

JOEL

How to Use This Discussion Guide with Your Group

Start with a prayer, and then read the introduction from the sheet. Read the portion of the text from your Bible or an app (use whatever translation you're comfortable with, but we suggest the New Living Translation (NLT) or the English Standard Version (ESV)). Then read the summary paragraph(s) and talk through the questions for that section. You can work through this guide in one session or spread it out over several – whatever works for your group. As you read and discuss, consider how what you're reading applies to your life today. Don't forget to close with prayer!

AN INTRODUCTION TO JOEL

We don't know very much about Joel. His name means 'The Lord is God' and he prophesies in Jerusalem around the year 400 BC.

The Jews have returned from exile in Babylon (538 BC). They have no king, but the national life is focused on Jerusalem. They have built a new temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel (515 BC) and rebuilt the walls under the leadership of Nehemiah (444 BC).¹

A DEVASTATING PLAGUE OF LOCUSTS

Read 1:1–20 in your Bible.

Joel's prophecy begins with the news of a terrible plague of locusts (1:1–20). Wave upon wave of hungry insects have swarmed over the land like a devouring army. Trees have been stripped of leaf and bark. Fields, vineyards and orchards are all ruined. Farmers and vine-growers are in despair, and the priests have nothing to offer to the Lord.

Joel, like a true prophet, calls the priests and people to turn to God. The devastation of the locusts and the effects of the drought are such that only God can help.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR VERSES 1-12

1. What weather conditions (hot and humid, cold and windy, storm brewing) might depict the week you've just had? What weather forecast might fit the week ahead?
2. What is the closest you've come to experiencing famine or plague conditions?
3. What various groups does Joel address? What event has come to them? How does it affect them?

¹ Andrew Knowles, [The Bible Guide](#) (1st Augsburg books ed.; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 358.

4. Why does Joel emphasize hearing and retelling (vv. 2-3)? What does that say about how faith is born and nurtured?
5. What famous plague in their recital of God's mighty acts would Joel's hearers have recalled (see Exodus 10:13-15)? Since that other plague of locusts happened to God's foes, what makes this one especially unpalatable?
6. How does Joel describe this disastrous event? How complete is it? How do you respond to his vivid, poetic images?
7. Is this plague a punishment for sin or a test of faith?
8. The joy of this nation was linked to external circumstances. On a scale of 1 (never) to 10 (always), how often is that true of you?
9. When your joy withers, what or who has God used to renew it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR VERSES 13-20

1. What is Joel calling the priests to do? Likewise the elders? Why fast and pray (see Leviticus 16:29)?
2. What is the link between their current famine and the future "Day of the Lord" (vv. 14-15)? From Amos 5:18ff, what else might Joel be associating with this day when the Lord is clearly vindicated and manifest in earthly history? What does "the Lord's Day" mean nowadays?
3. How does Joel depict this drought-stricken land (vv 16-20)? What is the point of picturing God as the Lord of plants and animals, land and water?
4. If locusts consume all that's edible, and fire destroys what remains, where then is hope (vv. 16, 19)?
5. When have you felt like your resources (spiritual, financial, physical) were drying up or burnt out? Did you or could you cry out to God? Why or why not? What happened?

GOD'S JUDGMENT AND MERCY

Read 2:1–32 in your Bible.

Joel sees more in this crisis than a cloud of locusts. He sees the gathering clouds of God's judgment on the world. He calls for the trumpet to sound the alarm, for here comes another invasion of locusts, even more thorough and all-consuming than the last. Darkness and fire envelop the land as millions of the horse-like creatures swarm over it, turning paradise to desert. But the most terrifying news of all is that God himself is at the head of this invincible army. This is the Day of the Lord; and he is sending a plague of locusts not on his enemies, but upon his own people!

The Lord appeals to his people through Joel. This terrible Day has not yet arrived. The nightmare has not yet become a reality. There is still time to repent and get right with God. The Lord would love to see his people turn to him, so that he can change his plan from punishment to blessing.

Joel calls for the entire community to gather for fasting and prayer. Even the very old, the very young and the newly married are to come and pray. Fasting (going without food) is a sign of utter concentration on God, and often goes with loss of appetite at times of worry or grief. The priests are to beg God to spare his people, especially as other nations will judge God by whatever happens to Israel.

Joel promises that if the people truly repent (tearing their hearts and not just their clothes), then God will sweep away the armies of locusts and restore the crops. The autumn and spring rains will bring life to pastures, trees and animals, and the joy of harvest will fill hearts and stomachs. The word Joel uses for the autumn rains can also mean ‘teacher’. God is going to bless his people by teaching them his truth and guiding them in right living.

The last part of chapter 2 is so important that it forms a separate chapter in the Hebrew Bible.

God’s Spirit will be given to everyone—men and women, young and old, rich and poor. The whole community will be alive to God—able to perceive his will in visions and dreams, and speak his word in prophecy. This mighty blessing of God’s people will go hand in hand with a tremendous upheaval throughout creation. There will be darkness and fire, blood and smoke. And then the dreadful Day of the Lord will come. At the center of it all, Jerusalem will be both the focus of judgment and the place of refuge.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR VERSES 12-17

1. When, if ever, have you fasted from food? Drink? TV?
2. What was your incentive?
3. Would you do it again?
4. With destruction at the Lord’s hand near, what does Joel expect?
5. What is meant by “rend your heart and not your garments (v 13)? What else should prompt them to return to God (see Exodus 34:6-7; Nehemiah 9:16-17)?
6. Why are daily temple offerings so key (v. 14; see Daniel 8:11-13)? For what blessing does Joel hope?
7. Who is this event for? Why “everyone”? Why does the bridal party “never” fast (v 16; see Mark 2:19-20)?
8. What’s the point in the priests’ prayer for Israel (v. 17)?
9. Can repentance of heart be true without “fasting and mourning”? How? What would a spiritual fast include today? How would that differ from a spiritual diet?

THE NATIONS JUDGED AND JERUSALEM SAVED

Read 3:1–21 in your Bible.

Joel now delivers God’s message about the distant future. The nations who have ill-treated Israel will be summoned and judged. Joel sees this taking place in the Valley of Jehoshaphat—perhaps

the Kidron Valley where armies have camped when besieging Jerusalem. Joel names some of Israel's enemies—the Phoenician and Philistine traders who have stolen the temple treasures and sold God's people to be slaves in Greece. These words help us to date Joel's prophecy to the early 4th century BC. Joel predicts that the Jews will get their revenge. This will come about when the Persian emperor Alexander captures Sidon in 345 BC and Gaza in 332 BC. The Jews will trade their captured enemies in Arab slave markets.

THE OUTPOURING OF GOD'S SPIRIT

In the New Testament, Peter sees Joel's words being fulfilled. On the great Day of Pentecost, God pours out his Spirit on his apostles. This story is told in Acts 2. The writer of the Acts of the Apostles describes the Spirit as sounding like a violent wind and looking like flames of fire. Those who receive the Spirit are able to praise God in languages other than their own. Peter explains to the crowd that the outpouring of God's Spirit is a sign that Jesus is the Christ, and that God will judge the people who killed him.

Joel ends by describing Zion, God's city—high and holy, safe and secure. Just as God's judgment has been described in images of war and devastation, now his blessing is pictured in terms of peace and plenty. The Lord reigns in Zion, and all is well with his people for ever.²

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR VERSES 17-21

1. How does the word "then" ("so") relate this passage to the previous ones? How are God's judgement and salvation linked? Justice and mercy? Hope and despair?
2. What message does Joel intend with the contrasting images of 3:18-19? How is one like a "Paradise lost," the other one "Paradise regained"? How can *one* event pronounce both irrevocable doom *and* promise such abundant blessing (see Psalm 107:33-36)?
3. How does the past promise (v. 21, offering forgiveness and fellowship) relate to the specific situation of Israel which prompted these oracles (ch 1-2) in the first place?
4. If the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem made it holy (v. 17), then what does the Lord's presence in your life mean? What evidence is there of this?
5. How can you imitate Joel today?

² Andrew Knowles, [The Bible Guide](#) (1st Augsburg books ed.; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 358–359.