

Lake Cities Community Church
Book of Joel
Pastor Craig Schill
February 21, 2010

The Lament of the Locust Joel 1:1-20

The President searched carefully for the right adjective: “unimaginable” seemed the best choice. Unimaginable suffering. Unimaginable Pain. Unimaginable destruction. The President of Haiti, Rene Garcia Preval, chose this word to describe the results of the January 12, 2010 7.0 magnitude earthquake that tore through his country – the poorest in the western Hemisphere. For 35 torturous seconds the land rolled like waves on the ocean – it was the worst recorded earthquake in that country in more than 200 years.

If you are like me, as you watch the video and pictures, you are completely overwhelmed with the scale of human suffering and physical destruction. It is unimaginable to me that 230,000 people are dead. That would be like every single man woman and child in Garland – dropping over dead. There are 300,000 injured. 250,000 homes and 30,000 buildings are completely destroyed. Hospitals, churches, government buildings are all gone. It was a disaster of biblical proportions.

How do you process that as a Christian? How do you respond to disaster? What do you say to someone who has lost everything? How does your faith handle a sovereign God who would cause or allow such a thing to occur? I mean, was this a *natural disaster* or was it an *act of God*? What do you do when your world is rocked by the earthquake of disease,

or divorce or despair? How should you and I respond as Christians? How do you survive such unimaginable pain and devastation?

If you are not there, turn with me to the Book of Joel. Do not feel bad if you need to first go the Table of Contents to find the page number! It is a short book (73 verses) tucked between Hosea and Amos. Joel was a prophet of God writing during a time of unimaginable disaster. And it was his job to bring God's Word to a devastated people.

I will ask the question this morning this way: When calamity comes – how should we respond? When disaster comes to your door – what do you do? And before we go any further I would like to answer that question for you. The prophet's Joel's answer is summarized in one short word – you cry. You cry for your loss, and then you cry out to the Lord in prayer. So, we will explore three points this morning. First let's look at the calamity. What happened? Second we will look at the people's cry of great loss and third, we will look at the Prophets command for the people to cry out to the Lord in prayer. One calamity – two cries – cry of loss and cry of prayer.

CALAMITY (1-4)

The calamity is described in verses 1-4. The prophet tells us that, first, the disaster was unprecedented. Verses 2-3: *“Listen, all inhabitants of the land. Has **anything like this happened in your days, Or in your fathers' days? Tell your sons about it, And let your sons tell their sons, And their sons the next generation.**”* This disaster was unprecedented and therefore would be unforgettable. I grew up hearing stories about the great depression from my grandparents. It was an unprecedented depression and therefore unforgettable. The people who lived through Hurricane Katrina will tell those stories to their children,

and to their children's children. Joel commanded the preservation of this story, not only because it is a history lesson, but because (as we will see over the next four weeks) it contains a vital spiritual lesson.

What happened? Basically millions of locusts – grasshoppers invaded the land and destroyed all the crops. We do not see this type of problem much in our day due to pesticides. However, in 2004, a huge swarm of millions of locusts ravaged many countries in Africa and the Middle East doing an estimate 100 million in damage. Brian Webster shared with me that the Little House on the Prairie family (Ingalls) experienced a locust invasion that devastated the land for two years. This is how they described it: “The cloud was hailing grasshoppers. The cloud was grasshoppers. Their bodies hid the sun and made darkness. Their thin, large wings gleamed and glittered. The rasping whirring of their wings filled the whole air and they hit the ground and the house with the noise of a hailstorm.” (*On the Banks of Plum Creek*)

It was an unprecedented and unforgettable disaster; and the destruction was utter, verse four: **What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; And what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten; And what the creeping locust has left, the stripping locust has eaten.** Imagine the first swarm of locust – the people crying out; the fear welling up: The swarm comes does great damage; but the damage is not complete – some crops are spared. But in a little while a second black cloud approaches – larger than the first. These locust feast on the remaining crops. What used to be green is now brown. But there are still a few patches of green, a few figs on the tree. Some signs of life. But all hopes are dashed with a third wave comes and then a fourth. One after another

until absolutely nothing is left – everything is gone. The destruction is utter and complete.

Cry of Loss (5-13)

What do you do in the face of such calamity? You cry. Joel calls the people to cry out because everything is gone. Verse five, “**Awake drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you wine drinkers, on account of the sweet wine that is cut off from your mouth.**” It is a bitter irony – that those who are normally jovial are now reduced to tears and there is no wine to comfort them – the vines are all gone. *Cry out* Joel commands, verse 8, “**like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.**” Weep like a young woman in love, whose fiancé has been killed. The loss is staggering. Verse 9, the priests are to mourn, because the grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off. Verse 13, “**Gird yourselves with sackcloth and lament O priests...for the grain offerings and the drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God.**” Verse 10, “**the land (too) mourns for the grain is ruined.**” Verse 11, the **farmers and vinedressers** wail and cry out for all the fruit of the trees, the fruit of the vine and the harvest of fields is gone. Everything is gone.

And because the food is gone, the cattle will soon die (verse 18), and when the cattle are dead the people will face famine and starvation. And there are no offerings to bring before God. Verse 12 says it all: “**Rejoicing dries up from the sons of men.**” What do you do when calamity comes? You cry much because you have lost much.

Rich Stearns, president and CEO of World Vision, recently returned from a trip to Haiti and he said in *Christianity Today*: “Last week, I stood in the streets of Port au Prince Haiti weeping at the scope and scale of human suffering.” That is a very godly response. Didn’t Jesus Himself cry over the loss of his friend? And in our cry we have the first glimmer

of redemption. In our cry of loss we have the first rays of hope. Nothing can be restored that isn't first lost. No one can receive comfort, unless they first feel pain. Jesus said, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt 5:4).

Cry out in Prayer (14-20)

What do you do when calamity comes? First you cry for the loss, and second you cry out in prayer to God, verse 14: "Consecrate a fast, Proclaim 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.

I remember years ago at our church in Flagstaff, Arizona we were devastated to learn that an elder's wife was diagnosed with cancer. It was devastating news to her and to the entire church. Many tears were shed, and so we gathered the whole church to pray and to seek God's help and healing. And that is what Joel is saying – get everyone together and let us cry out together to the LORD. Verse 19, "To you, O LORD, I cry."

But what type of prayer was it? I believe there are at least two elements. First, certainly they were asking for God's help in a time of difficulty. They were devastated and sought God's assistance. Second it was to be a cry of repentance. Though Joel does explicitly say: "Repent of your sins," the sackcloth, fasting and call for everyone to gather is the Old Testament formula of repentance. One commentator says: Their cry "is one of distress...the assembled people will endeavor to move to repentance so that the misfortune will be removed from the land." (Crenshaw, *Joel*, 105). This is confirmed in verse fifteen "Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, And it will come as destruction from the Almighty.

Joel is saying, “Get yourselves right before God; because if you think this destruction by little bugs was terrible – just wait until you see the destruction that the Almighty God can provide!” Dr. Brian Webster put it this way: “As the Robin is the harbinger of Spring, so the locusts are the harbingers of destruction.”

As soon as the first grasshopper came into view, the theme of repentance entered the people’s minds. In Deuteronomy 28:15 God warned, “If you will not obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you... (and among other things...) Deuteronomy 28:38_“You shall bring out much seed to the field but you shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it.

In our passage it is becoming clear that the Prophet is connecting the dots between this natural disaster and the people’s sin. There is an assumed *causality* between their sin and this disaster, and the response of the people is to repent of their sin or else something even worse will happen to them.

Do you remember the question I asked you at the beginning of the sermon? “How does your faith handle a sovereign God who would cause or allow such a thing to occur?” We are reminded here that God punishes sin. Though Christ’s death on the cross has taken care of God’s wrath and punishment of sin in the ultimate sense, God still disciplines His children. This is not an easy reminder and it brings up an uncomfortable discussion of a good God being at all associated with pain and suffering. Rich Stearns, again of World Vision, asked in light of the disaster in Haiti: “Who of us in these past days has not asked , “Where was God?” or “Why God?” The sudden deaths of so many innocent people and the

staggering human suffering that persists seem to mock the very notion of a loving God.”
(*Christianity Today*).

We are in deep water here –but let us go a little deeper. Christian leader Pat Robertson said recently that God was punishing Haiti because they had been serving the devil and not the Lord. He attributed this and other calamities to their sin. He is connecting the dots. How did you feel about that? It sounds a little bit like the Prophet Joel doesn't it? You did this, so this occurred? I had a friend in college whose baby daughter died and the church told the parents it was because of their sin. They have never been back to church.

Is God sovereign? Yes. Like any parent, does God chastise his children? Yes. Can you connect the dots? No – not usually. Why could Joel connect the dots? Look at verse one: **The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel**. Joel was delivering the Word of the LORD – He was not connecting the dots –God was! But today God does not give a running commentary on the disasters of the day. We dare not pretend that we are God. 95% of the time we just don't know why God has allowed suffering to occur. Sometimes it is clear that we have brought suffering on ourselves through sin, but most of the time we do not know God's purposes. We trust He is sovereign and that is enough. That has to be enough this side of heaven.

But let's come back to the prayer of repentance. I look at it this way – there is never a bad time to repent of your sins. And if you are going through a difficult situation, it is an ideal time; whether or not you ever know why you are going through your calamity. Humble yourself before God and seek the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ.

I want you to now think about your life for a moment. I know that some of you are facing some very difficult times. And I know that you have shed many tears. Some of you

have lost loved one. Others of you have lost relationships or jobs. We have cried with some of you. Joel's challenge for you is to turn your cry for loss into a cry of prayer – earnestly seeking God's help and sincerely seeking the forgiveness of your sins.

Joel told the priests to put on sackcloth, the people to fast and gather in the house of the LORD. But, if you think about it, we don't know if they did it. If the book is dated just before King Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of the land - it is likely they did not repent. They suffered loss and perhaps got mad with God, or they went to the Egyptians gods for help. They didn't make the turn from helping themselves to seeking help from God.

Conclusion

Let me try to bring summarize what we have been talking about with this true story. Mount Hekla in Iceland is an active volcano, which had erupted over 20 times since 874 A.D. Most recently it erupted ten years ago in February of 2000.

Years ago, on September 2, 1845, a man by the name of Carl Steinman was hiking at the top of the crater. He was not worried as the volcano had been dormant for nearly 60 years. Feeling confident in himself, he ignored the counsel of his guide and hiked to the very edge of the opening - the lip of the crater. When the mountain shook violently and he was thrown literally down into the chasm. You see, it was then, on that day - at that time that the volcano erupted again. He was literally hanging on a ledge as the lava rose up toward him.

You might call that a calamity and an Act of God. And I can assure you he cried out for help and he cried out to God. We have his words. This is what he said:

"Oh, the horrors of that awful realization! There, over the mouth of a black and

heated abyss, I was held suspended, a helpless and conscious prisoner, to be hurled downward by the next great rumbling of trembling Nature! "Help! help! help!-for the love of God, help!" I shrieked, in the very agony of my despair. I had nothing to rely upon but the mercy of heaven; and I prayed to God as I had never prayed before, for the forgiveness of my sins, that they might not follow me to judgment. All at once I heard a shout, and, looking around, I beheld, with feelings that cannot be described, my faithful guide hastening down the sides of the crater to my relief. "I warned you!" he said. "You did!" I cried, "but forgive me, and save me, for I am perishing!" "I will save you, or perish with you!" "The earth trembled, and the rocks parted-one of them rolling down the chasm with a dull, booming sound. I sprang forward; I seized a hand of the guide, and the next moment we had both fallen, locked in each other's arms, upon the solid earth above. I was free, but still upon the verge of the pit. Together we raced to safety!

Carl Steinman was foolish to disobey his guide, just as we are foolish to disobey God. It happened that his sin led to a natural consequence and grave danger. Whether or not God meant that as a direct punishment we don't know – we can't connect those dots. But it didn't really matter to Steinman who took the opportunity to cry out to God for both help and forgiveness. The stubborn pride that got him in trouble was replaced by a humble submissive attitude. And God rescued Him from his danger and restored him to safety.

What do you do when calamity comes? You cry. You cry for what you have lost, and you cry out in prayer for help and for the forgiveness of your sins.