

Lesson 20

Joel 2:17, Continued

Joel 2:17 – Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

As was said last week, I think the ASV provides a much better translation of this verse:

Spare thy people, O Jehovah, and give not thy heritage to reproach, **that the nations should rule over them:** wherefore should they say among the peoples, Where is their God?

And, as we also said last week, **there is no earthly nation that could ever rule over the kingdom of Christ.** And, in fact, we see that great promise all the way back in Daniel 2, over 500 years before Acts 2.

Daniel 2:44 – And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. **It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end,** and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by

no human hand, and **that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold.** A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.

That stone cut by no human hand is the kingdom of Christ that was established in Acts 2 during the days of those Roman kings – and it is that kingdom of Christ that Daniel says “shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end.”

Now, let me ask a question – **when** did that happen or **when** will that happen? When did or when will the nations of this world crumble to dust before the kingdom of Christ?

Didn't Daniel answer that question earlier in that same chapter? Let's back up a bit in Daniel 2.

Daniel 2:34–35 – As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. **But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.**

Doesn't that final sentence answer our question? Doesn't that final sentence tell us **when** the nations of this world crumbled to dust before the kingdom of Christ? And doesn't that sentence tell us it has already happened?

The stone struck that giant statue while it was still just a stone. It was only later that the stone “became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Daniel 2:35).

The church of Christ defeated and destroyed the kingdoms of this world in its infancy! That is not something the church will do someday when it becomes big enough and powerful enough. The church did that when it was still a stone – but that stone, even then on Day 1, was already big enough and powerful enough to defeat every kingdom of this world.

I think we see that same promise elsewhere in the Bible.

Psalm 2:7-9 – I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. **You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.**”

Haggai 2:21-23 – “Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, **and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders.** And the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his brother. On that day, declares the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the LORD, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the LORD of hosts.”

Let me say it again: **There is no earthly nation that could ever rule over the kingdom of Christ.** And that fact has been true of the church from the very beginning of the church in Acts 2.

Why am I emphasizing this fact?

First, I am emphasizing that great fact about the church because I think we are seeing a preview of it here in verse 17.

But second, I am emphasizing that great fact about the church because we are slowly marching toward the description here in Joel 2 of the events in Acts 2 – and one of those events was the precise event prophesied by Daniel in Daniel 2:44.

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven **will set up a kingdom** that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever...

And perhaps there were more things going on that day than we usually think! Perhaps nations were crumbling on that great day!

Let's keep all of that in mind as we study Joel 2 and Acts 2. And let's never doubt the power of the Lord's church. Let's never be guilty of thinking that we will do some great things if we ever get big enough! We are already big enough. We are already powerful enough. And we always have been!

Romans 8:31 – If God is for us, who can be against us?

But, some might say, the nations of the world sure don't look like they have been defeated! And Rome sure didn't look defeated in the first century! How do we explain that?

Simple. Last week we read the great description of Christ found in Revelation 19. Let's read verse 15 from that description again.

Revelation 19:15 – From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

Let's never doubt the power of God's word. God created the universe with words! The gospel is the power of God (Romans 1:16), and the gospel is something we hear – the gospel is the word of truth.

Ephesians 1:13 – In him you also, when you **heard** the word of truth, the **gospel** of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

Let's never doubt the power of God's word.

Ephesians 6:17 – And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Hebrews 4:12 – For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

So, someone asks, how were all of those nations defeated? They were all defeated the same way they were all created in the first place – by the word of God!

“From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations!”

But they don't look defeated! That may be true for some, but that does not mean that they are not defeated. All that means is that we should add that to our list of things that are seen by fallen man as the opposite of how they really are – and that is a very long list!

1 Corinthians 2:13-14 – And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

If we want to see things as they really are, then we must view them through the word of God. And the Bible tells us that the nations of this world have been defeated by the word of Christ! The Bible tells us that they have all crumbled to dust before the church of Christ! The Bible tells us that there is but one eternal kingdom!

Joel 2:18

Joel 2:18 – Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

The opening phrase in verse 18 can be translated either “became jealous” (as we just read in the ESV translation) or “will become jealous” (which is close to the KJV translation – “Then will the LORD be jealous for his land.”)

In the ESV, the verb would be describing a past event, but in the KJV the verb would be describing a future event that is tied to a present event.

Based on the context, I think the KJV is the better translation here. This verse is following a call to repent, and I think this verse begins a section that shows us what would happen if the people did, in fact, repent.

As one commentary concludes, I think we should take “this response from God as a contingent promise rather than as a report of action already taken.”

I think verse 18 makes better sense as a promise than as a report, and I think the verses that follow verse 18 will confirm that view for us. God is telling the people here what will happen if they repent and return to him.

And what does verse 18 tell us would happen? Two things: God would be jealous for his land, and God would have pity on his people.

We often see God’s jealousy for his people in the Bible, and that jealousy (like the jealousy of a husband for his wife) is based on the covenant relationship between God and his people. God expects his people to be faithful to him just as a husband expects his wife to be faithful to him.

Deuteronomy 4:23–34 – Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has

forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, **a jealous God.**

And, again, as we see between a husband and a wife, the worry is not that God is jealous for his people, but rather the worry should come when God is not jealous. And I think we saw that sad situation with regard to Israel in our study of Hosea.

Hosea 1:9 – And the LORD said, “Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.”

But here in Joel 2 that has not yet happened with Judah. And the promise here is that it will not happen if the people will repent and return to God, their husband.

As for the reference to “the land” in verse 18, I think that word “land” is pointing to the danger of the invading army that God has said is coming and is near. We see that same connection between God’s jealousy and God’s land in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 36:4-6 – **Therefore, O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord GOD:** Thus says the Lord GOD to the mountains and the hills, the ravines and the valleys, the desolate wastes and the deserted cities, which have become a prey and derision to the rest of the nations all around, therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Surely I have spoken in my hot **jealousy** against the rest of the nations and against all Edom, who gave **my land** to themselves as a possession with wholehearted joy and utter contempt, that they might make its pasturelands a prey. Therefore prophesy concerning **the land of Israel**, and say to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, Thus says the Lord

GOD: Behold, I have spoken in my **jealous** wrath, because you have suffered the reproach of the nations.

And we see God's jealousy in Zechariah in the context of the surrounding nations that had abused God's people.

Zechariah 1:14-15 – So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am exceedingly **jealous** for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster.

And, again, as we will soon see, that context of disaster from a surrounding nation is the same as our context here. Joel 3 will later begin with God's judgment against the nations that "have scattered" God's people and that "have divided up" God's land.

And so we see God's jealousy for his people here in verse 18 – but we also see something else. We also see God's pity for his people in verse 18.

And those two things – God's jealousy and God's pity – are the basis for what God is promising to do here.

The first – God's jealousy – points to God's covenant relationship with his people, while the second – God's pity – points to God's great love for his people.

In short, God was not just their husband – God was their **loving** husband. God did not just want them back because they were his – God wanted them back because he loved them.

God did not just want his wife back. God wanted his happy home back! God wanted a complete restoration of the loving relationship that he had earlier enjoyed with his wife. I think we also saw that in our earlier study of Hosea.

And let's keep all of that in mind as we get closer to the end of Joel 2. Why? Because we know from Acts 2 that the end of Joel 2 is telling us about God's household – the church!

1 Timothy 3:15 – ...you may know how one ought to behave in **the household of God**, which is the **church** of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

All throughout the Old Testament we see God's desire to dwell with his people as a loving husband dwells with his wife – and that is precisely what we see in the church.

The church is the household of God. The church is a dwelling place for God. The church is the bride of Christ. There is peace in the church – even between Jew and Gentile!

We are God's happy home! Let's all do our best to keep it that way!

Joel 2:19

Joel 2:19 – The LORD answered and said to his people, "Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and

I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.

Verse 19 is a transition point in the book of Joel, and I think we can see why when we look at the Handout for Lesson 20.

That handout shows all of the references to God in the book of Joel.

- Some of the references to God use the words “Lord,” “God,” or “Almighty.” Those references are underlined in red with a bold font on the handout.
- Other references to God in Joel are with pronouns, and some of those pronouns are first person pronouns spoken by God, such as “I am sending” or “return to me.” Those first person references are highlighted in yellow.
- Other pronoun references to God in Joel use second person pronouns spoken to God, such as “to you, I call” or “spare your people.” Those second person references are highlighted in blue.
- And, finally, other pronoun references to God in Joel use third person pronouns spoken about God either by God himself or by someone else, such as “his people” or “he has poured.” Those third person references are highlighted in green.

Now, let’s focus on the yellow highlights, which are the first person pronouns spoken by God about himself.

The front side of the handout covers most of the text that we have studied so far in our study of the book of

Joel. How many first person pronouns (highlighted in yellow) do we see on the front side of the handout?

- We see some examples in Joel 1:6–7. (Some commentaries believe that is Joel speaking about himself there, but we decided that it was more likely God speaking about himself in those two verses.)
- And then we see two more examples: “my holy mountain” in 2:1 and “return to me” in 2:12.

But that is it for the text prior to Joel 2:19, which is the verse we are looking at now.

So, let’s now ask that same question about the remaining text of Joel – how many first person references to God do we find in the remainder of Joel?

When we flip the handout over to look at the back, the first thing we notice is that there is a lot more yellow on the back than we saw on the front!

In fact, here in verse 19, we see something we have not seen at all before in the book of Joel – we see God referring to himself as “I.” Here in verse 19, God says, “I am sending” and “I will no more make you.”

And if we count all of those first person pronoun references to God, what do we find?

- We find 5 first person references by God prior to verse 19.
- We find 37 first person references by God from verse 19 to the final verse of the book.

As I said, a transition occurs in verse 19. As one commentary says:

“A brief perusal of the last half of the book reveals how completely first-person verbs (with God as subject) dominate the text.”

For the most part, the first half of Joel is Joel talking about God, while the second half of Joel is God talking about himself. Yes, there are exceptions, but that is what we find for the most part.

And, yes, the entirety of the text is inspired, and so, in that sense, the entirety of the book is God talking about himself – but, starting with verse 19, the inspired text does that differently.

And our question is **why**. Why do we see this big shift in verse 19?

Could it be because the importance of the message has changed? Yes, everything in Joel is important, but not everything in Joel is of equal importance.

What do I mean by that? What I mean is that some of the text in Joel is directed to local concerns – local in geography and local in time. The locust invasion, for example, was certainly important to those who experienced it, but less so for those of us who did not.

But when we get to Joel 2 we find a description – not of a local locust invasion – but of the great day when the glorious kingdom of Christ was established. That event was not just a local event in any sense! That great day was planned before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4)!

I think this change to first person pronouns in verse 19 occurs because of a change in content and scope of what is being described. Let me give a modern analogy to what I think is happening here.

When a lawyer is working on a complex litigation matter, that case usually extends over several years. And during that time, the attorney interacts with the judicial system through various intermediaries.

Many of those communications come through court clerks or magistrate judges acting under the presiding Judge's authority, and those court officials convey the judge's thoughts and preliminary rulings.

But then one day you find yourself standing before the presiding Judge in open court, and you hear the Judge say, "I hold" or "I have decided."

While all of the prior communications carried judicial authority, there is an unmistakable difference in weight when the Judge speaks directly to you using those first person pronouns. Every word takes on heightened significance as you experience the court's authority in its most direct form.

I think we are seeing something similar here as the text shifts from Joel talking about God to God talking about himself.

But, for whatever reason it happens, we can certainly say that God begins speaking directly to the people here in verse 19, and that continues for most of the remainder of the book.

Here in verse 19 we are told that God is answering someone. Who is God answering, and what question is God answering? I think verse 17 answers both of those questions.

Joel 2:17 [ASV] – Let the priests, the ministers of Jehovah, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Jehovah, and give not thy heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them: wherefore should they say among the peoples, Where is their God?

Here, in verse 19, God is responding to the priests, and the question God is answering is the priests' combined petition and question that we just read in verse 17.

And what is God's answer? It begins right here in verse 19.

And, again, as we said for verse 18, I think this section is showing up what would happen if the people repented.

How do we know that? Well, if the invading nation here in Joel 2 is Babylon (as is looking increasingly likely), then we know that the people were not spared that punishment, and we know that the people did in fact become a reproach among the nations.

Jeremiah 51:51 – 'We are put to shame, for we have heard reproach; dishonor has covered our face, for foreigners have come into the holy places of the LORD's house.'

And so, if this is about Babylon, then I think we know that this promise that begins in verse 19 is a conditional promise. It is showing us what God would

do if the people repented, as God commanded them to do back in verse 12.

But, in the case of Babylon, we know that the people did not repent. We know that they persisted in their sin and rebellion, which caused God to punish them with a 70 year exile.

Jeremiah 25:8-11 – Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: **Because you have not obeyed my words**, behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, **and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.**

So, with that background, what then is God telling the people here in verse 19 that he would do if they repented?

“Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.”

If we were to summarize that statement with a single word, I think that single word would likely be “restoration.” And, in fact, that word “restoration” is a key theme that we will see all throughout the remainder of the book of Joel.

Here, we are told that God would restore their lost grain, that God would restore their lost wine, that God would restore their lost oil, and that God would restore their lost reputation.

And, God tells them, "you will be satisfied."

I think there are two aspects to that satisfaction. First, there is the obvious one – the people would no longer be hungry and thirsty.

But, second, the people would once again be able to worship God as God wanted them to worship him. They would once again be able to make the required drink and grain offerings to God. Back in Joel 1:13 we saw that those offerings had been withheld after the locust attack, but now they would be restored.

But how do we know the people would be concerned with those offerings? We know that the people would be concerned with the lack of food in their own homes – but what makes us think that they would be concerned with the lack of food in God's house?

I think we know that because of the conditional nature of this promise. These blessings would come only after the people repented, and if the people repented, then we know that they would have the proper concern for the house of God and the worship of God.

And, so, not only would the grain, the wine, the oil, and their reputation be restored – but their proper worship of God would also be restored.

And while this restoration did not happen prior to the Babylonian exile – it did happen.

It happened after the people returned from that exile 70 years later as we saw when we studied the book of Ezra. And we know that their proper worship of God was restored when the temple was rebuilt.

Joel 2:20

Joel 2:20 – “I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his vanguard into the eastern sea, and his rear guard into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things.

“I will remove the northerner far from you.”

Who or what is this “northerner” in verse 20?

Are they northern locusts? That 1915 article from *National Geographic* that we looked at earlier certainly seemed to think so.

These clouds of flying locusts, in Jerusalem at least, invariably came from the northeast going toward the southwest, and it was observed that when strong winds arose, too stiff for them to resist, rather than be carried they seemed to settle till the storm passed over. Students of Joel, who assert that the first two chapters up to the 28th verse picture an actual invasion of locusts and not Judah’s human enemies, such as the Assyrians and Chaldeans, find a difficulty in the verse, “And the northerner will I remove far from you,” since locusts were reported to invade Palestine from the south; the present experience not only removes this difficulty but establishes the accuracy of Joel’s account.

The argument in that article seems to be that, while locusts usually arrived from the south, the fact that they arrived from the north at least once proves that the “northerner” in verse 20 must be talking about locusts.

But does that argument make any sense?

Let’s keep in mind the change in the verb tenses that we saw between chapter 1 and chapter 2. Whatever invasion force we are looking at here in Joel 2 has not arrived yet. And so, if this word “northener” is describing a locust invasion, then it is describing a locust invasion that had not yet come.

And so here is the question: if the people were looking for a second terrible invasion of locusts, in which direction would they be looking?

Would they be looking north, or would they be looking south? And even if the locusts did on some rare occasion arrive from the north, would that mean the people would be looking north when they looked for the next locust invasion?

Let’s consider a modern example. If I told you a huge tropical storm was coming and was near, which way would you look? North or south?

But what if I reminded you that tropical storm Allison, which dumped 40 inches of water on Houston, actually approached from the north after it had stalled and changed direction? Would that fact make you now look north instead of south for this next storm?

I think the answer is no. Just because we can think of one tropical storm that came from the north does not change the fact that we expect those storms to approach from the south.

Likewise with these locusts, the fact that they once may have approached from the north does not mean that we should suddenly start referring to them as northerners anymore than we should suddenly start calling tropical storms a “northern threat” after Allison.

Far from showing that the locusts are northerners, that 1915 article actually shows the opposite. As the article itself states, “locusts were reported to invade Palestine from the south.” That it makes news when they come from the north is just an example of the exception proving the rule – they usually come from the south.

So far in Joel 2, we have looked at various reasons why the coming invading force in this chapter is **not** a locust invasion, but rather is the invasion of “a great and powerful people” as verse 2 tells us.

And perhaps verse 20 is the best evidence of all. It would make no sense to refer to locusts as northerners, but it would make all the sense in the world to refer to an invading **human** army as northerners. As one commentary states:

The word “northerner” is a major conundrum for those who assert that Joel had only locusts in mind here and not a human army. It is indeed difficult to imagine how Joel could have used this term for a locust plague. ... The simple fact is that locust plagues attack the environs of Jerusalem from the south or southeast, not

from the north. The rare exception of a locust plague arriving from the north or northeast does not solve the problem. For locust plagues to acquire the nickname “northerner” in the Jerusalem dialect, they would actually have to come from the north with sufficient frequency for the term to make some kind of sense to speakers.

But what about a human army? Does the Bible ever refer to a human army as a **northern** invasion? Yes, over and over again it does.

Isaiah 14:31 – Wail, O gate; cry out, O city; melt in fear, O Philistia, all of you! For smoke comes out of the **north**, and there is no straggler in his ranks.

Isaiah 41:25 – I stirred up one from the **north**, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.

Zephaniah 2:13 – And he will stretch out his hand against the **north** and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert.

Zechariah 2:6-7 – Up! Up! Flee from the land of the **north**, declares the LORD. For I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heavens, declares the LORD. Up! Escape to Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon.

Jeremiah 1:14 – Then the LORD said to me, “Out of the **north** disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land.

Jeremiah 4:6 – Raise a standard toward Zion, flee for safety, stay not, for I bring disaster from the **north**, and great destruction.

Jeremiah 6:1 – Flee for safety, O people of Benjamin, from the midst of Jerusalem! Blow the trumpet in Tekoa, and raise a signal on Beth-haccherem, for disaster looms out of the **north**, and great destruction.

Jeremiah 10:22 – A voice, a rumor! Behold, it comes! – a great commotion out of the **north** country to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a lair of jackals.

Most of those references to a northern army are describing Babylon, and, if the pre-exile view is correct about when Joel was written, then the invading army here in Joel 2 is also Babylon.

And although Babylon was located geographically east of Jerusalem, it was typically described as coming from the north. Why? Because invading armies from Babylon would approach Jerusalem from the north because anyone coming from Babylon in the east would travel around the Arabian desert rather than directly through it. That is why Jeremiah repeatedly referred to the Babylonian threat as a northern threat.

Is Babylon the threat here in Joel 2? We have not yet made a final decision on the date of the book, but, based on what we have seen so far, I think we are leaning strongly in favor of the pre-exile view, which would mean that, yes, the invading army here is Babylon.

But whether it is Babylon or Assyria, we have a question to consider here in verse 20 – **why wasn't Joel more specific?**