

### **Joel (1): The Lord is God – Sovereign above and over all**

Please read Joel 1: 1-12 and pray; “*Sovereign God, fill me with holy awe in your presence, and speak to me through the holiness and power of your mighty Word. Amen.*

And so, we begin a new series of sermons on the **prophecy of Joel**. Joel is a short book of prophecy listed among the 12 *minor prophets* in the Old Testament. The minor prophets still presented major messages, and they are only referred as *minor* because their writings are much briefer – in the case of Joel, who is listed 2<sup>nd</sup> in the minor prophets – just 3 chapters in length, compared to Isaiah, a major prophet, which contains 66 chapters.

David A Hubbard in his biblical commentary on Joel remarks;

*The word of God came to Joel in the heat of an emergency. What prompted Joel to preach and then record his words was an invasion of insects, a devastating plague of locusts. So widespread and so death-dealing was their assault that every aspect of human life was put in jeopardy...*

This is why we are now turning to Joel in 2021, just over a year on from the start of a pandemic that has not only hit our nation, but many other nations across the world. The question Joel raises at the very beginning of his prophecy with the elders of Judah is highly relevant to us;

***Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? (1:2)***

And so, we will spend a number of weeks examining the prophecy of Joel, and bring alongside these studies our consideration of all that we have faced with Covid-19 over the last 13-14 months. Today is merely an **introductory sermon** in which I will aim to set out for you *one of the great themes of Joel* and indeed of all the prophetic writings, major or minor, namely the great biblical doctrine of the **God who reigns over all**.

For now, let me continue with an introduction to the prophet Joel. What is known as the *superscription* at the beginning of this prophecy is remarkably short. This great prophecy is introduced with a few simple words and here they are;

***The word of the Lord that came to Joel, son of Pethuel.***

The information given about the prophet Joel is very sparse as you can see. We have no other information about him or his father who is named as Pethuel. What we do know from the prophecy is that Joel must have been resident in or near Jerusalem because he knows the local scene and the agricultural economy in Judah so well. There are a number of important references to Zion and the workings of the Temple. (1:13, 2:15, 23, 32, 3:1) Joel was almost certainly a local – probably not a priest but someone very familiar with the workings of the Temple.

We also do not have any clear indication as to when Joel shared his prophetic message. Normally in the superscription at the beginning of a book, you would have information about the reigning King/Kings during the period in history when the prophet delivered *his word from the Lord*. There are no historical details in Joel, no named Kings, no clear historical references, therefore we cannot date the prophecy within any degree of certainty. Fortunately, that does not matter, because the *meaning of the message* is not affected or compromised by our lack of historical detail. The message stands without those historical details which can be so vital to other biblical books. (Take Hosea for example – Read Hosea 1:1)

**Joel's prophecy is timeless**, and so like many of the Psalms, having all the surrounding historical background is not so crucial. This is why some scholars think Joel may have been, and may still be used

liturgically – in the worship of the Church – because of its timelessness. One of the greatest bible commentators of all time John Calvin writes this at the beginning of his commentary on Joel;

*But as there is no certainty, it is better to leave the time in which he taught undecided; and, as we shall see, this is of no great importance.*

John MacArthur the veteran American bible teacher writes in his great Study Bible that “while the date of the book cannot be known with any certainty, the impact on its interpretation is minimal” because the message of Joel is timeless and contains doctrine/teaching which could be repeated in any age.

Nevertheless, there is one detail in the introduction that I think is very interesting and that is ***the name of this prophet – JOEL!*** The meaning of the prophet’s name is;

### **The Lord (Yahweh) is God!**

Or you could say: “God is God”. Joel’s own name declares something theologically vital – namely, that Jehovah is God – the one God – the only God – **over and above all things**. In other words, Joel’s name is declaring with boldness the ***Supremacy and Sovereignty of God*** over all. God is God! The Lord is God. Joel’s name, given to him by his father Pethuel, emphasises the Godhood of God! The Hebrew word “Yahweh” which we translate “Lord” is used of God more than 6800 times in the Old Testament, and implicit within it, is the idea that “this Lord **is God!**”

What Joel, and indeed all the prophets of the OT make clear is that the Lord is God, the only God, and that this one great and awesome God is the God who is over all and above all. In other words, Joel’s name declares the sovereignty of God over absolutely everything. God is above all and reigns over all. There is nothing/no-one greater or higher than the Lord. **The Lord is God!**

Let me put this another way – and this is a most vital question. Who, according to the bible is seated on the throne of the universe? Who reigns, who rules, who controls? The answer is: - **the Lord reigns, the Lord is God. Over all and above all and omnipresent.**

*Read Psalm 93 v 1-2, Psalm 96 v 10, Psalm 97 v 1-6, Psalm 99 v 1-3, Psalm 103 v 19*

The throne of the universe and of our world (which God created) is ***His throne***. In Isaiah 66: 1 we read;

***This is what the Lord says: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.***

As king David prayed, the prayer which is recorded for us in 1 Chronicles 29: 10-13

***Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything is heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as God over all.”***

What has this got to do with *our present crisis* or the crisis which Joel and people of Judah faced? Well, whatever the crisis, whatever the challenges upon the earth which God created, we must understand that the Lord reigns! On our Church Facebook page last year, when Covid-19 was the only thing that occupied our national and international news and our daily thinking – I posed the question – ***So what is God doing in 2020?***

The first biblical answer to that question is this: God is reigning in 2020 and 2021. The Lord reigns. Or to use the meaning of Joel’s name, The Lord is God. This Sovereignty and the Providence of God over all never alters as a fact. He is God over and above all. So, God was not knocked off balance *as we were* when Covid-19 came along. God was not surprised or confused or baffled or taken aback with

the arrival of Covid-19. God is omniscient. He knows all things. Nothing, in that sense surprises or catches Him off guard. God knows the end from the beginning. He reigns over all. He knows all. He reigns over all – including Covid-19. If He doesn't reign totally, then God cannot be God. Let me give you some classic definitions of the sovereignty and providence of God from some of the very great historical statements/confessions of faith, which help explain what the bible teaches.

From the **Belgic Confession**, Article 13, The Doctrine of God's Providence, 1561.

"We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God's orderly arrangement."

From the **Westminster Confession of Faith**, 1646, Chapter 5: Of Providence.

"God the great creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy."

And a quotation from the biblical writer and commentator A.W. Pink;

"Here is the foundation for faith. Here is a resting place for the intellect. Here is an anchor for the soul, both sure and steadfast. *It is not blind fate, unbridled evil, man or Devil*, but **the Lord Almighty** who is ruling the world, ruling it according to His own good pleasure and for His own eternal glory."

My dear friends, our world, even with Covid 19, is not according to the bible, being ordered according to some impersonal and abstract "laws of Nature"; our world today, at this moment, as in every single moment and milli-second, is being held, ordered, governed, and mercifully and graciously maintained by the Lord who is God – by the God of Joel, by my God and your God, by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hallelujah – for the Lord our God, the almighty reigns. (Revelation 19:6, Isaiah 52:7)

And as I take you through Joel, and as we are confronted by many difficult issues and questions which we will have to face, we will see **many** of the ways in which God reigns and rules and is sovereign.

Here is a taster of some the things that Joel writes about concerning God's sovereignty.

- God reigns over the natural order/nature. We will especially see God reigning over the comings and goings of locusts and the provision of rainfall. We take our lead, as always from Jesus who taught; "He (my Father) causes *his* sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45). Even more remarkable from the lips of Jesus is this statement of belief: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground *apart from the will of my Father.*" (Matthew 10:29)
- God reigns over Israel (his very own people) whom He chose and created from all the nations of the earth. (Isaiah 43:15). God called Israel into being and God governs their history and destiny, and his own Son, Jesus Christ came into the world, through this separated nation. (Romans 9:5) The Lord Jesus was a Jew. Israel were God's chosen people. We will also discover through Joel, that God reigns over his Church which is both Jew and Gentile, and his eye is upon his own people in a very special way.
- God reigns over all nations – not just Israel. Joel teaches us this. To put it in the famous words of Isaiah, and to put the nations in their rightful place before God; "*Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.*" (Isaiah 40:15). Or as the psalmist asserts; "*For God is King of all the earth;*

*sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God: he is greatly exalted.” (Psalm 47: 7-9)*

- God rules over history. All history. This is shown in the prophecy of Joel and particularly through one of the very great subjects that Joel takes up and is famous for – that is, the awesome subject of **The Day of the Lord**. This “day of the Lord” is interpreted in several ways in many of the prophets, but one meaning that stands out amongst all the rest, is the ultimate and final day of God’s visitation and intervention in this world at the dramatic and decisive second coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. God obviously rules over history because this “great and dreadful” day is the one which will see the end and the closure of **this age** and of human history as we know it.
- God is Sovereign over both salvation (the saving of human beings) through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, and God is sovereign over judgement, both of individuals and the nations. (Joel 3:12) God is Judge of all the world, all nations, all individuals. (Genesis 18:25, Psalm 94:2). This is where the passage that was quoted by the apostle Peter from Joel on the day of Pentecost comes to the fore with the outpouring of the Spirit “in the last days”. (Joel 2:28, Acts 2:16-17)

So, if God reigns, and He does, for the bible clearly teaches this throughout its pages, then where does Covid-19 come into this reign and rule? How do we explain this pandemic in relation to God’s reign?

I thought I might be able to answer that question this week, but there isn’t adequate time, so we will have to look at this next week. One of the questions we will consider is whether or not Covid-19 could be some kind of judgement from God as some have asserted. I don’t believe that to be the case at all, but we need to consider that question because the locust plague described in Joel chapter 1 was indeed a judgement from God. If Covid-19 is not a direct judgment from God – then how does it relate to God, and to his sovereign reign over all things? That is a question we will consider next week, along with some other issues to do with the that great question raised at the start of Joel’s prophecy. *“Has anything like this happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers?”*

What I do want to end with though today is some challenging thoughts about your personal response to the pandemic, and the Christian response to such a crisis with all the upheaval and unrest it has brought about.

The Christian response to **any such crisis** is to be found partly in that the words of the Psalm we began our worship with – the great and famous Psalm 46.

*“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help IN TROUBLE. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way, and the mountains fall into the heart of sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”*

Throughout this crisis – the God who reigns with power, grace and mercy, has been OUR ever-present help and refuge. This God who is above all, and whose love and power knows no bounds has been with us, surrounding us like a great shield or fortress. God is and always will be OUR stronghold. So later in this Psalm we have the great statement of faith;

*The Lord almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. (v7 &11)*

Whatever has been happening or will happen in the future – God, the Lord of heavens armies is with us, and is our fortress and refuge. Our lives are always in His faithful and loving hands. Our times are in his hands. Nothing can separate from his love – nothing – certainly not a virus. The Lord is *our* God

– our fortress – our very own protection! This image of a safe refuge is also marked out in the prophecy of Joel. *“But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel”*. (*Joel 3:16b*).

Now the Psalmist argues or makes the strong point, that if we KNOW God is our ever-present help and refuge and fortress – then we need NOT FEAR. Of all people, Bible believing Christians, should have been calm and collected and at peace during this crisis because of their personal knowledge of God’s presence, power and reign over their lives. We will not fear! We need not fear. The Lord is God and He is with us. WE have been building our lives on this MIGHTY ROCK, not on sand, and we know that God is faithful in his care for us. So, our first response to a crisis like a pandemic is not to fear, but to trust in our reigning God and to find refuge under the shadow of his wings. Christians can be confident in their God who reigns over, and controls their lives and destinies. From the Psalms again we read;

*“For in the day of trouble, he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.”* (*Psalm 27:5*) *“Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.”* (*Psalm 57:1*) *“My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I shall never be shaken.”* (*Psalm 62:1-2*)

When so much has been *shaken* in recent days, the peace and confidence and faith of the Christian should have remained strong and secure in their fortress-like God who is their heavenly Father. We will not fear! We shall not be moved from our God who is the Eternal and Everlasting Rock!

And so, this is also the God we **lean upon** and trust explicitly in times of trouble and crisis. Who or what have you been leaning upon over the last 12 months? How strong and secure is what you have been leaning upon? We should not rely on our own resources to somehow get us through a serious crisis. We should instead look to the Rock. We look to the God who reigns over all things – even life and death – and we trust Him. We do not rely on our own strength and ingenuity to get us through a horrible time, but we rely upon the faithfulness, love, goodness, grace and strength of Almighty God. As the Psalmist expresses; *“My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.”* (*Psalm 63:8*) *“Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”* (*Psalm 62:8*)

Our ultimate trust has to be in the God who reigns. Our eternal hope and security rests with/in Him, not with politicians and earthly princes who cannot be trusted in the same way God can be completely trusted. (*Psalm 146*). *“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.”*

These are days when we must look primarily to the God who forever reigns, the God who holds our lives in his hands. Lean upon His everlasting arms! Know that this God will be forever with us and we shall be forever with Him, in life, in death and beyond death! God is our Shelter in the storms of life!

And so, you see that the meaning of the prophet Joel’s name is very relevant and comforting;

**The Lord (Yahweh) is God.**

And as the psalmist announces; “blessed are the people **whose God is the Lord.**” (*Psalm 144:15b*)

**Amen!**

Revd Peter J Clarkson (May 2021)