

Warning Signs

Joel 1:13-20

Open Your Heart: Our Father, as we open the pages of Your Holy Word we long for You to speak to us. Renew our spiritual sensitivity that we may recognize our profound need of You!

1. What has been the most traumatic event that has happened to you personally? How did you use that time in your life?

More than 2,500 years ago the people of Judah suffered an invasion of locusts that left them without food, wine, and oil. They and their animals were hungry; they had nothing to bring as offerings (Joel 1:9) and they were without joy in the house of the LORD. It is the stressful situations in life that prove to us that we need God. In our passage this week Joel instructs the people about the way of return. He calls the people of Judah to renew their relationship with God. The priestly mourning in Joel 1:9 was not enough, it must lead to true repentance.

Read Joel 1:13-14 several times utilizing your observation skills.

In these dire conditions Joel issues a special plea to the priests who were the spiritual leaders of the nation.

2. In your own words, describe the specific instructions given to the priests by Joel that demonstrate the urgency of the situation (verse 13).

Note: Sackcloth symbolized poverty, both of life and spirit. It was the clothing of contrition as well as grief. This rough garment stood in stark contrast to the splendid garments worn by the priests during the temple rituals.

A Closer Look

In verse 14 Joel begins his plea for prayer.

3. Reflect on the words "holy" and "sacred" in verse 14a (NIV). Define these words within the context of this verse and Joel chapter 1.

4. What do we learn about fasting and mourning in Old Testament times from Judges 20:26; 2 Samuel 1:12; 12:16-23 and Ezra 8:21-23?

5. From Joel 1:14 describe the rare and extraordinary event that was called for at the prompting of the prophet Joel. See Nehemiah 9:1-3 for a similar example. (The elders were the secular leaders in the Old Testament era.)

6. To your knowledge has such an event occurred in the twenty-first century—an event when all work ceased and all eyes turned heavenward—crying out to God in repentance?

Heart Check: In Joel's day God had been waiting patiently for many years to hear from His people. He had been listening for their prayers of repentance long before this crisis came—but the people were prayer-less. *Has God been waiting to hear from you?*

Consider how sin can eat its way into our souls until we are as devastated as the land of Judah after the invasion of locusts.

7. In what ways has God been convicting you through this unforgettable event? Write your thoughts in a personal prayer to God below.

The immediate occasion for Joel's prophecy was a plague of locusts in which God descended upon the people in a very powerful and memorable way. In verse 15 however, there is a brief change from the present tense to the future tense. The people did not perceive as Joel did that the devouring locusts were only the forerunners of a greater threat lying just over the horizon of their history. *It was that which was still to come that gripped the prophet and caused him to summon the entire nation for a season of heartfelt prayer.*

8. What insights does verse 15 provide about the day of the LORD for Judah? Read this verse from several translations.

After Joel called upon the people to behold the deeper significance of the locust plague (verse 15) he returned to the terrible conditions that were right before their eyes!

Read and reread Joel 1:16-18. Try to picture the actual scene Joel is describing. Imagine what the long term effects might look like.

9. a. What elements of this passage tear at your heart the most? Why?

- b. What is the lesson of these verses?

10. We don't know if the priests heeded Joel's call for national fasting and prayer but Joel breaks forth in a cry to the LORD. **Read aloud** the prayer in verses 19-20. Notice his sincere identification with his own people to whom he had been called to deliver God's message.

Note: the word "fire" is probably a metaphorical reference to a drought which left the land looking like it had been burned. *Thus, in the midst of the seemingly unending prosperity, all the land had suffered an unprecedented locust invasion accompanied by a harsh drought.*

For Thought and Discussion

What do you find most striking about Joel's prayer? Did he plead with the people to repent? Did he call to God for help? Before we conclude that Joel's prayer lacked substance, ponder all that Joel had seen: the horror of the locust plague—the terrible drought—and he perceived in these events the entire spectrum of the coming Day of the LORD!

11. As you consider the human emotions involved in each of these experiences, how do you understand Joel's prayer to God?

Consider how the barrenness of the land of Judah is reflected in the dryness and decay of the hearts of the people of Judah. Have there been times in your life when you have felt barren and worthless? These times often serve as *warning signs* in our life that not all is right with our relationship with God. In those times do you cry out to God—to the living God?

12. The verses below will encourage you to do just that. Spend some time feeding your soul on these great promises from God's Word. (Psalm 63:1-5; Psalm 143:5-6; Isaiah 55:1-2; Matthew 5:6; John 7:37-39 and Revelation 7:16-17; 22:17.)

♥ **Store in your heart Jesus' personal promise to you: Matthew 5:6**

Compare Joel 1:20 with Psalm 42:1. How much have you experienced this thirsting like the deer panting for the water brooks? *Do you long to taste and to see with your inner eyes the wonder that is God?*

13. How can you specifically encourage this mighty longing after God in your life this week?

14. Finish by singing this familiar chorus with your group, drawing from His well that never will run dry!

*Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up Lord,
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul,
Bread of heaven, feed me 'til I want no more,
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!*