

Prophecy, Dreams, & Visions

Joel 2:23-32

CONTEXT

When the temple had been rebuilt, about 515 years before the birth of Jesus, a plague of locusts – what we would now call grasshoppers – descended upon a community near Jerusalem. Over a period of years, these clicking, swarming insects consumed harvest after harvest. The people were starving; the cattle and sheep were wandering aimlessly with empty bellies. There seemed nowhere to turn and nothing to do but die. A man named Joel rose from within the community to address the people in the middle of this dire situation. He called for the people – right down to the nursing infants – to a time of fasting and prayer, in hopes that God would respond and save them. When the plague had lifted, Joel spoke these words from God to the people:

JOEL 2:23-32

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. 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.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; 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 will pour out my spirit.

I will 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. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

THE END OF THE WORLD

John, a man I've known all my life, has been convinced for decades that the end is near, so it really came as no surprise when he informed me a couple of years ago that the end the world was going to start on September 26. The first email he sent described a brown dwarf star that had turned into a comet called Planet X, and it was hurtling toward the earth. The first of its destruction would be the giant solar flare it would cause when it barely missed the sun. This would, in turn, cause a massive electromagnetic disturbance that would knock out technology for six months. This event would shortly be followed by mass chaos on earth, a solar eclipse, the comet swooping by Mars and sucking away the red dust on its surface, which would then obscure the moon and make it appear the color of blood, the rain of deadly meteors on earth and its inhabitants, and eventually the impact of Planet X itself. After his description, the man asked me, "Any of this sound familiar?" He then reviewed the scriptures in the Bible that describe the celestial signs that would precede the great and terrible Day of the Lord, including today's text in Joel.

PREPARING FOR THE END

In the days leading up to September 26, John and I had many discussions on what the end would entail and how we should prepare for it. At one point, he sent me a thorough list of all the purchases I should make so I would be fully stocked and have plenty of barter material. I added up the cost, and discovered I couldn't afford the apocalypse. What struck me through it all is that John didn't appear to be afraid of this impending destruction and mass chaos. He was *excited*. And that took me awhile to figure out. He is one of the gentlest men I know, so this wasn't about morbid curiosity and blood lust. It wasn't the end of the world he couldn't wait for but what would follow it.

TIMES OF DESPAIR

It seems like every generation becomes convinced that the world is about to end. Whether an individual tragedy or a global nightmare – the questions are the same: "Where is God in all this? Can it possibly get any worse?" And the assertion of many becomes: "Surely these are signs of the end. The great and terrible day of the Lord is near." Have you been there? Have you ever worked hard to create something only to watch it taken away from you one piece at a time? At first it seems manageable, only one medium-sized insect, maybe two. They don't take much, you hardly notice them, but then the sound you've been hearing just beneath your consciousness starts to grow. A hum, a vibration, a throbbing pulse. And then you see them, millions of them, waves of them, and when they land, they destroy. There is nothing you can do but watch as the life you've understood is first obliterated and then laid to waste.

CALL AND RESPONSE

Tragedy can freeze people in their tracks, shutting them down, trapping them in their pain. But I believe the prophet Joel knew that it can also have the opposite effect. Tragedy can bring people together. It can serve to wipe away smaller concerns or divisions and focus everyone on the emergency at hand. World War II is a good example of this that happened before my parents were born. Nine-eleven happened in my lifetime. When Joel's community thought all was lost, he neither urged his people to do battle with the locusts nor did he grant them permission to give up. Instead, he gathered them together and pointed them back toward God. As

one, the people fasted and prayed. They joined up and called out to God. And, as often happens in faithful community, the people knew the presence of God.

GOD'S RESPONSE

We aren't told how long the time of fasting and praying lasted, but eventually the cloud of locusts lifted and the autumn rains began. Joel spoke God's words to the people: He told them to "be glad and rejoice in the Lord," for the plague had ended and the rains for new crops had arrived. Their harvests would replenish their stores until they overflowed; the people would have plenty to eat and be satisfied. They would know that "[God was] in the midst of Israel, and that [God], the Lord, [was their] God and there was no other." This was quite a miracle, to be rescued from the brink of destruction, but God's message through Joel didn't end there. Not only would the people be vindicated *this* time, but afterward God would pour out the Spirit on all flesh. This is *ruach*, the Breath of God, the stuff of new life. It is power, and it is for everyone: sons and daughters, young and old, slaves and free. And this outpouring will happen none too soon because Joel also saw an even more distant time when the sun would "turn to darkness, and the moon to blood" which would make the plague of locusts seem like child's play in comparison.

GOD'S PRESENCE

How wondrous that God is so immediately present during times of fear and dread. When the very heavens seem to be falling apart, no one would be excluded from direct communication with God. Divine revelation wouldn't be reserved for a few select prophets, but as the great and terrible day of the Lord approaches, *all* will know God's intention and prophesy, *all* will be filled with hope and dream, *all* will see God's salvation.

I think this is what excited John. Not the doom and destruction hurtling toward us from space, but of what those heavenly signs would mean: that the day of the Lord wasn't just some distant time, but *next week*. That *next week* he would experience God and bear witness to events that would lead to the Kingdom of God, up close and personal. For me, the words of Joel are words of hope. In times of greatest darkness, total destruction, utter despair, God breathes into us. When we need God the most is when God is most present to us. When we draw together and reach out to the Lord, we will know God is among us, we will know that *God* is God – our God and no other, and our prophecies, dreams, and visions will become a reality.

GOD'S FINAL WORD

I watched a movie in which one of the characters would respond to failure by telling people, "Everything will be all right in the end, and if it's not right, it is not yet the end." Those are the words I want to leave you with. When all seems lost, God has more to say. It is reflected in one of our deepest beliefs as Christians. God has the final word.

During Jesus' life, miracles surrounded him. The diseased and those past hope were healed. Lazarus and a little girl were raised from the dead. Giant crowds followed Jesus to hear the word of God. Jesus was on a roll; things were really coming together; and when he rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, people greeted him as their savior and king. Can you imagine how that must have felt? Triumphant! Glorious! Let's praise God, and won't you give me a Hallelujah!

And then the grasshoppers came. One at a time at first, attacking Jesus' reputation, sowing division, laying plans. And then the humming and buzzing grew louder. Roman authorities began to see the crowds supporting Jesus as a threat, and all it took was an opportunity of betrayal to destroy Jesus' careful planting. As Jesus hung from the cross at his mortal end, he said, "It is finished." His disciples first scattered and then hid behind closed and locked doors. Everything was far from right. But it was not yet the end. God had more to say – *a lot* more. Jesus rose from the dead and breathed God's Spirit on those who had gathered in fear, and the door was opened to the world. The way was paved for *all* to approach God. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.