

From the Locusts to the Last Days

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[0 : 0 0] Very much, Alice. Good afternoon, everyone. Really good to be here and to continue our series in the Book of Jewel. And today, the mood of it lifts a bit. It's been all kind of doom and gloom for the last couple of weeks, although in the first part of chapter two, there was a foretaste of what we're going to be looking at today, but very much more positive in the message that Jewel brings to us as we go through it. As we focus our thoughts, let's just think about something else. When you came to the church this morning, you probably walked up or down Leamington Terrace and you came to a view that looks something like that. Probably more people there than there were when I took the photo. But you see a bit of the architecture of the church and see a bit of the inside. Very familiar to many of us. Let's imagine instead you'd come in a helicopter this morning. And the view you got might have been something like that. So you can see the church down near the bottom left-hand corner and you can see quite a lot more of the immediate area around Brunsfield. The thing that I think is surprising for a lot of people when you see a picture like this is how much green space there is in among the tenement flats that you never would see from the streets. So you can see a bigger perspective, you can see a bigger picture, but you can see less of the detail of the church. You hopefully would recognise it, but you can't see all the detail that you can if you're standing at the front door. Now let's imagine you're flying over Edinburgh in an aeroplane and you're looking out for the Church of Brunsfield right in the middle of this picture and it might look something like that, the view that you get. You see quite a lot of Edinburgh, of the character of the city, perhaps see if there are a lot of churches around the city, but you don't really see much of the detail of this building. You might be able to locate it if you look carefully, but you can't see all the detail you see from the helicopter, certainly not all the detail you see from the front door. Now if we replace distance with time, I think what I've just shown you is quite a good illustration of how biblical prophecy works and how we can look at it. We look at biblical prophecy from quite a long distance away, two and a half thousand years perhaps, or even more potentially in the case of Joel. And we can't see all the detail that the people Joel was writing to at the beginning could see. We don't even know with any certainty at what time Joel was written and their differing views on that. But we can see a bigger picture.

We can look at Joel or any of the other Old Testament prophets and we can see them in the light of what God has since revealed about himself and particularly what he's revealed through the Lord Jesus.

And part of the passage we're looking at today is very definitely looking ahead to the time of the Lord Jesus and beyond that. So we take a slightly different view of it. And if we think about the perspective the prophets give to us. So all of the prophets were writing for their own time. And they wrote about what was happening at that time. So it wasn't always they were just looking forward to seeing what's going to happen in the future. They were saying here are things that are happening in our land now.

And here is what God is saying to us through them. So in Joel chapter one that we looked at a couple of days ago, there's been this great plague of locusts that has come over the land. The little creatures are everywhere. They're destroying all the fields and the crops of the Israelites. And God says to them, this is a sign to you that you should be repenting of your sin. The people had failed to keep God's covenant and that had consequences. And one of the consequences in that time was the locust coming.

And it was a call from God that the people needed to repent and to turn back to him. So that was chapter one. Second element of biblical prophecy is what I've called soon after. Now soon after can mean several generations, not necessarily next month or next year, but it's something that God has said is going to happen in that era of human history. And that's what we had at the start of Joel chapter two, and indeed quite a lot of what we'll see as we go through today. God says there's going to be an even greater plague of locusts, or is it actually a picture? And it's going to be a great foreign army coming and invading quite likely, and that's what is intended.

[4 : 45] And it's going to come on the land and it's going to be in the relative of the near future. And then as we read in the passage just now, there will be that period when God restores the land and the people win in the world, they will win. And they will win. And they will win. And they will win. And they will win.

So a bit of looking forward in the prophecy again in their time. And as with the then of chapter one, this part of the book, we don't know the kind of detail that people on Joel's day would have seen in it, but we see the broad picture of what's happening. As we go through our reading today, from verse 28, things change. And the third element of biblical prophecy is that very often is pointing forward to something that we now understand was fulfilled by Jesus. The people in that day might in some cases have recognized that it was going to be part of the Messiah coming. Some cases wouldn't have, but we can look back and we can say this part of the book, we can definitely see as being associated with the coming of Jesus. How do we know that in this case? We know it because in Acts chapter 2, the very first Christian sermon, Peter starts with this passage from Joel and says that what was written in Joel was now being fulfilled. We'll come back to that a little bit later. And then there's a final potential perspective, which is things that are still in the future for us. Things that haven't happened yet, but we look at what's said in the prophecy and we say that is something that God is going to bring about in the future. And the very last part of our reading today appears to be that, is looking forward beyond our times to a time when the Lord Jesus returns and he comes again as judge.

So four perspectives are then what the people of the day need to learn from God. Looking a bit into the future, looking towards the Lord Jesus, and also looking to what is now future for us. Now, it's not always that simple. Some passages say it was partly fulfilled in the past and partly through the Lord Jesus, maybe partly in the future as well. But these are the perspectives that we get in prophecy. And all that helps to orientate us as we come today to look at the end of chapter 2. We're looking at something that was a bit in the future for Joel's generation in the first part of our passage. And we're looking at something that is current now and some of its future in the second part. I've called them to help us hopefully remember it a bit better. It's the years of the locust and the days of the Spirit are the two sections we're going to be looking at. The years of the locust and the days of the Spirit.

So let's start by looking at the section from verse 18 to verse 27. So I've called the years of the locust. Now, you remember last week, we had a passage where God was talking about what was going to happen when these new locusts or this new foreign army came. And there was in the middle of that, there was the promise that if the people repented that God would relent because he's slow to anger and abounding in love. But it ended up with this thing that was being said by the nations round about about the Israelites, where is their God?

So the people round about were saying, have they got a God? Is he real? Does he care? And if he does, why is all this happening to his people? And the first thing we see in the passage reading today is the Lord's response to that. And for the first time in the book of Joel, we have God speaking directly to his people, not through the prophet, but the words of God himself. And so in verse 17, the people around the Bible say, let them say, spare your people, Lord, do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. And the Lord replies in verse 19, never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations. Now, I think we have to assume that between verse 17 and verse 18, the people have done what God was commanding them and they have repented for their sins. I think that's implicit in what is in this passage we're looking at today. So the very firm message that came from God, blow your trumpets, come together and repent as a people of your sins, that has happened. And God now is restoring them as a result of that. And so from verse 18 down to verse 20, the first half of verse 20, we see what happens when God responds. The grain and the harvest, the wine and the olive oil, they start coming in again, the famine is over, and the invaders, whether people or locusts, they are gone, God has destroyed them, and his people have been restored. God has responded, and the God who is jealous for his name, and for his people, and for his land, he has shown everyone that he is indeed God, that they are indeed his people. And as they have returned to him, so they have been forgiven and brought back into a relationship with them. The Lord responds.

[10:18] Second thing we see in this part of the passage is the Lord restores. Now, I think from towards the end of verse 21 down to the next few verses, it's not the Lord himself speaking, it is a commentary by Joel, or a marveling by Joel at what God has done. And twice he says, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, land of Judah. Do not be afraid, you wild animals. And then in verse 23, be glad people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God. God has got rid of whatever the invading force was. He has brought the rains that the people need for their harvest, and they are back to normal, if you like, again. The trees are bearing their fruit, the fig trees and the vine yield their riches. As the people repent, the Lord restores his people to him and restores their normal way of life. But as we go through this passage, he actually goes beyond that. From verse 25, is the Lord speaking directly again? And we call this, but the

Lord repays. It's the beginning of verse 25, I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten. Now, when the Lord uses the word repay here, it doesn't mean he had any kind of debt to his people, that there was any requirement on him to repay what they had lost in these years. But it's the Lord making up to them what they have lost. So, he's going beyond just restoring the normal way of life and the normal harvest. He's saying, you've lost the years of the locusts, they've gone, but I will make up for them, and your harvest will be even more plentiful. And the reason for that is, in verse 27, then you will know that I am in Israel, I am the Lord your God, there is no other. Never again will my people be shamed. God, in his great mercy and in his grace, has not just restored the normal circumstances of life to his people, he has given them extra on top, in a sense to make up for the years of the locusts. What a wonderful grace, amazing grace that God shows to his sinful people as they return back to him. Now, what we make of this passage, or this part of the passage for today?

I was really struck by the phrase, the years of the locusts. The Israelites would look back as the Lord had restored them, and they would say, these were really difficult years. These were hard years when the locusts were here, and we were really struggling, and we didn't have enough food, and perhaps we were being invaded by foreign armies. These were really difficult years, but God has restored things, and he has gone beyond that, and we can rejoice in him. Many people these days suffer for what we might describe as the years of the locusts. They go through times when things are really, really tough, and they find it difficult to see how God is working or what is happening in their lives.

Very often, it is a consequence of their own actions. We do things that are really stupid, and that has consequences within our lives, of the way we live, and our relationships, and other things to do with our lives, and it takes time for things to get back to normal. But as we come back to God, and we repent, we have his promise that he'll forgive us, he will restore, he will repay.

Perhaps if I can broaden it a little bit, the years of the locusts also potentially come through circumstances that aren't directly under our control. From times of illness, or of bereavement, or of unemployment, or from the actions of others which harm us through their consequences. And many of us can look back, and perhaps we can see these in our lives, perhaps even very recently, or even currently, we can see these things in our lives. And it's good then to be able to lay hold on what God says here, that he will bring us through them as we depend on him, as if necessary we repent and turn back to him. Then he is a gracious, a merciful, a loving God, and he will not just restore, but actually he will to some extent repay for the years of the locust. Very often those of us who have fairly routine lives, if that's the right way to describe it, who haven't had these big crises, we don't really appreciate all that God does for us on a daily basis. And yet those who have gone through these times, and God has spoken to them, and they have come through, and they're able to rejoice in what

[15 : 20] God has done. Perhaps they have an extra appreciation of his goodness, of his love. So if today you're going through the years of the locust, or have been through that recently, then the message of Joel, I think, is this, that as we turn to God, as we look to him and recognize his goodness, then he will not fail us, he will repay us, he will give us his blessing, his joy in our lives. The years of the locust.

Then we want to, from verse 28 onwards, and what I've called the days of the Spirit. And as we saw earlier, the prophetic perspective is changing here. We are not looking primarily at the years immediately ahead, as Joel was writing. We are looking forward to the days of the Lord Jesus, indeed, beyond these days.

And the days that Joel is writing about are actually the days that we are in now. Peter, on Pentecost, as I've mentioned, used this passage as part of his sermon. And he said, this is what is happening here and now. God's Spirit is here. He has been poured out in a marvelous way that it never has been before.

And it will culminate in the day of the Lord, in the return of Jesus, in his return in judgment. But with the knowledge that everyone who has called on the Lord, everyone who has believed in Jesus will be saved from judgment. So let's go through the verses. And again, I've got three subheadings to think about. So in verse 28 and verse 29, I've called it, The Lord Sends. The Lord sends his Spirit. Actually, the word sends, which I use for alliteration, is probably not strong enough.

What it says here is that I will pour out my Spirit on all people. And the picture is probably akin to what Joel has talked about in a few verses before, of the Lord sending the rains, and it is the Lord sending abundant rain, of pouring out the blessing from heaven of his Spirit. As the Spirit is sent to us, so we can experience this marvelous blessing that God gives us. And we're experiencing the day of Pentecost and is still available today. I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

[17 : 48] Second thing we might notice about this is it is on all people. And Joel is very clear as he goes through that. It's on the old and the young. It's on men and on women. It's on servants, as well as those who perhaps are in higher social status. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of the Lord came upon people in certain circumstances and empowered them to do things for God. Kings, prophets, people like that.

But not everyone had the Spirit of God. Not everyone could enjoy that in their lives. With the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the Lord poured the Spirit on everyone. And if I am trusting today in the Lord Jesus, if I know him as my Savior, then as part of that I have this wonderful blessing of the Holy Spirit in my life. Leading me, guiding me, teaching me the truth, empowering me to do good things, and changing my character as well to be more like Jesus. God has poured out his Spirit on all those who trust in the Lord Jesus. And what does the Spirit do? I've talked about these things specifically in this passage. The Spirit is the one who teaches and who helps us to speak out to others. So your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Someone has described that as God revealing himself intimately to us. Not all of us will see lots of visions or have lots of dreams, but God, through his Spirit, reveals himself to us and helps us to understand more about him and more about how we should live. And then what happens? Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Now, I don't think he, when he talks about prophesying, he is looking specifically at the gift of prophecy, which we read about in the New Testament, which some people had and some people didn't. This is something that everyone has, and it's being able to take the Word of God and to apply it in our generation. To be able to say to people, whether it's publicly or one-to-one, here is what God's Word says, and here is what it means for us today. And all of us, if we know the Lord Jesus, are able to do that. He has sent his Spirit to enlighten us and also to empower us as we go out and as we talk to others about him and seek to help them to understand their need of the Lord Jesus. The Lord has sent, he has poured out his Spirit on all people. And if today your faith is in the Lord Jesus, you have his Spirit living in you, and day to day, you can enjoy the benefit of that. Now, that was the initial perspective of these verses, but then it does move on. And what we're looking at now, I think, is mainly future. Now, there's some disagreement on exactly the timescales of some of these things, but I would take it what we're looking at from now is mainly future. All part of the days of the Spirit, the last days, as Peter calls them, but probably future to us. Next, verse 31, I won't talk about very much. I've called the

Lord shows. So, Joel is saying, before the day of the Lord, before what we're taking is the return of the Lord Jesus, there will be certain signs that happen. And the Lord Jesus talks about them himself in the Gospels. And Joel says here, the sun will turn to darkness, lips of the sun, I assume, the moon to blood, and these will be signs that the Lord is coming. Now, we don't know the day, as Peter said earlier, we don't know the day that the Lord Jesus will return. We don't know the timing, but there are signs that he brings. Let me maybe look and say that it could now be very, very soon.

And then he will come. And the last part I've called the Lord saved. This great phrase, which is taken up by Paul in Romans chapter 10, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

But we're going to understand that we do have to look at the previous verse, where Joel talks about the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Christians can look forward to the return of the Lord Jesus, and to all that that will mean. But we also have to recognize that the Lord Jesus, when he comes, he will come as judge. And for those who don't have their trust in him, for those who have refused his offer of salvation, then there will be consequences. It really will be a great and dreadful day as they are held to account for what they have done. But the great news is, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. It's not everyone who lives a good life and does their best and is good to others.

[23 : 02] Not everyone who goes to church and tries to do their religious duty. By the great grace of God, it's everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. All that God requires of us is that we recognize our sin, as the people in Joel's day had to do, that we recognize our sin, that we recognize that that does have consequences. But then that we realize that these consequences have been taken for us by the Lord Jesus, if our trust is in him, that he died on the cross, taking our sins on himself, and that we can have complete forgiveness. And that when he comes, we can know that he, we have been saved, that we have been delivered, and we can rejoice in the fact that we know him. So the day of the Lord, the coming again of the name of the Lord Jesus, for some, it will be a time of terror and of judgment for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord and puts their trust in Jesus. It's a time when we are saved from all the consequences of sin, when we have the privilege of going to be with him forever. And the challenge must then come to us. Are we those who have called on the name of the Lord? Can each of us look into our hearts and say, yes, I realized my sin, I've realized my failure before God, but I've recognized that through

Jesus I can have salvation, my trust is in him, I believe that he is my savior, and I am seeking to follow him and to live for him. That is the challenge, I think, that particularly comes from this passage.

Have I called on the name of the Lord? Can I be sure that my sins are forgiven because Jesus took the punishment for them? I leave that with you to think about and to consider prayerfully whether you are among those who have called on the name of the Lord. But the great thing with this passage is that it shows us what wonderful mercy God has for us. And if we will just accept that mercy and that grace, his blessings will be poured out, his joy will be ours, and we can know that whatever our circumstance, whatever happens in life, he will be with us. Now we do need to look forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus again. When I was a teenager, there was a film that was very widely sending millions of people around the world, and we're supposed to have seen it called *A Thief in the Night*. And it was a film about the second coming of the Lord Jesus. The theme song for it was by Larry Norman. Larry Norman was probably the first Christian rock musician, certainly the first very popular one. And the line that was repeated again and again in that song was, I wish we'd all been ready. I wish we'd all been ready. It was likely where people had been left behind me saying, I wish we'd all been ready.

Let's make sure today that all of us are ready. If the Lord should return, perhaps very soon, that we are ready to meet him, that we know that we have been saved by our faith in him. I'm going to take a couple of minutes, we've got some time left. We're going to just take a few minutes to respond to what we've been thinking about this morning, respond in prayer, and give all of us an opportunity to think through some of the things we've talked about. So let's join together in prayer now. And perhaps for some of us, and we're looking at what we've started about in the first part of the message today of the passage of the years of the locusts, of times which have been difficult for us, and when perhaps we've been away from God, or perhaps circumstances have been very hard for us. Let's rejoice in the fact that God has great grace and is willing to pour out marvellous things in our lives. And let's just commit ourselves to him and put our trust in him for that. Perhaps for some of us, it is to challenge today to recognise the work of the Spirit in our lives, to recognise the importance that we understand God's Word with the help of the Spirit, and that then we use that to go and talk to others about it. That we can, in the sense that Joel's talking about, we can go and prophesy to others by applying God's Word in our generation, and helping them to understand its relevance to us.

And perhaps for some, it is that point of recognising our need of Jesus, recognising we need to call on the Lord and to be saved. And to think that today could be the day when we finally put our trust in Jesus, and choose to trust in him, to repent of our sins, and to acknowledge him as Saviour and Lord.

[28 : 25] Our Father, we thank you for your Word to us today. We thank you that this passage comes still with real power to us. We pray that you will help us to apply it to our hearts, help us to recognise your wonderful grace, that if we will just trust everything to you, we can know that you are the God who is in control of all things, that you are the God who saves, that you are the God who blesses. I pray that all of us may go from here today, recognising more of who you are, perhaps for the first time for some recognising who the Lord Jesus is, and putting their trust in him, that we may experience in the coming weeks and months, that great grace that you give to us that great blessing that you want to bring into our lives.

We thank you for your presence this morning as we have worshipped and as we've studied your word together and we commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.