances of over 200 miles per day, they stop and consume vegetation along their path then continue swarming
 - i. One travelled from Northern Africa all the way to Great Britain in 1954 and in 1988 a swarm made it from West Africa all the way to the Caribbean
- b. To an agrarian society this was economically devastating!
 - i. No food – famine
 1. Locust invasions are regional, sometimes covering over 460 square miles, so food would have been available, but at a drastically increased price and very difficult to get (without modern transportation or refrigeration)
 2. This would basically be like a huge spike in the prices for our staples:
 - a. Milk \$25/gallon
 - b. Eggs \$20/carton
 - c. Gas \$40/gallon
 - d. Etc.
 3. Desert locusts, the most feared in Northern Africa and the Mediterranean, can cover 1/5 of the world’s land surface and destroy 1/10th of the world population’s food supply
 4. In a swarm of up to 80 million locusts per ½ square mile, they could consume over 400 million pounds of plants per day and have a lifespan of several months.
 - ii. No jobs – depression
 1. No money for landowners means no work for the average worker
 2. No crops means no farming
 - a. This may have created some intense lifestyle choices (moving, etc.)
 - iii. Depression – Anarchy & Personal Warfare:
 1. Stealing, looting, riots would break out between hungry individuals or clans
 2. Blameshifting, racism, injustice abounds in such times of dire destruction

3. Wake up and mourn the loss (5-12)

- a. **Awake!!**
 - i. See the loss of your blessing, the devastation of your “happiness!”

1. Even the drunkards should take notice!! There are no vines to produce grapes to produce wine!
- ii. Wake up out of the slumber of your ambivalence and your full belly and weep for the devastation of sin (in general), of the destruction of our foolishness, of mankind's rebellion, of loss, of death, of addiction, of despair!
- b. **Weep! Wail!** Because a nation (of locusts) have come against your land and stripped it bare!
 - i. Tragedy is tragic! It is horrific! It is to be grieved and wept over as ugly and as terrifying as it really is!
 - ii. This is a command to grieve to the people who have been devastated by a "natural" disaster
 - iii. **Wail** as a young woman who has lost her husband; like one cursed and deprived of her happiness, security, and welfare.
 - iv. Servants of God: **Mourn** for even the first fruits of the harvest are gone from the house of the LORD. You have nothing to offer Him!
 1. Note that just because one is a servant of the Lord who offers first fruits to Him, they are not somehow passed over in this corporate tragedy.
 2. They are a people together and this tragedy has fallen on the righteous and the unrighteous alike.
 3. Mourn because you cannot offer what you want to offer, you cannot do what you want to do, even though it is good.
 4. Mourn because there is NO HARVEST at all! Not even the first fruits.
 - v. Farmers: **Be ashamed!!** (See Daniel 9:7) Your land is fruitless and withered.
 1. Nothing to show for your efforts
 2. This word, "bosh", sounds a lot like the word in v12 for "dried up", which is "bish"
 3. Be dried up, ashamed, shriveled of your own strength and power
- c. This tragedy has dried up the joy of man!
 - i. Tragedy has a way of withering and shriveling our joy to where there is no singing, there is no rejoicing, there is no dancing or celebration of the harvest coming in
 - ii. This is primarily due to the fact that we feel the presence of the Lord is distant and remote, making our rest and our joy also shrivel up as we ascertain the loss of our temporal blessings
 - iii. Thus the priests are called to mourn and call the people together to cry out to the Lord, for the Day of the Lord is near
 1. Mourn, Wail, Grieve – because you cannot offer gifts to God (13)
 2. Proclaim a time of fasting to pray
 3. Summon the leaders and call out to the LORD!
 4. Recognize the Severity of God (solemn assembly)!!

4. **Cry Out to the LORD Together for the Day of the Lord is Near (15-20)**

- a. Notice that the "Day of the Lord" is still in the future here, even though the locusts have already devastated the land
 - i. What does this mean?
 - ii. The primary reason for gathering together and calling out to the Lord is because there is still a coming day of greater judgment than even the utter devastation of the locusts!
 1. It is near and it comes as destruction
 2. It comes as destruction from the Almighty (El Shaddai)
- b. We cry out *for* God, not merely *to* God for His blessings to return
 - i. Even the beasts understand that the presence of God is what is necessary (v20)
 1. "The beasts of the field long for you..."
 2. "The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God" (Ps 104:21)

- ii. Man's sin has brought a curse upon creation, for which it groans for its redemption (Rom 8).
 - 1. The cure for this curse, and the curse of tragedy is a solution for sin, the redemption of man.
 - 2. What is the crying out? Redeem this land! Redeem your people! Send the Redeemer!

5. The Day of the Lord Has Come and Is Coming

- a. Every tragedy in this world points to a greater tragedy in the future, the coming Day of Judgment
 - i. There is a day of judgment coming in the future, even though nobody knows the day or the hour
 - ii. This judgment will be terrible and horrible for the enemies of God, the proud and self-reliant, those who do not repent and trust in Jesus.
- b. There is also a Day of Judgment that has already passed, laid upon one man, the Reconciler, Jesus Christ
 - i. Here is what is amazing about the Gospel: Though God is perfectly just to destroy mankind because of his rebellion, God has entered into our tragedy to defeat sin through tragic loss to Himself!!
 - ii. Upon Him was all the judgment of God laid in our place, so that all who repent of trusting in their own power and turn to trust in Him as their Savior from sin and judgment and receive Him as the King of their lives, find protection in the future Day of Judgment
 - 1. Unified with Him in His death: so that they died and were judged already in Him
 - 2. Unified with Him in His life: so that their condemnation parlayed, they find peace with God and life in His Spirit
 - iii. Mankind is left with two choices:
 - 1. Trust in Jesus Christ as the bearer of our judgment and the King over our lives and thus avoid the coming judgment
 - 2. Resist the grace of God and face God alone on that terrible day
- c. What an amazing God that would provide a way out for us on that day by providing Himself in our place!
 - i. Though He is the righteous judge, the Holy One, the Glorious Creator, he gave Himself that we might live
 - ii. God paid down our debt against Him that we might be reconciled to Him!
 - iii. Grace, grace, greater than all our sin!

Conclusion:

Often times we are asked, or we ask, (especially when these tragedies strike others than us) how can this happen to people? How could God do this? How can He be good if He does this to these people? Jesus was asked the same questions in Luke 13:2-5. How did He respond? He responded with, "Repent!"

We who ask these questions ask them because we don't see our own sin or our own need to repent. Joel didn't ask these questions because he saw his and his people's sins. His message is not trying to answer Why, but rather is bringing us back to the primary reason God has for suffering: Repent and fly to Jesus as our shelter! See your sin against God, the hardness of your heart, and repent! Do not blame anyone else for your suffering, don't blame the President or the Congress, or the liberals, for the economic blight or the loss of lives or the height of crime or the price of gas. Don't blame Islam, don't blame terrorists, don't blame your neighbor. God may use these causes He uses to bring you suffering, but wise men will use these tragedies to turn to God in repentance and to lead others in the same repentance before the God who controls all things, because with repentance comes forgiveness and with forgiveness come blessing. Read on this week into chapter 2 and see how God responds to repentant faith.