

# How We See God Acting Today

**Joel: God Acting in the World, June 27-28, 2020 | Joel 1:1-20 (1-4, 13-15)**

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## WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE GOD ACTING.

### **When Johan Gutenberg made his printing press around the year 1450, it changed the world.**

Gutenberg didn't invent the printing press; he introduced a moveable type press to Europe which made it much faster, easier, and more cost-effective to print books.

Until that time, books had been produced by hand, with artisans (usually monks) copying them word for word. Books were so difficult to produce that very few were being made.

Within just a few years of Gutenberg introducing his press to Europe, book production skyrocketed. More books were written, more books were produced, and more books were being read.

### **Gutenberg's printing press has actually impacted OUR faith.**

Gutenberg himself printed nearly 200 Bibles.

Presses like his eventually churned out many Bibles in many different languages.

Since then books have helped to shape and reshape our faith.

Writing, publishing, and reading books has helped to spread Christian faith to people and places who never had it before.

Given the impact books have had on our faith since Gutenberg, we have to say that God was acting in the world when the moveable type printing press was introduced.

### **There are so many moments when God acted in the world in obvious ways in the past.**

We've all heard how God acted in the pages of the Bible.

We've even heard how God acted in big moments in history.

We know that God worked in the world in the pasts.

### **But when things happen today, is God acting?**

When something happens in our own day, we become functional atheists.

We turn to the news to try to understand what has happened and what's going to happen.

We assign blame for what went wrong and responsibility for making things right.

But we assume that we are fundamentally on our own. It's all up to us.

When we pray, we usually pray as if God was just as surprised as we were by what happened, that God needs to be reminded to do something, and as if God barely has the power to keep our world from falling apart.

We're slow to remember that God is already at work, already present, and always loving.

**It's hard to believe, but the prophet Joel described how God's people responded to a natural disaster back in biblical times in a similar way.**

To be fair, the people living through the disaster were not aware that they were living in "biblical" times. They assumed (like we do) that they were living in "normal" time.

When they faced a dramatic natural disaster, no one considered that God might be acting.

No one thought to turn to God to help them understand what was happening.

And no one thought to ask God for help.

We're going to turn to the book of Joel today. We're going to look at how the prophet Joel helped them to see the world (and God) in a fresh way. That fresh way of looking at God is a powerful reminder to you and me right now.

## I. JOEL DESCRIBED AN "OUTBREAK" OF LOCUSTS.

**We don't know much about the prophet Joel himself.**

The prophet himself tells us next to nothing about himself.

Nor does the rest of the Bible add much detail about this unknown prophet.

And the events Joel describes are difficult to place at one specific point in history, because Joel describes something that has happened many times in history.

**Joel 1:1-4 begins the book with a description of an absolutely devastating natural disaster for Judah.**

The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

*Hear this, you elders;*

*give ear, all inhabitants of the land!*

*Has such a thing happened in your days,*

*or in the days of your fathers?*

*Tell your children of it,*

*and let your children tell their children,*

*and their children to another generation.*

*What the cutting locust left,*

*the swarming locust has eaten.*

*What the swarming locust left,*

*the hopping locust has eaten,*

*and what the hopping locust left,*

*the destroying locust has eaten.*

**Joel was talking about a plague of locusts.**

Locusts are a specific kind of grasshopper.

Under normal conditions, it would be difficult to tell them apart from other grasshoppers.

They would keep to themselves and do very little damage.

But when the conditions are right, locusts begin to change.  
They multiply quickly and travel together.  
The new generation of locusts start eating everything in their path.  
As they grow, they develop stronger legs than normal and start hopping around together.  
As they continue to grow, they develop bigger, more power wings and are able to fly great distances.  
When they start to fly, the form swarms that keep searching for food.  
That's what Joel was describing in verse 4. He was talking about different stages and types of locusts coming and eating absolutely everything in the land over a longer period of time.  
Call it a plague. Call it an "outbreak." It was devastating.

### **The plague of locusts was almost certainty accompanied by a drought.**

In all likelihood, there was a drought before the locusts ever showed up.  
Grasshoppers turn into locusts usually when a big rain produces lush, green vegetation after a period of drought. The abundance of food causes the grasshoppers to turn into an outbreak of locusts. So there was likely a drought before the outbreak began.  
Then Joel describes a drought coming after the locusts. In verse 17, he says:

*The seed shrivels under the clods;  
the storehouses are desolate;  
the granaries are torn down  
because the grain has dried up.*

Once the plague was over, the people of Judah began to replant and try to recover. But it seems that there was another drought that made growing anything nearly impossible.

### **This was a multi-year event with massive consequences.**

Joel 1 is filled with details. Vines are stripped and fail to produce. Grain doesn't grow. Fruit trees don't produce. All the staple crops of the land were affected.  
In verses 18-20, we see that drought led to fire and the animals suffering.

*How the beasts groan!  
The herds of cattle are perplexed  
because there is no pasture for them;  
even the flocks of sheep suffer.  
To you, O Lord, I call.  
For fire has devoured  
the pastures of the wilderness,  
and flame has burned  
all the trees of the field.  
Even the beasts of the field pant for you  
because the water brooks are dried up,  
and fire has devoured*

*the pastures of the wilderness.*

There is no doubt that many people went hungry.

Almost certainly many people died.

## II. GOD CARES ABOUT OUR "OUTBREAKS."

**Scholars have implied that a plague of locusts wasn't a good enough reason to write a prophetic book.**

Their argument goes that most of the prophets addressed massive, world-shaping events.

When God's people disobeyed him, God sent empires to overthrow them.

By contrast, dealing with a natural disaster seems unimportant.

**However, that argument misses something critical about the nature of God.**

God cares about us.

And in Isaiah 41:10 God says,

*fear not, for I am with you;*

*be not dismayed, for I am your God;*

*I will strengthen you, I will help you,*

*I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

He cares about events that reshape the world AND about things that shape our lives!

God is the one who issued regulations in the Old Testament about what to do when mold and mildew creeps into their possessions.

God cares deeply about what happens to us—even about what historians would call meaningless details.

**God cares about the outbreaks of our day.**

I'm using the term "outbreak," because this season started with a virus.

We've all paid attention to the news; we know what's going on.

We've all talked about the ways that our lives have changed and are changing.

We've all debated where these days are going and what we should be doing.

Still, the outbreaks we face today may look very different to each one of us.

**One mom told me what the "outbreak" looks like to her.**

She helped me when I went to visit one of my doctors not too long ago.

She had been furloughed when the outbreak started. So, she was at home and not working.

It was disruptive not to work when you've been working every day.

But it was also worrisome, because she didn't know if or when she'd go back to work.

But while she was at home, she had the opportunity to help her son with his schoolwork. He was home as well, because his school (like all the schools) was closed. So, she made sure that he did his schoolwork each day.

Then her clinic opened up again. She went back to work and started earning money, which was good for the family.

But her son was home trying to go to school.

Her husband wasn't able to help him much, because he was working full-time.

So their son only did the schoolwork he wanted to do.

She was frustrated with him, but she was also frustrated with the process. So she stopped making him do his schoolwork, because he couldn't handle it and neither could she.

That's one small piece of one person's perspective.

### **What does this outbreak look like to you?**

Are you alone at home, isolated from everyone?

Are you confused by the technology and unable to connect with the outside world?

Have you gotten sick? Or are you afraid of getting sick? Or are you separated from someone who's sick?

Has your job changed? Has your income changed?

Have you watched as the business you spent years building has started to slip away?

Have you been told that you don't belong in our society? that you're unworthy? Or that you should "go home?"

Are you a police officer who finds yourself thinking, "Wait, I'm one of the 'good guys!'"

There are many different kinds of outbreaks happening in our lives right now.

## III. JOEL CALLED HIS PEOPLE TO SEE GOD ACTING.

### **Joel had to push his people to see that God was acting in the middle of their outbreak.**

In verse 2 he called upon the elders or leaders of his people to pay attention.

In verse 2 he called out the people of the land, the majority of the population.

In verse 3 he told them that they would tell this story to their children; their children would tell it to their children; and their grandchildren would tell their great-grandchildren!

In verse 11 he called on the farmers to wake up:

*Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil;  
wail, O vinedressers,  
for the wheat and the barley,  
because the harvest of the field has perished.*

Later, he called the priests to pay attention.

Apparently, no one was asking what God was doing in the middle of it all!

### **Then in Joel 1:13-14 the prophet called his awakened people to cry out to God.**

*Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests;  
wail, O ministers of the altar.  
Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,  
O ministers of my God!  
Because grain offering and drink offering  
are withheld from the house of your God.  
Consecrate a fast;  
call a solemn assembly.  
Gather the elders  
and all the inhabitants of the land  
to the house of the LORD your God,  
and cry out to the LORD.*

Joel wanted the people to call a national assembly. He wanted them to gather all the people in Jerusalem at the Temple.

This was something of a tradition for God's people. We find it in Judges 20:26

*Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept.  
They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt  
offerings and peace offerings before the LORD.*

In important moments, God's people would gather in front of Him, lament, fast, mourn, and cry out to Him for comfort and deliverance.

Joel wanted them to do that in their day!

**In verse 15, he said that this outbreak had become a "Day of the Lord."**

*Alas for the day!  
For the day of the Lord is near,  
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.*

When the Old Testament talks about the Day of the Lord, it's looking ahead to the day when Jesus is going to return.

On the one hand, the Day of the Lord is going to mean judgment; God's enemies will be defeated.

In other ways, the Day of the Lord is going to mean deliverance; God is going to make everything right.

Joel viewed the outbreak that his people faced as a Day of the Lord!

He didn't mean that this was the end.

Judgment had come near, and blessing might come near as well.

What he meant is that the Lord was active.

Joel wanted his people to wake up and see God acting in their day.

**It's easy to miss that God is acting and speaking right here and right now to us.**

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans years ago, a friend of mine made an ominous sounding statement.

He said that Katrina had come as a message of judgment on the people of New Orleans. He said that New Orleans had become a morally corrupt place and that God sent a hurricane to wash all the sin away.

I can say with certainty that God was working before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina.

I have no idea what God's message was to the people of New Orleans.

But I do know what God's message was to me. God was working on me!

I was called to go. I went to New Orleans, and I saw the destruction, and I saw the suffering.

I was also called to be compassionate. God broke my heart for the people of that city.

And God called me and the church I was serving at the time to do something. We went and helped the people of New Orleans.

God worked in me and through me after Hurricane Katrina.

I don't know what God's message was to the people of New Orleans. That's for them to discern. But I know what God's message was to me.

#### **Joel had to help his people see God acting and speaking.**

He had to help them realize that God didn't just act in the past.

He had to help them realize that God wasn't going to wait to act until the future arrived.

And he had to help them realize that God doesn't just act in distant lands.

Joel had to help his people realize that God was acting in their midst in their day.

## IV. LET'S LOOK FOR GOD ACTING TODAY.

#### **What are these "outbreak" days showing us about God?**

If we're looking for God to act today, then these days will give us CONFIDENCE in God

If we look with the eyes of Joel, we will see that God isn't surprised by these days.

Instead, God is acting right now. He's with us and for us.

So as we look for God to act today, we're going to find reasons to have confidence in God.

#### **What are these "outbreak" days calling us to do?**

If we're looking for God to act today, then these days call us to COMPASSION for people.

When people are hurting, God expects us to reach out.

And we've seen so many examples of this already.

People in our church have responded by giving generously to people who need help during these outbreak days, and we will continue to do so.

People in our church have helped one another and neighbors during these days.

If we're looking for God to act today, these days are going to call us to have compassion.

#### **What are these "outbreak" days pointing out in us?**

If we're looking for God to act today, then these days will RESHAPE our hearts.

The outbreak in Joel's day demonstrated that His people were relying on themselves and that they had forgotten God.

Outbreaks can reveal our insecurities, character flaws, and sins.

These "outbreak" days are probably going to point out some things in our own lives that we don't want to see.

We can hide them, deny them, or confront them and let God do some big things in us.

If we're looking for God to act today, these days will reshape us.

### **God is at work.**

Joel had to convince the people of his day of this fact.

But as we'll see next week, when Joel got their attention, the people finally realized that God was at work and that He was calling out to them, and they turned to Him.

God is at work today, just as certainly as He was in Joel's day.

Let's look for God acting today!