

The Message of the Book of Joel

Discernment and Responsiveness in Seasons of Shaking

I. DISCERNING THE CRISIS AT HAND

- A. I'm stirred by three primary crises that are mounting in the nations of the earth. I want to articulate them and present the Biblical response to crisis as laid forth in the book of Joel.
- B. First, is the pollution and collapse of the church in the West.
1. Thom S. Rainer has described the present state of the church in America in his book "The Bridger Generation" by showing the dramatic decline of church engagement over an 80 year period. While this is specific to America the trend is the same across the West. The regions of the globe that were historically saturated with the message of the Gospel are now literally swapping statistics with the Global South (England being a prime example).
 - a. Builders generation (1924-1944) – 65% church engagement
 - b. Boomers generation (1945-1965) – 35% church engagement
 - c. Buster generation (1966-1983) – 15% church engagement
 - d. Bridger generation¹ (born after 1984) – 4% church engagement
 2. While this is specific to America the trend is the same across the West. The regions of the globe that were historically saturated with the message of the Gospel are now literally swapping statistics with the Global South (England being a prime example). The Global South are now leading the way as the West experiences a steady decline into a "post-Christian" age.
 3. The term "Global South" refers to the astonishing growth of the church in Africa, Latin America, and Asia while the formerly dominant centers of Christian influence in Europe and America are weakening.
 4. "In a word, the Christian church has experienced a larger geographical redistribution in the last fifty years than in any comparable period in its history, with the exception of the very earliest years of church history." (Mark Noll, The New Shape of World Christianity)²

¹ Thom S. Rainer

² These statistics come from these sources: Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward; Global Christianity Since 1945" in International Bulletin of Missionary Research, April, 2000, Vol. 24; Philip Jenkins, "Believing in the Global South" Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward; Global Christianity Since 1945"

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- At the beginning of the twentieth century, about 71 percent of professing Christians in the world lived in Europe. By the end of the twentieth century, that number had shrunk to 28 percent. 43 percent of the Christians now lived in Latin America and Africa.
 - In 1900, Africa had 10 million Christians, which was about 10 percent of the population. By 2000, the number of Christians was 360 million, about half the population of the continent. This is probably the largest shift in religious affiliation that has ever occurred, anywhere.
 - There are 17 million baptized members of the Anglican church in Nigeria, compared with 2.8 million in the United States.
 - “This past Sunday more Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the United States combined.”
 - “The number of practicing Christians in China is approaching the number in the United States.”
 - “Last Sunday . . . more Christian believers attended church in China than in all of so-called ‘Christian Europe.’”
 - Kenya has more people in Christian churches on Sunday than Canada.
 - “More believers worship together in Nagaland than in Norway.”
 - “More Christian workers from Brazil are active in cross cultural ministry outside their homelands than from Britain or from Canada.” In other words, the churches of the Global South are increasingly sending churches.
 - Last Sunday “more Presbyterians were in church in Ghana than in Scotland.”
 - “This past week in Great Britain, at least fifteen thousand Christian foreign missionaries were hard at work evangelizing the locals. Most of these missionaries are from Africa and Asia.”
5. While we celebrate the advance of the Gospel in the Global South we ought to lament over the state of the church in the West. We need to get a vision for historic revival and awakening.
- C. Second, is the mounting crisis that will precede the Day of the Lord culminating with the Second Coming of Jesus. I believe we are at the beginning of the beginning of the great transition period of history that will crescendo with the physical return of Jesus to the earth. In the very near future we will witness an unprecedented expression of man’s sin, Satan’s rage and God’s judgments.
- D. Third, is the fact that neither of these two realities are seemingly undiscerned in the Western world.

II. THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF JOEL: RESPONDING TO CRISIS WITH DISCERNMENT

- A. The prophet Joel ministered in the wake of judgments of the recent past and in the shadow of greater judgments yet future. He was sent as a voice of clarity and reason to shepherd a devastated nation through the past, present and future calamity that God was responsible for. The historical context of the

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book of Joel spanned a number of decades as locust invasion, drought, fire, famine and economic fallout pummeled the nation culminating in the Babylonian invasion in a 20 year siege and deportation.

- B. Joel begins his message by speaking into the crisis of the past which still abides in the present:

Hear this, you elders, And give ear, all you inhabitants of the land! Has anything like this happened in your days, Or even in the days of your fathers? 3 Tell your children about it, Let your children tell their children, And their children another generation. 4 What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; What the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; And what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten. (Joel 1:2-4)

- C. He then begins to call this crippled and disoriented people to responsiveness:

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. (Joel 1:13-14)

- D. Then Joel tells the people that the calamity and devastation has come from the hand of God:

Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is at hand; It shall come as destruction from the Almighty. (Joel 1:15)

- E. Knowing the propensity of people to resist this sort of message Joel begins to alarm and disrupt the people by further elaborating on the seriousness and the intensity of the crisis that looms on the horizon:

Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. (Joel 2:1-2)

1. The prophet commands the watchman to sound an alarm. Danger is on the horizon. The locust plague is only the precursor. The nation is set for a military invasion, and it is the Lord who is directing the army (2:11).
2. If the trumpet isn't sounded then the people won't be alarmed. And if the people aren't alarmed, then they are incapable of responding to the level that is required in light of the intensity of the impending crisis.
3. "Doom and gloom" preaching is mock by modern minds - including many within the church. And yet gloom preaching is profoundly Biblical. Jesus, Paul, John and all the prophets spoke of this hour of

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military crisis at the end of the age. It's essential that we understand this critical component of God's eschatological purposes.

- F. He asks the question of whether or not there are any alive who can navigate through this season so as to endure it:

The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very terrible; who can endure it? (Joel 2:11)

¹⁰ And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. ¹¹ Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. ¹² And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But he who endures to the end shall be saved. (Matthew 24:10-13)

- G. Then he answers the question of "who can endure" the pressures of the Day of the Lord with a clarion call to discernment and responsiveness:

So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. ¹⁴ Who knows if He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him? (Joel 2:13-14)

III. DISCERNING THE PRESENT HOUR OF RELATIVE SAFETY CORRECTLY

- A. Church history is filled with examples of revivals which precede a military crisis. America has many examples of revival preparing many young Americans for death in the Revolutionary, Civil, and World Wars. The revival prepares young persons for eternity but fail to make cultural and systemic change before the oncoming judgment. Thus, the judgment plays a crucial role in the systemic, cultural shift of the nation.
- B. Rarer are those revivals which take place in time to prevent the oncoming military crisis, where the transformation penetrates to such an extent that it turns the potential judgment of God into a season of blessing and protection. Hezekiah's revival is one such example. The move of the Spirit led by Whitefield and the Wesley's is often said to have saved England from a bloody revolution such as the French experienced.
- C. Joel reveals to us that there are narrow windows in history when the correct interpretation must be given in order to set the prayer culture to preserve the next generation from oncoming judgment and destruction. The prophetic voice calling Judah to hear exploded from 640-620 B.C. with Joel, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah.
- D. Josiah's Reign and the Emergence of the Prophets of Judgment
1. 640-620 B.C. – Joel, Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah Announce the Day of the Lord

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2. 640 B.C. – Josiah's Reign
3. 632 B.C. – Josiah's Seeks the God of his father David
4. 628 B.C. – Josiah's Purging of the High Places and Idolatry Begins
5. 627 B.C. – Jeremiah the Prophet Prophecies Impending Military Judgment
6. 622 B.C. – Josiah Discovers Restores Temple, Discovers the Law Books, and Restores True Worship.
7. 622 B.C. – Josiah Repents and Seeks the Prophetic Word from Huldah the Prophetess

Then she answered them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Tell the man who sent you to Me, 24 "Thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will bring calamity on this place and on its inhabitants, all the curses that are written in the book which they have read before the king of Judah, 25 because they have forsaken Me and burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands. Therefore My wrath will be poured out on this place, and not be quenched.'" 26 But as for the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, in this manner you shall speak to him, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel: "Concerning the words which you have heard -- 27 because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and against its inhabitants, and you humbled yourself before Me, and you tore your clothes and wept before Me, I also have heard you," says the LORD. (2 Chron. 34:23-27)

8. 609 B.C. Josiah Dies and Idolatry Takes Root
 9. 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar Invades Judah and the Exile Begins
- E. The elders in Josiah's day missed the prophetic window in which to change the culture to corporate prayer. Thus, Josiah's individual efforts did not enable the reform to transform the larger body and avert the oncoming judgment. The window was missed, so that by the time Jeremiah came it was too late. The revival fizzled out days after Josiah's death, and within three months the people under king Jehoiakim returned to idolatry. Within four years the Babylonians had begun their twenty year invasion process.
- F. The invitation to hear is critical. It is not a vague summons. It is the difference between responding correctly at a key juncture of history that can set a culture of corporate prayer to turn the crisis into blessing. We see this in Jesus' warning some 40 years before Titus' invasion. We also see the preparation of the Churches in Asia Minor receiving the same invitation some decades before a season of coming trial.

IV. PURSUING THE TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN AN HOUR OF MOUNTING CRISIS: UNDERSTANDING GOD AS JUDGE

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- A. God is going to express Himself to the nations as “Judge” in an unprecedented way in the coming decades. And it’s essential that we don’t inappropriately bolster our hearts with Bible verses that get God “off the hook.” It’s imperative that we devour the word of God in order to be renewed into the true knowledge of God.
- B. Though the vast majority of the church in the West is in staunch opposition to the concept of God as Judge it’s not something that we can afford to ignore or oppose.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. (Hos. 4:6)

- C. There are three reasons why the judgments of God are good news:
- D. First, because God will rid the earth of darkness, sin and demons bringing restoration with Him when He returns ushering a new age of peace and justice. The fact that God is Judge means that darkness doesn’t win. Though the comfortable, sentimental and humanistic Western church is opposed to the idea of God being a Judge, the unknown millions of victims of the sex trafficking industry wouldn’t be opposed to the Lord manifesting Himself as a Judge tonight. God refuses to make agreements or peace treaties with darkness, demons or sinful men. There is coming a Day of Reckoning when God will Judge the living and the dead. And this is the hope of the nations. That God will bring this present evil age to a close, incarcerate the usurper Satan and call men to account.
- E. Second, because He is a Good Father who disciplines His children. The heart of the Judge is also a heart of a Father. When He judges us He does so for our good and to make us wealthier in the age to come. If you aren’t disciplined by God you’re not a child of God.
- F. Third, because Jesus is a jealous Bridegroom who is passionate about His Bride. There are two sides of this. First is that He won’t tolerate us having adulterous hearts that aren’t fully devoted to Him. And so, in His kindness He goes to war with the things that hinder us from being able to love Him extravagantly. And the second side is that He won’t tolerate Him Bride being abused. When Jesus returns at the end of the age covered in the blood of the nations its largely because the nations have been shedding the blood of His beloved.