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Judah in the time of Joel, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk



I. Introduction to Joel, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk

In this segment, we look at Joel and Zephaniah and Habakkuk, three Judean prophets toward the end of the time that Judah was an independent nation. In other words, all these prophets are within the last few decades of the history of Judah prior to its final destruction and captivity by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

II. Book of Joel

We do not know for sure the date of any of them, but we can fairly well guess that Joel might have prophesied rather close to 586 B.C., as the Babylonians were more and more powerful, more and more successful, and had more and more influence in and around Judah. It could even be that Joel is making reference in a metaphorical way, with his talk of the invasion of locusts, to the first great invasion of the Babylonians that affected Judah and Jerusalem in 598 B.C.

A. Locust Invasion (Joel 1:1-2:11)

Chapters 1-2 of Joel talk about locusts. The question is: Is the prophet actually speaking of a locust plague when he talks about all the doom and hardship that it caused? He implies that it is a kind of army invading on God's behalf and giving a wake-up call to Israel (that is, Judah, the part of Israel that is left now). Or is he portraying the Babylonians like locusts? It is difficult to tell. I am inclined to think it is the latter: that he is, in fact, responding to the way that the Babylonian armies are simply overwhelmed. They just outnumber anything the people of Judah could ever put on the field. Like a monstrous army of locusts, like the millions and millions of these special grasshoppers that grow under certain conditions and fly together on the



Day of the LORD



Joel 2:13

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.

wind as locusts do and are so totally destructive and leave the land devastated—the Babylonians, in fact, fought that way.

Joel can speak of these invaders as an army, and does so, but then also he can speak of God as driving them away. Generally speaking, we know that the prophets told the people of Judah that the Babylonians were functioning as God's army to bring about His judgment against the people of Judah. Jeremiah says that in many different ways, in many of the chapters of his prophecy. Habakkuk says exactly that, and it would be reasonable for us to think that Joel is, as well, indicating that sort of thing.

When God talks about these locusts as “my great army,” we have to presume that it makes sense to think that in fact He, too, is referring to the Babylonians. Here is the situation: Judah is invaded; it is invaded by an overwhelming force that seems unstoppable in the way that a farmer cannot really stop locusts. You can hardly go out there in Bible times with rocks or stones or sticks and do much to them. You can step on a few of them and crush a few of them in your hand, but they come in such overwhelming numbers that you can hardly end up with any kind of successful resistance. In each case, what Joel is doing (in chapter 1 where he first describes the invasion, and in chapter 2 where the invasion continues and is further described), what Joel is inspired to do is call the people to lamentation and repentance.

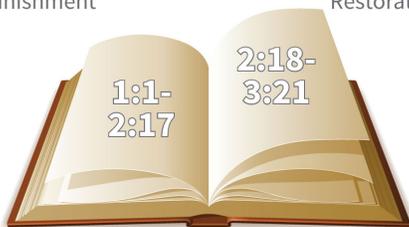
B. Deliverance Promised if Israel Repents (Joel 2:12-32)

What is Judah supposed to do? When the invader comes and all these problems are before them, what do they do? The answer is: You turn to the Lord. You bring your lament before the Lord. You bring your call to Him for deliverance. You describe to Him why you are suffering. You tell Him you trust in Him and that you have assurance in Him; and you praise Him. And you place in His hands your burden and ask Him to help you. And you certainly have got to repent. That is what the people needed to do.

This invasion was not the result of happenstance—it was a call from God to His people; it was a message to them.

The Book of Joel's Bifid Structure:

Punishment Restoration



Punishment

Restoration

The message of the Scripture always is: If your sins have found you out, repent, turn yourselves over to God. Appeal to Him, and confess your sin, for He is faithful and just to forgive you. But there is a real turn that takes place also in the book of Joel. Joel is one of these prophetic books that is kind of bifid in structure; that is, it has all the materials of one kind at the first half and then turns to another kind of emphasis in the second half. Many prophetic books are organized in such a manner—Joel is.

There is a real turning point with 2:18. After all these descriptions of invasion, and the destruction, and the need for repentance, and so on, then we get these suddenly happy predictions, wonderful and glorious predictions. God wants His people to see that, even though in the short run, in the decades immediately ahead, they will be conquered and exiled by the Babylonians, the time is coming when He will restore them to things more wonderful than ever could have been imagined. In other words, the time of the new covenant is coming and all the blessings that Christ gives His people will be theirs.

We read about this in connection with the coming of the Spirit—2:18: “Then the Lord will be jealous for his land and take pity on His people. The Lord will reply to them: ‘I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations. I will drive the northern army from you, pushing it into a parched and barren land, with its front columns going into the eastern sea and those in the rear into the western sea (that is, from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, which was, in fact, a description of the distance that the armies of the Babylonians covered).’ Surely He has done great things. Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things. . . . Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for He has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.”

So often, the prophets express in the common language of agricultural bounty the spiritual blessings of the Lord. “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten . . . my great army that I sent among you. You will have plenty to



Joel 2:29-30, 32

I will pour out My Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. . . . And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls.

Joel 3:12

“Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side.”

eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the Lord your God Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” This is a prediction of the democratization of the Holy Spirit, the spreading of the Spirit of God—not just on one person or another, not just on Moses and Aaron or Joshua, or not just on the prophets, but now everybody will have God’s Spirit.

This, of course, is one of the great features of the new covenant age: the fact that we all have, who know Christ our Savior and Lord, the indwelling of His Spirit. We may not use the Spirit; we may resist the Spirit. We may be like people still walking a great distance to work, with a Mercedes in the garage. But we have the Spirit; and if we have the Spirit, we have God within us. So it is a wonderful prediction: “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.” In other words, every believer will be as close to God as the prophets once were.

“Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke.” It will not be limited just to some. It will be for everybody—young and old, male and female, upper and lower classes—with no distinction. “And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls.” Of course, Christ bought that deliverance on that very Mount Zion, where He gave His life.

C. Judgment on the Nations and Israel’s Restoration (Joel 3:1-21)

In chapter 3, there is in the book an emphasis on the judgment on the nations. Again, it is the other nations, those who are suppressing Israel—nations like Tyre and Sidon, or the Philistines, or other groups—are eliminated, their power restricted and diminished. It will be possible for the people of God to be elevated, which is always a theme in the Prophets. “Do not worry about history. Do



Zephaniah:

Yahweh has treasured

not worry about what the nations are doing, I will take care of all that,” says the Lord. “I am doing wonderful things; I am going to bring on the scene a whole new kind of international reality, where what you have known to be the pattern will be done away with.”

Then there is a call to judgment of those nations, where God will judge them, as of course we know the final judgment will take place at the throne of Christ. “Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears,”—the opposite of what Isaiah and Micah have said in predicting peace. This is now a prediction of war against those nations to eliminate them in terms of their political and military power, so that their people can be freed from the oppression of a structure that looks only for world domination and empire. “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.”

This is the Jerusalem of the book of Revelation, a Jerusalem full of people of faith, belonging to God, symbolizing heaven. “In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk . . . Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem through all generations. . . . The Lord dwells in Zion!” Good news for a people who were oppressed and suppressed, encouragement for a people who were about to go through a horrible time of conquest, exile, decimation—suffering for many years as slaves in a foreign land.

III. Book of Zephaniah

Zephaniah, a contemporary of Joel and Habakkuk, preached “the Day of the Lord.” This theme is found in many of the prophetic books, but it is something that Zephaniah starts with.

A. The Day of the Lord (Zep 1:1-2:3)

Listen to these words from a prophet preaching sometime within the last two or three decades prior to the destruction of Judah in 586 B.C. “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord. ‘I will sweep away



Zephaniah Prophecies Against the Judeans

both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,' declares the Lord."

Wow! That sounds like an elimination of humanity, but it is part of the way that God, through this prophet, describes something akin to the extreme action of eliminating wickedness that took place during the days of the Flood, when only Noah and his family were rescued. So using that same kind of language, the prophet Zephaniah says major, sweeping changes are going to take place. It is as if everybody will be gone and there will be a whole new people. Now, of course, that is God's plan. God's ultimate plan is to destroy all evil in the universe; all evil will be eliminated, and, therefore, people who continue to be evil have to be eliminated as well. Only righteousness will prevail and only righteous people will continue to live forever. That is the plan of God; that is the biblical story; that is how redemption will work, in fact, with regard to the wicked and the righteous.

Zephaniah has prophecies against the Judeans and what will happen to them, the dangers of their own wickedness, the way that they have been unfaithful to God. He says, speaking for the Lord: "At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.' Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine. The great day of the Lord is near. Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter That will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin"

There had been a belief among many Israelites (we know it especially from Isaiah and other prophets) that when God intervened on His day, when He came on that day, He really entered into setting things right. He would totally rescue His people, Judah. But what Zephaniah and other prophets were inspired to make very clear was that that day was not going to be good for them, because they, too, were among God's enemies. Many of the prophets, Zephaniah prominent among them, used "Day of the Lord" language

Zephaniah 2:1-3

Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's wrath comes upon you. Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what He commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger.

ironically. “This is a day of rescue for the good people; but do not step forward too fast, Judah, because your sins are so great that you who think you are okay are not. So woe to you who are complacent, who think the Lord will do nothing—you have got another thing coming. God has, in fact, in mind to punish you for what you have done.”

The possibility of repentance however is always held out. In the long run, God knows His people will have to turn to Him again; He is the only Savior. We read these words, “Gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord comes on you, before the day of the Lord’s wrath comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.” See, that is what should be the response of everyone who trusts in God. They should say, “Even if everybody else is going down to defeat by opposing God, even if God’s wrath is coming on my society, on my nation, I am going to do what is right.” And that is what people are invited to do, as individuals or families or small groups, even though the predominant future is, in fact, a future of wrath.

B. Oracles against Foreign Nations (Zep 2:4-15)

There are a number of oracles against those nations that oppressed Israel—the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Assyrians and so on; but then there’s also a prediction of disaster on Judah itself and particularly its capital city, Jerusalem.

C. Moral State of Israel (Zep 3:1-20)

Chapter 3: “Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!” That sounds like the language that Nahum used against Nineveh, but now here is Zephaniah using it against Jerusalem. “She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.” We see various leaders of the society. We see people in all kinds of positions of influence, and they are

Zephaniah 3:6

“I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left—no one at all.”

The Moral State of Israel

Zephaniah 3:1-20

Zephaniah 3:10-12

From beyond the rivers of Cush My worshipers, My scattered people, will bring Me offerings. On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to Me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on My holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord.

Habakkuk:

Embracer

all in complicity to violate the law of God, to live selfishly, not to care about His purposes, to ignore what His prophets that are true prophets are saying, and so on.

The determination is made that Judah must be destroyed, and its great capital city also must be destroyed and taken into exile. But the time will come when people will call on the Lord. He predicts this also in chapter 3: “From beyond the rivers of Cush (speaking of distant lands) my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings. On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and the humble, who trust in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel (that is, who are new people, His new covenant and new creation)—they will speak no lies, they will do no wrong, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will sit down and eat and no one will make them afraid. I will gather you when I bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,’ says the Lord.” Doom in the short run, but joy and redemption, rescue, and restoration in the long run.

IV. Book of Habakkuk

The prophet Habakkuk is famous for one particular thing. Most people know only a little bit of Habakkuk, and the part that they know is the part that meant so much to Martin Luther, when he placed great hope and confidence in the words that Paul had quoted from Habakkuk—Habakkuk 2:4: “The just shall live by faith.” That particular sentence out of this book was something that focused Luther’s understanding of what the importance of faith really was in the life of the believer, as opposed to the works-righteousness that he had grown up learning about and trying to perfect. There is much more to the book than just that statement. In fact, that statement has to be put into context. Its truth becomes all the richer when one sees the context of what is going on and why Habakkuk 2:4 is said as it is said and where it is said.

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but You do not listen? Or cry out to You, "Violence!" but You do not save?

Babylon, God's Agent

PERSIA

Babylon

A. Habakkuk's First Complaint and God's Reply (Hab 1:1-11)

The book of Habakkuk begins with a complaint. This is very much the situation of the prophet being like the psalmist and saying the complaint in a lament form, saying what the misery is that is bothering him. In this case, he is bothered by the fact there is so much violence, destruction, crime, general evil in the society, both nationally and internationally. The world is going downhill fast; this is a lousy world to live in, and people are not living like human beings ought to live. He says to God, "Why?"

God answers in the latter part of Habakkuk's first chapter by saying, "I am going to do something on a grand scale. I am going to punish our current society here in this part of the world by bringing a great nation, the Babylonians, as my agents of punishment. They are going to basically capture everybody; they are going to put everybody under their control. Every nation will be conquered and punished by me as I use the Babylonians to do that." Well, that has some hard sides to it in and of itself. Habakkuk recognizes that if God is going to use the Babylonians as punishment for all these societies that have become so corrupt and wicked, and all these nations of the earth as He knows them, that means that the Babylonians are going to get away with a lot.

B. Habakkuk's Second Complaint and God's Reply (Hab 1:12-2:20)

His second complaint, that starts further on in 1:12, is asking, "God, how can you let the Babylonians get away with all this? Well, God's reply is, "I will not. Eventually, the Babylonians also will be crushed by yet another power." We know who that power was—that was the Persians. They took over the Babylonian Empire and gave them their comeuppance. So it is interesting: God uses the Babylonians for His purposes of punishing people, and then punishes them in turn by yet another people who will usher in for the Israelites a time of greater hope and a time of prosperity and benefit. This time is known as the beginnings of the restoration of Judah.

In that context, recognizing that the Babylonians will in

“The just person will live by faith.”

Habakkuk 3:17-18

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

fact conquer all, we have this statement: “In the midst of stuff you cannot control, in the midst of great international events, in the midst of massive cataclysmic changes, in the midst of things that I, the Lord, am superintending that you, one citizen in little Judah, cannot do much about. Here is what you can do: The just person will live by faith.” In other words, no matter what happens in the world on a grand scale, we know our assignment—our assignment is to be faithful to God. We live by our faith, we trust Him, we place our lives in His hand, we obey Him, and we do His will—that is what we are called to do.

C. Habakkuk’s Prayer (Hab 3:1-19)

The book ends with the final chapter, chapter 3, portraying a prayer in which the prophet visualizes God’s second exodus. It is a march up from Egypt again, through the southern mountains of the Edomites and the Moabites and so on, and God is victorious; He is unstoppable. This is an important consolation for a people living at a time when the Babylonians looked unstoppable—that was who they were having to deal with directly. Habakkuk is reminded by God in this inspired prayer that it is really God who is ultimately unstoppable. In a hard time, in a time in the anticipation of great distress and trial and exile and punishment, Habakkuk can say these words: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”