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August 17th: Joel 1 & John 15:1-17

August 16, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Getting our bearings in the book of Joel. I am the true vine.

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Transcript

Joel chapter 1. 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. And 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 brigim of her youth. 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 vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has 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.

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. Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels under the clods. The storehouses are desolate. The granaries are torn down because the grain has dried up.

How the beasts groan. The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them. Even the flocks of sheep suffer.

To you, O Lord, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and 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.

The Book of Joel, the second prophet within the Book of the Twelve, is a difficult book upon which to get a handle. Whether we are trying to determine who Joel was, the time and the context of his ministry, or the character of the historical events concerning which he prophesied, we will most likely achieve little more than informed speculations, although at points these may feel tantalizingly close to giving us some sense of the prophet and his times. Numerous dates have been suggested for the book, from the first half of the ninth to around the fourth centuries BC.

Within this wide range of potential dates, we have early, between 870 and 860 BC, and later pre-exilic dates down to fairly late post-exilic dates, down to the first half of the fourth century. Positions on the question of dating the book also don't neatly divide scholars along a conservative versus liberal fault line. The dating of the book tends to

depend upon how we account for specific details within it.

Allusions to other nations and places, such as Egypt, Edom, Philistia, Greece, the Sibeans, and Sidon, all need to be explained. The destruction of Sidon in 345 BC means that chapter three, verse four, must almost certainly be dated before that. A very early reference to the Greeks would also be surprising, although not as surprising as some earlier commentators have suggested.

Late references to the surrounding nations as threatening independent states would also be unexpected. The interpreter must further explain the violence committed by Egypt and Edom against Judah that is referred to in chapter three, verse 19. The reference to Judah as Israel in chapter three, verse two, has been taken as evidence for a later date, as such a reference might be less likely prior to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

However, Karl Keller is an example of a commentator who sees this reference to Israel as looking back upon the downfall of the Northern Kingdom, so perhaps not much can be rested upon this particular detail. There are several references to priests and to acts of worship in Jerusalem, but no references to a king, which has been taken by many as giving weight to the case for a post-exilic dating. The extent to which the temple was still standing and operative has also been questioned, as there is limited reference to the temple, save as a vestibule and a site of sacrifice.

In Jeremiah chapter 41, we see that even after the fall of Jerusalem, the temple was still operating in some sense as a site of sacrifice. The apparent reference to the wall in chapter two, verse seven is another possible constraint for dating, albeit a weak one, especially when we consider that the wall was never completely destroyed and that the reference in that verse might be figurative. The books on either side of Joel in the book of the 12, Hosea and Amos, are dated relatively early, but there are different orderings of the book of the 12 where it is placed later.

The placing of prophets within the larger book of the 12 has more to do with thematic ordering than chronological ordering. Determining relationships between prophets in the form of intertextual allusions will also help us in dating the text. Chapter two, verse 32, is likely dependent upon Obadiah, verse 17.

So presumably, Joel must be dated after Obadiah, which is most likely exilic or post-exilic. In some cases, supposed lines of dependence between prophets may reverse, depending on our judgments concerning their dating. In this case, however, Joel seems to be referring to a previous prophecy, writing, as the Lord has said.

So Obadiah was almost certainly the earlier of the two prophecies. Several of the many connections with other prophecies are mentioned by Christopher Seitz, who remarks upon the extensive pattern of mutual influence in the book of the 12, for which Joel is a

prominent culminating exemplar. As if they weren't complicated enough, questions of dating can be further entangled with the consideration of the possibility that the book contains material from two distinct periods.

For some, this is a matter of the book coming from different hands, with the book being of weak integrity. Another possibility is that the same figure, Joel, the son of Pethuel, had a ministry spanning distinct periods, from the very late pre-exilic period to the beginning of the exilic period, for instance. A further question that will weigh in our considerations of dating is our interpretation of the locust plague that is a central feature of the book.

Is the plague an actual plague of locusts, a figurative reference to an invading army, or some other form of reference to the destruction of the people at the hands of the Babylonians? Another possible reading is that there is a literal plague of locusts in chapter one, anticipating a figurative use of locusts in chapter two. Our interpretation of this plague will be another factor weighing in our determination of the dating and occasion of the prophecy. Seitz, speaking as a representative of canonical criticism, makes the point that Joel must, irrespective of his original historical context, be read first and foremost in his context in the canon as the second of the book of the Twelve, without merely being ambivalent to questions such as the dating of the book.

This is not, in fact, the most important interpretative matter. It is far more important, for instance, that within the context of the book of the Twelve, Joel serves to introduce the theme of the Day of the Lord that will be at the heart of much that follows within the collection, perhaps coming to its climactic expression in the book of Zephaniah, in common with the prophetic witness of Scripture more generally, but in a more pronounced manner. In the canon, the writings of the prophet Joel are drawn into a body of literature that is partly abstracted from the immediacy of its own historical context.

The words of this prophecy speak beyond the immediacy of its historical occasion, helping the faithful and attentive hearer to discern something of the shape of God's work, character, and the manner of the great day of his coming. We hardly know anything about the prophet Joel. He seems to have been a Judean, and his message focuses upon Jerusalem and particularly upon its worship.

In contrast to many other prophets, nothing is said about kings and other national leaders are more noticeable by their absence. In Joel, the theme of the Day of the Lord first becomes prominent in the book of the Twelve. The prophecy itself begins with a summons to attention, first addressed to the elders and then to all the inhabitants of the land.

A disaster of such magnitude is happening in their own days that the shock waves of the news of it would pass down through coming generations. The disaster is described as a plague of locusts with four different waves of them coming in succession, each eating anything left behind by the swarm that preceded it. We are, of course, familiar with the

plague of locusts in Exodus chapter 10, the eighth of the plagues that befell the land of Egypt by the hand of the Lord through his servant Moses.

However, locusts were also associated with divine judgment elsewhere. For instance, in the earlier prophecy of Amos chapter seven, verses one to three, "This is what the Lord God showed me. "Behold, he was forming locusts "when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout.

"And behold, it was the latter growth "after the king's mowings. "When they had finished eating the grass of the land, "I said, O Lord God, please forgive. "How can Jacob stand? "He is so small.

"The Lord relented concerning this. "It shall not be, says the Lord." There, the locusts seem to be a symbol of some judgment. Here, the locusts are described as an invading force coming upon the nation to ravage its land.

Commentators are divided about whether to understand the locust plague of this chapter as a literal locust plague or as a figurative plague of locusts. Elsewhere in scripture, invading armies or devouring forces are described like locusts. The Midianites and Amalekites are described as coming upon the land like locusts in Judges chapter six, verse five, and seven, verse 12, covering the land and consuming its produce.

In Jeremiah chapter 51, verse 14, the overwhelming of Judah by Babylon and its forces is described as akin to a locust invasion. "The Lord of hosts has sworn by himself, "Surely I will fill you with men, as many as locusts, "and they shall raise the shout of victory over you." And in verse 27 of that chapter, "Set up a standard on the earth. "Blow the trumpet among the nations.

"Prepare the nations for war against her. "Summon against her the kingdoms, Ararat, Minai, "and Ashkenaz. "Appoint a marshal against her.

"Bring up horses like bristling locusts." In Jeremiah, the actions of this invading force are spoken of in a manner that evoke the attack of a devouring locust swarm. In chapter five, verses 15 to 17, "Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, "O house of Israel,' declares the Lord. "It is an enduring nation.

"It is an ancient nation, "a nation whose language you do not know, "nor can you understand what they say. "Their quiver is like an open tomb. "They are all mighty warriors.

"They shall eat up your harvest and your food. "They shall eat up your sons and your daughters. "They shall eat up your flocks and your herds.

"They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees. "Your fortified cities in which you trust, "they shall beat down with the sword." Locusts serve as a symbol of an apocalyptic

judgment later in scripture in Revelation chapter nine, verses three to 11. "Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, "and they were given power "like the power of scorpions of the earth.

"They were told not to harm the grass of the earth "or any green plant or any tree, "but only those people who do not have "the seal of God on their foreheads. "They were allowed to torment them for five months, "but not to kill them. "And their torment was like the torment of a scorpion "when it stings someone.

"And in those days, people will seek death "and will not find it. "They will long to die, but death will flee from them.' "In appearance, the locusts were like horses "prepared for battle. "On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold.

"Their faces were like human faces, "their hair like women's hair, "and their teeth like lion's teeth. "They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, "and the noise of their wings "was like the noise of many chariots "with horses rushing into battle. "They have tails and stings like scorpions, "and their power to hurt people for five months "is in their tails.

"They have as a king over them "the angel of the bottomless pit. "His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, "and in Greek he is called Apollyon." On the one hand, reading Joel, the actions of the locusts seem to correspond more closely to the actions of a locust swarm than to the actions of an invading army. They are devouring all of the crops and the produce of the land, not destroying cities, killing, and taking captive.

In chapter two, their movements are compared to those of soldiers in an army. It would be strange to have a locust swarm symbolizing the invasion of the Babylonian army itself compared to an army. This would make for a rather convoluted metaphor.

On the other hand, while the locust plague could be devastating, the severity of what Joel describes seems to be greater than even a terrible locust plague could account for. And what the prophecy doesn't describe also seems notable. There is no extensive description of famine conditions in the land.

Rather, the focus is upon drunkards having their wine cut off and the priests having the tribute offering cut off. There aren't descriptions of people wasting away with hunger. The locust invasion then seems to afflict the animals and the worship of the house of the Lord the most.

It is the grain, the wine, other fruits of the land, and the flocks and herds, all associated with feasts and sacrifice that are especially struck, leaving the nation without the material that it needs to worship. Perhaps we ought to see this as a symbol of a divine devastation of Israel's feasts and worship, leaving them unable to celebrate. My judgment is that the locust plague is most likely a symbol representing the historical

events associated with the overthrow of Judah by Babylon, the various waves of attack and deportation, for instance.

However, the locust plague is a symbol of a divine invasion. The locust plague is like the divine war cloud. In its appearance, it's reminiscent of the dark cloud that descended upon Sinai, but it's a living cloud of devouring judgment that will descend upon the land and strip everything bare.

While on the visible historical plane, this is taking place through the agency of the Babylonians. This is not the day of Babylon, but the day of the Lord and of his judgment cloud. The leaders of the people are like a group of drunkards who are suddenly to be brought to their senses as the wine is removed from their lips by the advent of the locusts.

The locusts are compared to beasts of prey, to lions, which perhaps lends weight to the idea that we aren't dealing with typical locusts here. The locust swarm is stripping the Lord's vine and fig tree, both symbols for his people. Alongside the leaders of the people are the priests who are also particularly struck by this plague.

They are charged to lament with all of the anguish of a betrothed virgin, bereaved of her husband. The locust invasion cuts off the tribute offerings, causing the priests and the land to mourn. The people lose the means by which they would offer to the Lord.

The land, the people, and the temple can be depicted agriculturally. The nation is often compared to a field, to a land, to a tree, to growing crops, or something similar. It can be harvested like a field, or burned or felled in judgment like a great forest.

It can be watered and flourish, or it can experience drought and wither away. Joel is very much working within such a symbolic frame of reference. Within such a frame of reference, the temple is the chief place of gathering.

The temple was quite literally built upon a threshing floor, and it retains much of the symbolism associated with that. The great threshing floor of the land, where all of the first fruits and fine produce would be prepared, is left empty by divine judgment. The figures here represented as tillers and vinedressers are likely other leaders among the people who'd failed adequately to guard the people of the Lord's special planting.

The priests are charged not just to lament the disaster that has befallen them, but to direct their mourning towards the Lord. They are to recognize the Lord's hand in what has happened, call a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people together, and summon them to call out to the Lord for deliverance. He, not the Babylonians or some other force, is the one who has ultimately struck them, and it is to him that they must look to for deliverance.

The language of verse 15 is similar to that which we see in Isaiah chapter 13, verse six.

Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty will come. And also in Ezekiel chapter 30, verses two to three.

Wail, alas for the day, for the day is near, the day of the Lord is near. It will be a day of clouds, a day of doom for the nations. The land is being stripped of its fruit and rendered barren.

The herds and the flocks, which might represent the people more generally, now have nowhere left to graze. In addition to the image of the locust invasion, there is the additional image of a fire in verses 19 to 20, a fire that devours the pasture land and the forests. In addition to the consuming force of the locusts and the fires burning up the land, there is the further crisis of a drought, leaving the land parched and the animals of the land thirsty.

The Lord is the one who gives fertility and fruitfulness to the land. He gives it its rains and its seasons. When he cuts off his good gifts, everything will start to perish.

The only hope in such a time is to turn back in repentance to him and seek his face once more. A question to consider, can you think of any other places in scripture where agricultural imagery is used symbolically to represent the Lord's judgment upon his people? John chapter 15 verses one to 17. I am the true vine and my father is the vine dresser.

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I've spoken to you.

Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers.

And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

As the father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love.

These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends for all that I have heard from my father I have made known to you.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide so that whatever you ask the father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you so that you will love one another. On several occasions in the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself as the true something.

He is the true light. He is the true bread. He elsewhere speaks of the true worshipers that are coming.

Here in chapter 15, he speaks of himself as the true vine. He's the reality to which all other things point or anticipate they will find their realization or their fullness in him. Furthermore, in saying, I am the true vine, Jesus also likely once more hinting at his divinity.

The image of the vine was associated with Israel in places such as Isaiah chapter five or in Psalm 80. The vine and the olive tree are both sacramental trees, one giving wine and the other giving oil. And I don't think it's accidental that Jesus speaks of himself as the true version of these things.

He is the true vine. And as such, the true root and source of Israel's identity. As we look in the prophets, we will especially see this arboreal imagery, this language of trees and vines, plantings of the Lord, et cetera, being used in a messianic context.

Israel is the vine. The Messiah is the branch or the root, the one from whom a new Israel or Davidic dynasty will arise. Jesus, by identifying himself as the vine, gives us an image of a restored people of God arising from him, a broader people that has something of the character of Israel itself.

The relationship between the father as the vine dresser and the son as the vine is interesting. It ties in with other descriptions that we find in the gospels. People are committed to the son's care by the father and also removed from it in certain cases.

The word that is translated prunes is also the word used for cleansed. So in verse two and verse three, it is the same root word that's being used of the pruning of the tree and Jesus' cleansing of his disciples by his word. We might even think back to the Old Testament and the way that the cutting back of the tree and the cleansing of the tree might be clarified in part with the connection with the idea of circumcision with the pruning of trees in Leviticus chapter 19.

There, the unpruned tree is spoken of as uncircumcised. Circumcision was a pruning of Israel. It was making a wild tree, a domesticated one, all by cutting back the flesh.

This purging of the flesh was an order that they will be suitable as a fruitful vine for the Lord. The disciples are cleansed by Jesus' word, which stands for his broader revelation and message. The idea of removing branches from the tree of the people of God is similar to that in Jeremiah chapter five, verses 10 to 11.

"Go up through her vine rows and destroy, "but make not a full end. "Strip away her branches, for they are not the Lord's, "for the house of Israel and the house of Judah "have been utterly treacherous to me," declares the Lord." We aren't told exactly how the branches are cut off. Perhaps they are cut off through persecution.

This would also serve as a form of pruning, cutting good branches back for greater fruitfulness and faithfulness, along with removing the branches that lack any genuine life. John frequently speaks of abiding in both his gospel and his epistles. This is perhaps nowhere more powerfully illustrated than by the organic union between the vine and the branches.

The vine gives the branches all of their life, and the vine bears its fruit through them. Apart from the vine, the branches die, and the vine imagery can be helpful for understanding works in the Christian life. Fruitfulness is presented not as something that we do to earn or merit inclusion within the vine, but as an outflow of the life that we have been given.

They're seen as a blessing, a harvest, and a gift, rather than mere exercise of duty. We have no power to produce fruit apart from Christ. Fruit is produced as his life works itself out in our lives by his spirit.

It's produced as we abide in him. And so it's by cleaving to Jesus, by holding on strongly to him and abiding in him, that we will produce fruit. As we have seen, the Father is also active on the vine, helping it to grow and produce much fruit as he acts as the vinedresser.

Bearing fruit is the point for which we have been chosen. We've been set apart in order that we might bear fruit, and that our fruit might make a difference, our fruit might last. The Lord does not just want to save us as an end in itself.

Rather, he wants to produce something new, good, beautiful, and fruitful through and in us. He wants the life of Jesus, the life of the vine, to be expressed through its branches. And we are those branches.

Jesus' words must abide in us. The words of Jesus, the word who created all things made flesh. These are not just regular words as we've seen elsewhere in the gospel.

These words are spirit and life. They're the words of the Father. They're the words with the power to judge.

They're the words with the power to raise the dead. These are the words that are supposed to abide in us. And as these abide in us, then we will be able to pray in a new way.

We're told that if we have Jesus' words abiding in us, then whatever we wish, we can ask, and it will be done for us as these words have their life within us. And as we meditate upon these words, as these words feed us and give us our life and germinate within us, we will find that they rise up in the form of efficacious prayer as illustrated in so many of the signs of the book. The power that these words have in the mouth of Christ will be a power that they have in our lives and on our lips as we believe them and live in terms of them.

Our bearing of fruit then is not some onerous duty that has been laid upon us, but something which God delights and wills to accomplish through us. Jesus died in order to produce much fruit. Where does he want to produce that fruit? Through his people, through the branches.

And this truth is one that we should meditate upon as it completely reframes our understanding of what works are. If we keep Jesus' commandments, we will abide in his love. This reverses the earlier order that we saw in chapter 14, verse 15.

Indeed, there is a sort of circular character to be observed here, a gracious rather than a vicious cycle. As we love Jesus, we will obey his commandments. And as we obey his commandments, we will grow and abide in his love.

Our relationship to Jesus' commandments should be modeled after his relationship to his father's life-giving command. We're doing what he has done. And the commandments that Jesus gives us are liberating, empowering, and life-giving.

They are designed to give us fullness of joy. We shouldn't regard Jesus' commandments as a treadmill of rules and limitations and obligations, but as the shape of an authorizing vocation. The father wants to bear much fruit through us.

And as we look to Jesus and abide in him, that fruit will come forth. His words will have their effect in us, and they will produce something that lasts. This vocation takes the shape of loving and laying down our lives for each other, as Jesus did for us.

And as we follow this vocation, Jesus will be powerfully at work within us to produce this lasting fruit for his father. Jesus declares of his disciples, "'You are my friends.' This is the way that Abraham is described as the friend of God, or as Moses is described as speaking to God face to face. It's a remarkable thing to be described as Jesus' friend.

A friend is someone who is not just a pal or a buddy. The friend is someone who enters into another's counsel. We're not just servants doing Jesus' bidding from afar, but those who take an active role in shaping things, like the prophet in the heavenly council.

Jesus intercedes for us in heaven, but as his words take root within us, we can intercede, we can speak, we can act, and we can work in the world with power and effectiveness for the kingdom of God. Friendship also seems to be a particular emphasis within John's gospel, where there are a lot of one-to-one interactions, where the cross itself is presented as precipitated by Jesus' healing of his friend, Lazarus. Jesus lays down his life in large part on account of his love for his friend, Lazarus, and the relationship between the disciple who witnesses all of these things is the writer of the gospel of John.

And Jesus is also described in the form of friendship. He is the disciple that Jesus loved. A question to consider, where do you see the first epistle of John picking up some of the themes of this address from Christ to his disciples in this chapter?