

## INTRODUCTION

You may be wondering if I planned to teach from the Minor Prophets because we're moving toward an important election. But I have to confess I'm not that smart. Every year I take a few days in the summer to plan my messages about 18 months in advance. It was in the summer of 2011 that I felt God leading me to teach from these books that are largely ignored. It didn't cross my mind that our nation would be at the crossroads. But it just isn't a coincidence; I believe it is because of God's perfect timing that we are studying these books for such a time as this.

This series will cover the life and message of 13 men who are called the Minor Prophets. There's nothing minor about their impact or their message; they're called minor simply because their prophecies are much shorter than Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who are called the Major Prophets. But the message of all Biblical prophets is the same: God relates to nations as well as individuals.

The Book of Joel is only three chapters long and I hope you'll read it all, but we're going to focus on a few key passages as we address the question: Can America Return to God?

Joel 1:1-3: "The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel. Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children; and their children to the next generation." Some major event occurred that was so powerful it will be told for generations. In verse two we see it was a major agricultural devastation brought on by a hoard of locusts.

Joel 1:4. "What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten." People were asking, "What should we do in light of this disaster?"

Joel gives the answer in Joel 1:13-15. "Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord. Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty." As bad as the locust attack was, it was mild compared to the final great Day of the Lord!

Every prophet concludes with a message of hope and Joel is no different in his description of Jerusalem when it is resettled for the last time.

Joel 3:18-21. "'In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the Lord's house and will water the valley of acacias. But Egypt will be desolate, Edom a desert waste, because of violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they shed innocent blood. Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem through all generations. Their bloodguilt, which I have not pardoned, I will pardon.' The Lord dwells in Zion!"

Almost every prophet wrote about a time when God punished a sinful nation. But where there is true remorse and repentance, God restores those nations. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Israel is a perfect example. For over 1900 years the Israelites were dispersed around the world in little pockets of people who hung onto the promise of Yahweh. They had no land and they had no language. But today we see Israel as a living nation inhabiting Jerusalem one again. Joel's prophecy predicted all of this 2,800 years ago. What are the lessons we can learn from Joel?

## **LESSON 1: God rules in history—it is really His Story**

Joel wrote this book after a terrible natural disaster. Judah had been wiped out by a series of attacks by hoards of locusts. In the Hebrew language Joel used four different words to describe the destroying insects that came in four successive waves. One translation of Joel 1:4 says, "What the devouring locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust has left, the young locust has eaten; and what the young locust has left, the destroying locust has eaten." (HCSB)

In Bible times huge locust swarms could devastate an entire region. There are reports of clouds of locusts so thick they darkened the sun. These hungry grasshopper insects swept across fertile fields and orchards and left nothing in their path. Joel even describes them as warriors with the face of a horse with mighty cutting teeth. They ate every leaf, every blade of grass, every limb, and the bark off the trees. They even ate the reeds used to thatch the roofs of houses. Nothing could stop them. People tried burning, poisoning, and crushing them. The only thing that stopped these locust hoards was when they reached the sea and died of hunger because there was no more vegetation for them.

So imagine you're living in Judah about 800 years before Jesus was born. You've just watched with horror, as every living plant in your city has been devastated—not once, but in four different waves of locusts. You are probably worried about the future, and you're also wondering WHY did this happen?

Joel doesn't hesitate to give the answer. He says God allowed this natural disaster because Judah had turned away from God. He said this disaster was only a wake-up call. It is time to sound the alarm. He wrote, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand." (Joel 2:1) He said another Day of the Lord is coming and unless Judah repents, the coming Day of Judgment will make the locust attack look like a picnic in comparison.

The reason God sent this disaster was so that all people would know that He is God and that He is all-powerful, and that they would return to Him. His purpose was to draw them back to His heart. God said, "Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her." (Joel 3:17)

Joel is reminding us that what we call history isn't just a series of randomly occurring events. God is the author of history, and it is His Story. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign. Here are some verses that remind us that Our God Reigns: Psalm 103:19 (NASB) says, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all." Psalm 115:3 (NASB)

says, "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." Psalm 135:6 says, "Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth." (NASB)

So when disasters happen to our nation, did God send those disasters? Did God send 9/11? Did God send Hurricane Katrina? Did God send this economic recession? God is reigning and ruling over the universe and He allows everything that happens, but that doesn't mean He is *causing* it to happen. Locust hoards and West Nile virus occur because we live in a fallen creation where there are bacteria and an unbalanced food chain. Hurricanes occur because we live in a messed-up creation where high and low pressure systems collide and cause damage. Suicide attacks happen because the heart of sinful man is exceedingly wicked. Sin is behind every moment of suffering in our world. But God can USE even the worst events of life to draw us back to His heart. Do you remember the few Sundays after 9/11? Our churches were packed. People cried out to God. For some they were hoping that God would be their lucky rabbit's foot or their good luck charm so it wouldn't happen again. And when there were no more terrorist attacks, they soon grew bored and moved on.

When you really see God for who He really is, you'll never be able to turn away from Him. John Piper wrote: "We're bored with the unamazing results of standing in front of the mirrors of psychology and anthropology and sociology. It is time that we hold our eye to the telescope of theology. Untold numbers of puny personal problems would be swallowed up if we could learn to stand atop the Mt. Palomar of Divine Revelation and gaze at the God whose purpose is to be God alone, and before whose unutterable majesty, every knee will bow whether in heaven or on the earth or under the earth. From devouring grasshoppers to vanishing galaxies God has a purpose and He will achieve it—to be God alone in the eyes of all the world."

Joel reminds us that God is God and that gives Him the right to do whatever He pleases. He rules over history.

## **LESSON 2: God calls rebellious nations and individuals to repent and return to Him**

Not only does Joel tell us WHY disasters come, He also clearly outlines how we should learn from them and turn to God—actual "re-turn" to God.

In Joel's day, insects called locusts stripped the life-giving leaves and fruit from the trees. As I think about America, I can't help but think that over the past 60 years we've been under attack by a different kind of locust. Not actual insects, but insidious groups and movements with a voracious appetite to strip our nation of the rich spiritual and moral truths that made us great.

Think of it like a parable. At the first Continental Congress, our forefathers carefully planted a new kind of tree. It was a freedom tree of a government that was of the people for the people and by the people. There would be no kings or dictators. Instead we recognized that all of us have been endowed by our Creator with certain rights. This was a fragile freedom tree and it had to be protected, it was fertilized with faith in God and was watered with the blood of patriots who died to protect it. This tree grew strong and mighty until it towered over the trees of the forest of the world. America was known as a republic ruled by law, not by the whims of a dictator or the opinions of the people.

But midway through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there was a locust attack on the freedom tree. A swarm of judicial and legislative locusts started attacking the freedom tree. They came in several waves. In 1947 our Supreme Court first used the phrase "separation of church and state." The next locust attack was the Johnson Amendment in 1954, which muzzled pastors from speaking about moral issues that were also political. The next attack was in 1962 when school prayer was eaten away. Then a massive swarm of locusts arrived in 1973 when our government decided that it was okay to kill unborn babies. At this moment, there's a huge swarm of locusts approaching threatening to strip away the definition of marriage that has stood for 4,000 years.

I believe America has wandered from God because we have continually turned away from what the Bible says is right and wrong. Joel's prescription of Judah and for America was simple, "'Even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.'" (Joel 2:12-13)

Do you think America has wandered away from the God who made us great? If so, how can we turn back to Him? We must repent. That word means "turn around." If America is moving away from the moral basis of truth that has made us who we are, it's time to turn around and run back to God who is gracious and compassionate.

Today, I'm joining over 1,500 pastors in America to speak truthfully and plainly about moral and spiritual issues that have also become political issues. We're calling this day Pulpit Freedom Sunday. We're humbly committing an act of civil disobedience in violating the IRS regulation that dictates that churches should not speak about political issues.

I have not made this decision rashly or alone. I have been in consultation with leading pastors around the nation and I have given full disclosure of my intent to our church leaders and I'm taking personal responsibility for my statements today. Please allow me to take five minutes to give you the reason behind this action.

Since our nation's founding, pastors had the freedom to speak boldly on any and every subject—including politics. The fervor for rebellion against King George was sounded in the pulpits, and the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired in front of a church whose members had assembled at the direction of their pastor, Rev. Jonas Clarke. For two hundred years pastors were free to speak the truth without restriction, but this changed in 1954.

What happened? It started right here in Texas with a famous politician named Lyndon Baines Johnson. He was elected as a U.S. Senator in 1948 by a whopping 87 votes. That gained him the humorous nickname, "Landslide Johnson."

When LBJ was running for reelection in 1954 there were two powerful men who thought he was soft on communism so they endorsed his opponent. These two men were Texas Oil Man H.L. Hunt who had a non-profit organization called Facts Forum. The other was the media mogul Frank E. Gannett who had a non-profit organization called The Committee for Constitutional Government.

LBJ didn't like their support of his opponent, so he decided to muzzle them. He went to the floor of the Senate on July 2, 1954 and added an amendment to a large tax overhaul bill. His now infamous amendment read: "Non-profit tax-exempt entities cannot participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of—or in opposition to—any candidate for public office."

This amendment was never debated in committee or on the floor of the Senate, and the entire bill passed with a voice vote. LBJ smiled, knowing he had silenced his opponents. What he never realized was that churches are tax-exempt entities, and his amendment effectively muzzled pastors from speaking out on political issues. I believe one of the reasons our nation is in such a moral mess is because pastors have been afraid of the government coming in and shutting us down if we said anything that smacked of politics.

I believe the Johnson amendment is unconstitutional because it violates the freedom granted by an earlier amendment—the First Amendment—that says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" Speaking as a pastor, I can testify that the Johnson amendment seems as if the government is trying to muzzle the free exercise of religion and the freedom of speech in the pulpit. So I'm one of those pastors who prefer the First Amendment. And there is a higher calling than the First Amendment. God Almighty has called us to speak the truth in love.

Now I hate politics. I've said before the word politics comes from two words, "poly" meaning "many" and "ticks" meaning, "blood sucking pests." So I'm not talking politics today. I'm talking about MORAL issues that have become politicized.

When it comes to moral issues like abortion and the definition of marriage, we're facing an election where the choices have never been clearer. Even President Obama pointed this out when he accepted the Democratic nomination on September 6, 2012. He said, "When you pick up that ballot to vote—you will face the clearest choice of any time in a generation. On every issue, the choice you face won't be just between two candidates or two parties. It will be a choice between two different paths for America."

He is exactly right. And as I think of the words of Joel, one pathway will take us further away from God and His Word and the other pathway will return us to God's standard of morality. I challenge each of you to go online and simply Google "DNC platform" and "RNC platform." You can read for yourself the position of the two parties on these two biblical issues. The Democratic platform recommit itself to Roe v. Wade and pledges to continue the killing of unborn babies. For the first time in American history they have gone on record as saying they are committed to overturning the Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. They pledge to replace it with what they are calling the Respect for Marriage Act, which will force every state to accept same-sex unions as marriage. Then you read that the Republican platform pledges to protect life in the womb and protect the definition of marriage as the union of a one man and a woman.

These moral issues the Bible addresses have become politicized and for that reason many pastors have been too intimidated to speak clearly about them. Are they biblical or political?

40 years ago if I had preached from Jeremiah 1 and said that ripping a baby from its mother's womb is murder, no one would have disagreed. Today, people say, "Pastor you're too political!"

30 years ago if I had said in a message from Romans 1 that homosexual behavior is sin, no one would have disagreed. Today, people say, "Pastor you're too political!"

20 years ago if I had taught that Jesus said in Matthew 19 that marriage is between one man and one woman no one would have disagreed. Today, people say, "Pastor you're too political!"

I can't tell you how to vote, and our church can't endorse a candidate. But I'm going to tell you how I'm voting. And in the interest of respect for all people, I'm asking that after I make the next statement that there be no outburst of response—whether it's applause or booing. Because of the position of the Republican party in regard to these two moral and political issues, on November 6, I'm going to vote for Governor Romney... And since I've gone that far, I'll go ahead and tell you that I'm voting for Louie Gohmert as well.

How does America wander from God? By turning from what His Word says is right and wrong. How does America turn back to God? By reaffirming the moral truths that His Word affirms. On November 6, the choice is clear. Will you vote to put us on a path back to God and His Word, or on a path to take us further from God and His moral standards?

Can America turn back to God? Of course, we can. The better question is, "WILL America turn back to God? Only time will tell.

### **LESSON 3: God responds to true repentance by pouring out His Spirit**

Joel's prophecy contains one of the greatest promises in the Bible. It is such an important prophecy that when Peter was preaching the first Christian sermon on the Day of Pentecost, he used it as his text.

Let's go back to the Day of Pentecost to set the stage. Jesus had come back from the dead and spent forty days teaching the disciples before He ascended back into heaven. He told the disciples to wait and pray in Jerusalem until they received the power of the Holy Spirit. So 120 believers waited and prayed—and waited and prayed some more. Then after ten days, the room where they were praying was filled with the sound of mighty rushing wind. Each believer had a flicker of fire above his or her head, and they all started praising God in a language they had never learned. Because this was the festival of Pentecost, the streets were jammed with hundreds of visitors from foreign countries. As this prayer meeting spilled out into the streets, these foreigners were amazed that they heard these believers praising God in their native tongue. So they were curious and the crowd grew until the mob moved to the large area of the Temple Courts, which is about the size of six football fields. The people cried out, "What's going on? Are these people drunk?" Peter said, "They aren't drunk as you suppose—it's only 9:00 a.m.! But they HAVE had a drink at Joel's place. It's not wine that has been poured out; instead God's Spirit has been poured out. This is what the prophet Joel predicted!" And then he quoted this passage from Joel 2, "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams; your young men will see visions.

Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28-29)

On the birthday of the Church, this was the first time this scripture was fulfilled. But it is STILL being fulfilled today. God is still pouring out His Spirit in fresh ways on men and women who will humble themselves and seek Him with their whole hearts. I still think of myself as a young man because I'm still seeing visions of what our mighty God is going to do. But I must be getting a little older because I'm also dreaming dreams of what God can and will do in our lives and in our country. I'm not pessimistic about our future; I'm extremely optimistic. Yes, these are tough times, but our God is going to deliver us one way or another.

## CONCLUSION

It is true that locusts of all kinds come and eat up things valuable to us. They may be literal insect locusts, or they may be the financial or emotional locusts that destroy our savings or our sanity. They may be the judicial or legislative locusts that strip away the leaves from the tree our founders planted. But whatever kind of locust you've faced in the past, God gives an amazing promise in Joel. He says, "I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten." (Joel 2:25)

That's a personal promise to you. Will you say, "Lord, I've been devastated by all kinds of locusts in my life. I humble myself and repent. Please restore to me the years the locusts have eaten." This is a national promise to us as Americans. Will we humble ourselves and pray and seek God's face and turn (repent) from our wicked ways? When we do that, God will restore the years the locusts have eaten.

My spiritual mentor, Ray Stedman, had a gift for looking at life from an eternal perspective. His study of the book of Joel led him to conclude: "The future is in God's hands. It isn't in man's hands; if it were, we would make a mess of it. The future isn't in the Devil's hands; if we were, we would all be on our way to destruction. The future is in the hands of the One who is preparing something that eye has never seen and ear has never heard. Neither has it entered into the heart of man, the wonderful things that God is preparing for those who love Him!" (*Joel: The Revelation of God's Hand*, p. 4)

Joel said to rend your hearts, not your garments. In Bible times when someone was shocked or dismayed, they tore their clothes as a sign of their alarm. That's an outward act. Anyone can rip their shirt. But Joel said your heart must be ripped. Your heart must be broken. Is your heart broken over sin in your life and sin in our nation? Only when God breaks your heart will you receive His Spirit. There's a wonderful chorus we used to sing that says, "Spirit of the Living God; Fall fresh on me; Break me; melt me; mold me; fill me. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me." What a great prayer to pray for yourself and for our nation!

## OUTLINE

### LESSON 1: God rules in history—it is really His Story

"Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand." *Joel 2:1*

"Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her." *Joel 3:17*

### LESSON 2: God calls rebellious nations and individuals to repent and return to Him

"'Even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.'" *Joel 2:12-13*

### LESSON 3: God responds to true repentance by pouring out His Spirit

"And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams; your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." *Joel 2:28-29*

— MESSAGE DISCLAIMER —

These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.



David O. Dykes, Pastor  
Green Acres Baptist Church  
Tyler, Texas

---

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes