

I. Intro

A. A few months ago, a book came out called *My Life with a Seal*.

1. It was written by Jesse Itzler, a young successful business guy who prided himself in being high performing in life. But who had recently met someone he felt was operating at an entirely different level. Itzler was one of a team of eight runners competing in a 100-mile race – with all kinds of props and a big support team and the like. And they competed next to a retired Navy Seal who did it on his own, finishing with numerous broken bones in his foot.

2. Itzler was fascinated with this guy's drive. Grit. Stamina. And so, he asked him to move into his house for a month and train him. And the results became a blog that became a book. I've read parts of it. And it's sort of what you expect:

a) On the first day they are together, the workout starts at 4 AM, and the first thing the Navy Seal (who goes by the name Seal) tells Itzler to do, is 100 pull ups. And Itzler says, I can't do 100 pull ups. Seal doesn't care. It's not optional.

b) Then they are going out for a run. And it's 15 degrees out. And the Seal has on shorts and a tank top. The guy said he didn't "do cold." You get the idea.

3. I really like stories like this. The call to find another gear, another level. To excel. And we get some of that today in Joel.

B. We've been studying the Minor Prophets. Twelve Old Testament books, written about 3,000 years ago by those tapped by God to speak for him.

1. Each week we have noted that the minor prophets are not called minor because they are less important than the major prophets, but because they are shorter. I've heard from some of you who wish my sermons were a bit more "minor" than they are. Sorry about that. Well, not really.

II. Joel – which is second in the list - is unique for a few reasons.

A. He looks ahead. For the most part, the prophets engaged in forth-telling more than foretelling. They delivered corrective advice, telling us to love God, serve others, stop being so selfish and hard-hearted. On occasion, the prophets announced what was going to happen in the future. Not that often, and mostly only to prove that they were speaking for God. But occasionally they look ahead. And Joel is one of those who did.

B. Second, Joel is unique because we have no idea when it was written. Most likely it was late – after the Jews return from Exile.² (Please understand, the Old Testament is not laid out chronologically).

C. A third reason it's unique is because he never accuses Israel of any specific sin. He says they are in trouble because of God's judgment, but seems to assume they know why, perhaps because they've been reading the other prophets (many of whom he quotes).

III. Joel is one of the harder books to understand.

A. He uses a lot of poetry; he jumps back and forth between past, present and future. There is some heavy lifting here. But once you once you crack the code, the message is right up the middle and encouraging. He says: bad things are in the pipeline; and it will be hard. But if you turn around – stop going the wrong direction and repent – this will end well for you. God loves you. God is for you. You can trust Him.

IV. In chapter 1, Joel talks about the Day of the Lord, which is a big theme in the prophets and code for a time when God steps in and judges evil.

- A. He uses a Day of the Lord from the past – the eighth plague in Exodus, when locust decimated Egypt - to explain that this is what was going on with Israel at that moment. The Jews have just faced their own locust invasion. And the Book of Joel opens with a description of it. Let me read Joel 1:4:
1. “What the cutting locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust has left, the hopping locust has eaten; and what the hopping locust has left, the destroying locust has eaten.”
- B. In other words – the locust have eaten everything. It’s bad. And as we read on we find him:
1. Telling those who had had too much to drink to wake up so they can cry because there are no more grapes to make wine.
 2. In verse 10 he then tells the farmers that everything’s gone – no grain for eating, planting, for sacrifices or for the livestock. Not that it matters because, the locust drank all the water in the creek. In other words, it’s really bad.
- C. I know nothing about locust, but I did some research. Between Google and old *National Geographic* magazines you can learn a lot.
1. They are about 3 inches long and look like grasshoppers (Photo 1); they can eat their body weight every day; under the right conditions they multiply quickly. There are reports of a locust plague in this country in 1915.³ A farmer reported that they just appeared in the sky in a cloud so thick it blocked out the sun. (Photo 2 & 3).
 2. Biologists on the scene reported that after a few days of eating everything they laid eggs. The estimate was that there were 70,000 eggs per square yard. These eggs hatched in a few weeks. What emerged looked like ants and started to eat everything on the ground. After a few days, they started jumping and got into the trees and ate everything – including the bark. And then, after they have eaten everything outside, they got desperate, came inside homes and ate everything – from whatever food you had, to your curtains and clothes. They left nothing.
- D. So, you may think you are having a bad day: you wake up late; your cell phone isn’t charged; the drive thru line at Starbucks is long. The people Joel can one-up that.
- E. Of course, the important thing for us to realize about locust is not what they look like or how much they can eat. In the Book of Joel, locust are not just grasshoppers. They are: 1) a metaphor for sin – which also eventually destroys everything in its path; and 2) they are judgment from God. Joel’s message is that they have been sent to punish the Jews.⁴
- F. So at the end of chapter one, Joel calls on Israel to repent. To take full responsibility for their sin. To agree with God’s view of the situation, turn around and start heading in the right direction. Biblical repentance has less to do with sorrow and more to do with a radical change of mind. It means we stop doing the wrong things, turn around and start marching towards God.
- G. Chapter one ends with Joel talking about repentance and then repenting.
- V. In chapter two we have more of the same. We are dealing with poetry that discusses the Day of the Lord. But now, instead of looking back at what happened in Egypt, Joel describes events in the future.
- A. He describes an imminent disaster – which initially seems like it will be another wave of locust. It’s an army without number that darkens the sky and destroys everything in its path.⁵
- B. It sounds like it could be more locust. But it’s actually an actual invading army. It’s Babylon. It is all very dreadful. The sense is that no one can endure it.

C. He then starts talking about repentance again. This time he talks about what it should look like. In Joel 2:13 he says God wants them to “rend their heart, not their garment.”

1. In biblical times people who were repenting would often put on sack cloth, sit in an ash heap, rub ashes in their hair and rip their clothes – as if to say, “I try to look nice, but this image is closer to who I actually am.”⁶

2. Joel’s comment that God wants us to “tear our heart not our clothes” suggests that you can fake repentance – but God is not interested in that. He doesn’t want a show. He wants genuine change. He wants the people to stop with the selfishness and evil.

D. We get some more poetry, and some looks ahead, which can be confusing, but essentially are there to make three points:

1. There are references to the golden calf incident back in Exodus to argue that even when you mess up in a spectacular way, if you turn to God He responds with love and mercy.

2. In a second poem, Joel looks ahead, promising that a day is coming when God will not just fill the temple with his presence, he will fill people’s hearts. (This clearly is looking ahead to Pentecost).

3. In the last poem, we get another future image – this time of the land fully restored. There is a promise of a fully restored world – a new Eden.

VI. So what do we do with Joel?

A. The message was given 3,000 years ago to a specific group of people. What does it mean for us. Well, the first rule of Bible Study is to understand what the author intended the initial hearers to understand. That takes some work with Joel, but we’ve done that. So now we ask: how does that message apply today. What should I hear?

B. It seems to me that there are a few things that jump off the page. One of the main points is that we need to seek God. In fact, though we often think we have lots of problems, Joel suggests that we really only have one: we are not seeking God.

1. He talks about locust’s plagues and invading armies, but when he gives them advice about what to do about that, he doesn’t talk about pesticides and food storage and defensive battle plans, he talks about seeking God. One of the big ideas here is: we really only need one thing: God. With God we are fine, come what may. And without we are not, even if things are going well at the moment.

C. A second point is that many of the problems we face are the natural consequences of our sin. Joel notes that sin gets out of hand and causes problems - leads to pain. When we sin we are likely to suffer, not usually because God sends punishment. As a general rule, sin is self-destructive behavior. It costs way more than it advertises. It comes with a very high idiot tax. If we really understood things, and if we had the ability to do the right thing, we’d never sin, because it’s stupid. It’s never worth the price. The natural consequences of sin are sometimes referred to as the passive wrath of God.

D. A third idea is that sometimes God does actively intervene and punish us – such as he does here by sending a locust plague. But even that is a result of his love. When you read through the Bible – especially books like Proverbs – you realize that most of our troubles are the result of our sin. But occasionally there are times when he intervenes and we suffer something that is not the direct result of our choices. But even then, it is God’s love that is on display. He is acting like a parent who disciplines their 3-year-old who keeps running into the street. God occasionally intervenes to stop a pattern that is not going to end well.⁷

E. It is worth pausing to ask, is God allowing pain in your life right now, to help you see you are headed in the wrong direction? Has he allowed locust to eat the crops in your field to help you see that your life and loves are not rightly ordered?

VII. There are a lot of things to learn from Joel. We could camp in a variety of places. I want to focus on two. The first is: repentance, which comes up several times, most prominently in Joel 2:13: “Tear your hearts, not your garments...”

A. What does it mean to repent? What does it look like when we do it well – because the obvious suggestion from Joel 2:13 is that it’s possible to do it wrong? And it’s hard to imagine we do it right when we live in an age when no one takes responsibility for anything.

B. This has always been a problem, but since 1973, when Ron Ziegler, Richard Nixon’s press secretary, responded to questions about Watergate with the line, “mistakes were made.” Since then, that has become a very common phrase. We take avoiding responsibility for our sin to new levels.⁸ No one is willing to admit that the mistakes that were made were made by them, let alone that they were not mistakes, they were sin.

C. I have been thinking about repentance a fair bit lately. I didn’t set out to, but I heard a sermon on Ps. 51 that got my attention. And then I read a novel in which an Anglican Priest was prevented from repenting by his Spiritual Director until he had time to understand what was really going on in his heart.⁹ The Director argued, “you are full of sorrow and shame and you feel estranged from God and you want to confess – but you have yet to appreciate that you have grieved God.”

D. What is repentance? I noted earlier that the Greek word suggests a change of mind, a willingness to accept that I was headed in the wrong direction and to turn around. Let me add four things to that.

1. For starters, we can say that repentance is a big deal. The very first words we get from Jesus in the New Testament is “repent.”

2. Secondly, repentance is not a onetime event, it’s an ongoing posture. Martin Luther opened his 95 theses by stating that the entire Christian life is one of repentance. He was stressing that our way to God is through humility not religious activity.

3. Number three: What is repentance? Well, it’s not downplaying our culpability, saying “yeah I did it, but she made me.” Or, “It’s my parents fault.” A third thing repentance is not is simple remorse - feeling bad about what we did. That may look like repentance – and tears might go with both. But remorse falls short. It feels bad about failure and being caught, but doesn’t really focus on who we are and our sin.

4. Finally, let me add the fourth: repentance is not an activity designed to appease God. That is religion. I messed up. I now need to appease God by doing certain things – go to church, pray, give money, cry, tear my clothes – do something so that I can get back into God’s favor so he will bless me.

E. What is repentance? Repentance is a joyful act of coming fully back to God and all that goes with it. Repentance includes owning not just the sin, but the sinful condition, being transparent before God about all of that, and leaning more deeply into his love and grace.¹⁰

F. One of the things we can do to move closer to God – and spiritual habits are things we can do. We cannot change our heart. We cannot will ourselves to be better. But we can do that we can do – pray, serve, repent – to be in a position where the Holy Spirit is free to work in our lives.

VIII. And that leads right into the second suggestion that comes out of Joel – and many of the other prophets - fasting.

A. There are two places it is highlighted: 1) In Joel 1:14 Joel tells the people to call a “holy fast: And then in Joel 2:12 – just before the “rend your heart not your clothes line” – he says: “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

- B. If you go online and start reading about fasting – as I did this week – you realize that it's quite the rage in some health circles.
1. There are articles, books, TED talks and web sites about fasting. There is so much out there that I realized that there are probably more people fasting at the gym than at the church.
- C. Now, I suppose that if you fast there is some physical benefit – which is good. But it is not what I am focused on. I am focused on fasting as a spiritual practice. I am noting the many times in both Old and New Testament we are encouraged to humble ourselves, seek God and do this in part by fasting.
1. That means we give up something. The most common way to fast is to not eat food and only drink water. Or perhaps some juices. (We have some notes on this on line). There are other fasts – such as a fast from technology or from TV or whatever.
- D. The goal is not not eating. It is not losing weight or punishing yourself for your sin. The goal is seeking God. And the not eating is simply a way of:
1. Humbling ourselves before God;
 2. Of reminding ourselves that we are creatures who depend on him for ongoing strength
 3. Of symbolically declaring that our greatest need is God.
- E. Fasting is a way of reminding ourselves – and demonstrating before God – that we want and need him. And asking God to do in us the things we cannot do.
- F. Please keep listening, because as with repentance, or any other spiritual practice, such as prayer, worship, giving, Bible study, we need to guard against religion. It is very easy to do the right thing for the wrong reason.
1. The religious person believes that, "If I live a reasonably good life. If I go to church, fast, help little old ladies across the street, then God owes me good things. I have earned it."
 2. The Gospel tells us that we are lifelong sinners, yet deeply loved by God. I am not saved because I'm a good person. I am saved because of what Jesus has done. I am not saved because of my record but because of His.
 3. Fasting does not earn us God's favor. Nor is fasting a way in which we punish ourselves to make up for our sin. Forgiveness is a gift.
- G. We do not fast to gain God's favor, but as a grateful response to the favor He has already shown us in Jesus.
- H. Fasting is one of the tools we have that can help us grow. And so I am going to challenge you to fast at some point this week. I am recommending Thursday lunch.
- I. We are posting some instructions on the web site about fasting for those of you who are new to this. If you are new to fasting, skip lunch. Use that time to pray. And then as the afternoon plays out – and you find yourself hungry. Let every hunger pain be a prompt to pray.
- IX. OK, I have a final challenge. It doesn't grow directly out of Joel, but it is set up there. And then it gets declared by John the Baptist and Jesus and pretty much everyone who follows. It is – be baptized.
- A. If you are a Christ follower and you have not been baptized, you are camped in this no-man's land and you need to move out of it.
 - B. Baptism – the act of going under the water – does not save us. Our sins are not actually washed away by the water itself.

C. But being baptized is something we get called to do. It's a step of publically identifying with Christ. It's a way of identifying with Him in his death and resurrection. It's a way of seeking his blessing. It is one of two sacraments – sacred activities set up by Christ, who was baptized even though he was without sin.

D. And baptism is something some of you have been putting it off. Enough already. If Christ is your savior and Lord and you have not been baptized, you need to get this done.

1. I'd like to move into my Navy Seal imitation and say, look, if you are not getting baptized because: you are embarrassed that you never got around to it; or you don't look good with wet hair or you don't want people thinking you are some religious nut case, enough already. Get it done.

E. We have two major baptisms a year – one in the summer at the beach. And one in the Winter. Last year we held the winter baptism here and we invited other churches to participate. It was a great time. We are holding that same service again – in just over a month, on Feb. 25, at the Lake Forest campus. Sign up today..

F. Men and women, Jesus launched the church by stating, “Go and make disciples of all nations – how? Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded.

G. If you are serious about following Christ. If you are looking to Jesus to be your Savior and you have not been baptized, sign up today

X. Wrap up

¹ The Major Prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Jews place the book of Daniel (and Lamentations) among the Writings not the Prophets.

² We suspect that Joel was written during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah, because he mentions Jerusalem but there doesn't seem to be any kings. We also think it's late because he quotes from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Exodus, Ezekiel, Nahum, Obadiah, Malachi and Zephaniah

³ James Boice, *The Minor Prophets: Joel*.

⁴ Joel 1:5-7; 2:2-5

⁵ Joel 2:1f

⁶ They would also do this during times of mourning. It was both a way of humbling themselves and of showing the darkness of their heart. See 2 Sam. 3:31; Esther 4:1; and Jonah 3:5-7.

⁷ Furthermore, when God does send punishment, He is not lashing out in anger like we do. The Bible does say that God gets angry. But His anger is not like ours. When I get angry I tend to say or do stupid things. God does not. And I tend to get angry because people slight me. But God gets angry because he sees people he loves being hurt. The Old Testament in general, and the prophets in particular, have a reputation of God being angry and jealous. What we can miss if we are not careful, is that His anger is not because He is getting slighted but because those he loves – starting with you – are getting hurt.

⁸ “Watergate Press Secretary Dead at 63.” CBS News Website, Feb. 10, 2003, Also see John Carrol, *The Richard Nixon Playbook*, SFGate.com, May 1, 2002.

⁹ The Book is *Glittering Images* by Susan Howatch. I found the book provocative, but cannot recommend it because: 1) while parts of it are well written, I think parts are not; 2) I pretty strongly with some of the theological assumptions.

¹⁰ An exercise that was suggested to me that I intend to take up – have not yet, but plan to – is to write my own Psalm 51. Write a prayer of repentance to God that incorporates the attitude David brings in his great prayer of confession.

