**Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026**

# Joel: Acts of God, Divine Mobility and The Hope

## I. Overview

Joel belongs to the Book of the Twelve (the Minor Prophets) and is commonly dated by many scholars to the Persian Period (539–332 BCE, post Babylonian exile), although its precise dating remains debated. **This is crisis literature**: theology undertaken in the context of trauma, attempting to interpret and come to terms with a series of ecological, agricultural, and communal disasters. Joel begins with a dramatic description of a locust plague (1:4–7), drought (1:9–12, 17–18), and wildfire or scorching heat (1:19–20; 2:3–5), resulting in food shortages and the collapse of agricultural production (1:10). Humans, the earth, and animals are all pictured as participating in lament (1:10, 18, 20), suggesting that the catastrophe is not exclusively human but ecological and communal. The devastation disrupts not only the economy but also the religious life of Judah, as grain and wine offerings to YHWH cease (1:9, 13).

Joel, like other prophetic books, employs imagery of divine punishment, judgment, and the Day of YHWH; however, notably, it offers no explicit identification of Judah's particular sin as the cause of the disaster. This absence creates theological ambiguity: **Is the catastrophe divine punishment, an ecological disaster, a sign of an approaching judgment, or some combination of these?**

The community is summoned to collective repentance (2:12–17), while YHWH is portrayed as gracious, merciful, and responsive to communal distress (2:13–14). **Joel vacillates** between despair and hope, divine judgment and compassion, particularism and universalism, ecological devastation and restoration, *divine mobility* and a *theology of place* (Glossary of terms). Joel also calls our attention to a biblical pattern: judgment, then restoration.

Ultimately, the promise of restoration (2:18–27) and the outpouring of the divine spirit upon all flesh (2:28–29) suggest that catastrophe does not have the final word. The biblical pattern of **reversal of fortune** depicts God overturning established hierarchies, transforming the marginalized into agents of deliverance, and bringing the powerful low (e.g., Esther, Joseph, Moses, David, Hannah, Ruth, Job, Mary, and Jesus).

## II. Problematic

This section examines the theological and ethical dangers that emerge when Joel's prophetic message is interpreted uncritically. This section raises critical questions about who has the authority to interpret suffering as divine punishment, whether the promise of the Spirit being poured out on "all flesh" truly extends to all people, and whether religious inclusion necessarily produces structural liberation. It also considers the danger of interpreting restoration as retaliation and repentance as an obligation to bear the sins of previous generations. Ultimately, this section cautions against readings of Joel that turn suffering into blame, inclusion into tokenism, restoration into revenge, or historical oppression into divinely sanctioned destiny.

### A. Acts of God

**1.** Joel's portrayal of a locust plague, drought, wildfire and food shortage as divine punishment provides a theological narrative that has been weaponized against vulnerable communities hit hardest by tragedy. This signals interpretive danger: **the suffering of a people can be mistaken for evidence of**


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**God's punishment.** Uncritical application of Joel brings great harm to continents hit hardest by droughts, floods, crop failures, and shifting weather patterns. Religious leaders, political authorities, or outside observers portraying suffering communities as cursed, sinful, or deserving of their suffering risks spiritualizing environmental crises while obscuring climate change, colonial legacies, economic inequality, and the unequal distribution of resources. **Joel's prophetic language should therefore not become a license to blame vulnerable communities for disasters they did not choose.**
**2.** The interpretive question is not simply whether suffering signals divine judgment, but who has the authority to declare it so, whose interests that declaration serves, and whether it produces compassion or deepens oppression.

**B. From "ALL" to a Select Few**
**1. ALL**: Joel 2:28-29
**28** Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.
**29** Even on the male and female slaves, in those days I will pour out my spirit.

**2. Select Few**: Joel 3:17, 21 – "I the Lord your God dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall no more pass through it…For the Lord dwells in Zion.
a. In John 4 we find a similar vacillation in the dialogue between Jesus and the woman of Samaria – where God is Spirit, yet somehow male (Father), not limited to a mountain or a temple, yet somehow salvation is of the Jews.

**C. Inclusion without Liberation**
Joel 2:29 reveals another biblical pattern: esteeming slaves within a religious community without condemning the institution of slavery (ref. also **Luke 15:22** "But the father said to his slaves…" – and the book of Philemon where Paul urges that Onesimus be welcomed as a beloved brother within the faith community vv. 16–17 yet does not explicitly condemn slavery itself)—revealing the tension between **religious inclusion and structural liberation**.

**D. When Reversal of Fortune becomes Violent**
Reversal of Fortune can contain violence. Joel 3:10 turns farming tools or "plowshares" into weapons or "swords" in contrast with Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:4. When hope is transmuted into returning evil for evil, rather than ending evil, reversal of fortune perpetuates the cycle of violence.

**E. Watch Out for Generational Curse Theologies**
Joel calls for lament and repentance without naming a specific offense by Judah. Although Joel does not specify divine punishment for former generations' sins, this narrative can act as an invitation to generational-curse theology that turns present suffering into a system of inherited guilt, leaving future generations trying to repay a debt they never incurred.
**1.** The so-called **"curse of Ham" (Gen. 9.25-7)** identifies **Canaan**, not Ham, as the object of Noah's curse. Later interpreters racialized the story to justify enslaving Africans and their descendants. The danger: **an imposed condition of oppression is portrayed as a God-ordained hereditary destiny.**
**2.** The inherited **"Christ-killer"** accusation or "deicide" **(Matt. 27.25).** Christians used this verse's reference to "us and to our children" to assign collective, continuing guilt to Jewish people for Jesus' death. Jesus was executed under Roman authority for sedition against the empire. Neither Jewish


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people collectively nor subsequent generations bear responsibility. This interpretation helped justify centuries of persecution.

**III. The Hope**

**A. Imagination.** Joel's imagination of a reality where God's presence is available to all people continues to stand as a critique to patriarchal and colonial constructs: **God's presence will exceed the limits of human constructs**, **empowering people at the margins to speak and participate in the work of renewal.**

**B. Divine Mobility.** Joel also offers a radical vision**—the movement of God's Spirit beyond established boundaries, institutions, and centers of religious authority (2.28-9):**
All flesh, sons and daughters, old and young, male and female slaves will share in God's presence. This vision also challenges any attempt to confine God's presence to a temple, synagogue, priesthood, or privileged religious class. God's Spirit becomes present among people across generations, genders, and social positions, making divine revelation a shared possibility rather than the possession of a select few.
**1.** Biblical Pattern: Ezekiel recounts divine mobility as God's presence is apparent in exile, without a temple, in a valley of death and dry bones **(Eze. 1.1-3, 15-28; 11;14-6; 37.1-14; also Jer. 29.4-14; 31.31-4; John 4).**

**C. God Didn't Become More Mobile—Our Understanding Became Less Confined:**
From Housing God to Recognizing Ourselves as Divine Expression

**The Tent—The Temple—In Exile—In Us—As Us**
In the tent…we were not allowed into the Holy Place.
In the temple…we gave God an address.
In exile…we discovered God travels with us in crisis.
On Pentecost…we experienced God IN US.
In Christ Consciousness…We wake up to the God AS US.

God is not becoming something new.
We are awakening to what has been true from the beginning.
We began by making a dwelling for God,
only to discover that God was never homeless.
And, we were never godless.

Tents can be folded.
Temples can be destroyed.
People can be displaced.
But the Presence cannot be imprisoned.

The question is not only, 'Where can I find God?'
It is, 'How will God's love become visible as my life?'


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