Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Joel

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Introduction

The import of the book of Joel is sufficiently plain, although a few passages may be obscure.

Chapter 1

Famine through an invasion of insects, sent by God to show that the day of Jehovah was at hand

The Spirit of God takes the opportunity afforded by an unparalleled scarcity, caused by the invasion of innumerable armies of insects, to rouse the attention of the people with respect to the day of Jehovah; that great and terrible day which was to come, and in which His power should be manifested in judgment — in which He, who had shewn long patience, would at length interpose to vindicate the glory of His name, and deliver it from the reproach cast thereon by the sin of His people, and to take vengeance on all that magnified itself against Him. That which is here presented to us as the rod of Jehovah is the northern army — the same that we so often find in the prophets — the Assyrian. But, in the end, it is God Himself who, after having chastised His people by means of this enemy, intervenes for his destruction, and for the judgment of all the nations gathered round Jerusalem.

In examining the prophecy, the reader may observe that it distinguishes between the famine that ushered in the day of Jehovah, and that day itself. We have only to compare Joel 1:15, and Joel 2:1, 11. The state of famine and desolation, interpreted by the Spirit of prophecy, calls on the people to present themselves before Jehovah, because the day of Jehovah was at hand.

Chapter 2

Warning of judgment then-present and of the future

Joel 2:1 sounds the alarm, because the day is near. The day is then described as the invasion of a people, the like of whom had never been seen by Israel or the land. It was, in fact, the army of Jehovah. His power was with it as His rod. The voice of Jehovah was heard before it; the day of Jehovah announced itself as there (Joel 2:11). We find an instance here of that which is usual in prophetic teaching — some event which should act on the conscience of the people, taken up by the Spirit of prophecy, no doubt, to awaken their conscience at the very time of the event, but far more with the purpose of using it as a picture of some event in the last days of much greater moment. The judgment of God, already deserved by the people, and suspended by His longsuffering over their heads, awaits the hour in which this longsuffering will have no more effect, will become thenceforward useless, and in which the counsels of His wisdom shall have arrived at their development. The Spirit of God warns the people of this judgment: they should have given heed to it at that very time; but He describes for future days the instruments of God's vengeance, when He shall actually execute the judgment. Thus chapter 1 of Joel takes up the ravages of these insects, which, it seems, had caused a frightful scarcity, to act upon the conscience of the people at the time of the prophecy; but from the beginning of chapter 2 the

prophecy throws itself into the future, and introduces a people, who, in their turn, will ravage the land of Israel in the last days. Yet, at the commencement of the chapter, it is only the alarm that is sounded; but with the announcement that the day is nigh at hand.

The alarm sounded: the enemy in the land

We are reminded here of the ordinance in Numbers 10, in verse 9 of which it is commanded to sound an alarm, or blow loudly with the trumpets, when the enemy should be in the land, and Jehovah would remember the people. In verse 7, if the congregation was to be gathered together, they were to blow the trumpet, but not to sound an alarm. Thus, in Joel 2:1, an alarm is sounded in Zion. A great and strong people, who devour the earth, are in the land. There is but one thing that gives hope (and that one is in itself the most terrible thing of all) — Jehovah conducts this devouring people. It is His army. Faith takes hope from this. He who has recognised the trumpet of God, he who, awakened by the Spirit of prophecy when it sounded an alarm, and described this terrible evil beforehand (and it is the Spirit alone who does so) in its true colours, as Jehovah's doing — he, who has understood that it is God's judgment, that Jehovah is in it, can come before Jehovah according to His own ways, and plead with Jehovah according to His love for His people. This is the true character of faith in all times. It is the especial position of the remnant in the last days.

Testimony precedes judgment: the people gathered to plead with God

The day of Jehovah actually impending, and its true meaning understood, through the intelligence given by the Spirit of prophecy, is a call to repentance at the moment when repentance is necessary, at the moment ordained of God for His immediate intervention on behalf of His people. These are the ways of God. He to whom the moment is known acts outwardly to force His people to take heed; and He acts in testimony to direct their hearts. It was the same thing in the days of Jesus. The testimony of God was there before the terrible judgment which soon fell upon the people. He who had ears to hear profited by it, and enjoyed the effect of God's intervention in a deliverance which He has proffered, yet better, though of another character, than that which Israel shall enjoy in the last days. "The Lord added daily to the assembly such as should be saved."

Verses 12-14 give us the prophet's testimony, calling them to repentance, in view of the chastisements that were hanging over the people. In verse 15 the trumpet is sounded on God's part to gather the people together, according to Numbers 10:7, to plead with Him that He would turn away His wrath, to address themselves to Him, as One whose judgments were necessarily directed by Himself. Oh! how good it is to have to do with God, and to see Him in the judgment, although He is a consuming fire. It was thus David judged when he had numbered the people.

Blessing the result of humiliation

The humiliation, we perceive, was to be universal and complete, for the priests themselves are called to stand outside the sanctuary, to cry with the people unto Jehovah, appealing to His faithfulness, that the heathen might not say, "Where is their God?" as the Jews said to Jesus. Jehovah would hear His people

thus humbled. He would fill their land with plenty, and they should no longer be a reproach among the heathen; the northern army, which had devoured the land like locusts, should be driven out by the way of the east, judged on account of their pride, because they magnified themselves to do great things. But it should be Jehovah who would do great things, delivering them thus from all their fears. A full and abundant blessing should be poured upon the land of Israel; the children of Zion should rejoice in Jehovah their God; the people of Jehovah should never again be ashamed. They should receive the abundance of all the years which had failed. They should know assuredly that Jehovah was among them — He, Jehovah, their God, and not another; and they should never be ashamed. The blessing, and He who bestowed the blessing, should thus secure them from being a reproach among the nations.

A new thing: God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh

But this was not all. This was temporal blessing — the re-establishment of Israel in the blessing of former days, on the ground of grace, which would prevent their losing it. But there was a new thing to be bestowed upon them. God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh. The young men and the old men of the people should have visions and dreams: even on the servants and the handmaidens should this rain from heaven descend. Verse 30* resumes the subject in another aspect, and does not follow in direct succession. Before the great and terrible day of Jehovah there should be signs and wonders in the heavens, and on earth the terror of Jehovah should be felt, and whosoever should call on the name of Jehovah should be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem should be deliverance, as Jehovah had said, and in the remnant whom Jehovah should call. {* Verses 28, 29 are a short independent prophecy, and so are the verses from 30 to the end of the chapter, and still more so. Verses 28, 29 promise the outpouring of the Holy Spirit consequent on the repentance of the nation, which was also accompanied by temporal blessings. The repentance is the point of departure for both. So the partial fulfilment of Acts 2 was on those who repented, though the temporal blessings could not come on the nation. Thus, though there was that which was analogous in the destruction of Jerusalem already accomplished, signs and wonders will come before the great and notable day of Jehovah yet to come. The blood of the new covenant was shed and all things ready; but the nation would not repent and could not get the blessing. The remnant got the spiritual part of it with all flesh; the Jews will, all, when they say, "Blessed be he that cometh in the name of Jehovah." The Holy Spirit, who foresaw all this, has ordered accordingly the structure of the prophecy.}

Principal events of the last days

These, then, are the principal events of the last days, briefly but clearly set forth: a powerful enemy coming from the north, as the instrument of Jehovah's judgment, ravaging the whole land; judgment upon the people as an earthly people, according to their former position of temporal blessing in relationship with God; the people being called to repentance, by the Spirit of prophecy, in order that God might turn away this scourge. On their repentance God would restore temporal blessing, and drive away the northern army and destroy it. The reproach that rested on the people because of their sins should cease for ever. A double order of events is then announced, giving a precise statement with regard to the immediate relationship between God and the people; and that in two respects. First, the

temporal blessing, granted to the people now restored to the favour of God, should be accompanied by a gift yet more excellent, and more expressive of His love. The Holy Spirit should be abundantly poured out; the most simple and the most humble should partake of it. But, in the second place,* before the coming of the great day of Jehovah He would send marvellous signs, and whosoever should call on His name should be saved. It would be the returning in heart to Jehovah which He would own; for in that dreadful day of the wrath of God there should be deliverance in Zion, and in Jerusalem His chosen city. It is He who intervenes in judgment; He would remember mercy: there should be a remnant called by His grace. The accomplishment of all this is evidently in the last days, when the mystery of God shall be finished, and He will manifest His government in righteousness and in goodness on the earth, though the repentant remnant get the spiritual blessing in a christian way, as in like manner that of the new covenant. The whole tenor of the prophecy, I think, makes it plain that Joel does not speak of the beast and Antichrist, but of the powers of the heathen from outside the apostate system. It will be remembered that it is said in Daniel 9 that because of the protection of idols there will be a desolator. Joel thus speaks, not of him who makes a covenant with Israel, but of this desolator. Hence Jehovah roars out of Zion and utters His voice from Jerusalem. The judgment is not from heaven against the beast and his armies, but from Jerusalem against the enemies and desolators of Israel. {* This is an entirely distinct prophecy, which goes by itself, preceding the day of Jehovah, as indeed is clearly stated, which day ushers in the blessing previously spoken of. The order in the last days will be repentance, deliverance by the day of Jehovah, temporal blessing, the Holy Ghost. Before the day of Jehovah signs will take place. This last stands therefore necessarily apart, as the calling on the name of Jehovah of course precedes the deliverance.}

The rejection of Messiah and its results

But there is still something to be pointed out here. The Spirit of God has taken care entirely to finish His subject. In verse 27 the deliverance from the northern army is complete, and temporal blessing is so bestowed that Israel may enjoy it permanently, under grace. Jehovah is there, and His people shall never be ashamed. From verse 28 to 32 is quite apart, and this for every important reasons. On the repentance of the people the Holy Spirit should be bestowed; and, before the execution of the judgment, whosoever called on the name of Jehovah should be saved. Now the rejection of the Messiah necessarily brought in judgment on the Jew (although other counsels of God were to be accomplished with respect to the assembly, outside the Jewish system); their temple has been given up to the power of the enemy, who, as the army of Jehovah was to destroy these murderers, and to burn up their city. The last days therefore are come, the end of the age, with respect to the Jews, although it is all to resume its course for a little season for the definitive judgment, when the counsels of God with regard to the assembly are fulfilled. But if judgment thus hasted, mercy could not delay in coming and anticipating it. The Holy Ghost was given, according to this promise, to the remnant who in those days hearkened to the call of Jehovah, and it was poured out upon all flesh. Deliverance was found in Zion, although the redeemed (those who were to be saved) were translated into the assembly, the time for resuming the government of God not being yet come — the time when He to whom it was given should associate those with Himself who should have learnt to suffer with Him, that they might also be glorified together. Then the final accomplishment of all this mystery should take place — the great and terrible

day of Jehovah: Christ should take His great power, and should reign.

What we have been saying will explain the true importance of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, and the place which that destruction holds in the development of God's dealings; and the connection, with respect to His dealings on earth, between this destruction and that which took place on the day of Pentecost.

God's counsels of grace towards the Gentiles

There is yet one thing to be remarked here, namely, that in view of the counsels of grace towards the Gentiles, the Spirit of God makes use of language that leaves the door open to them. The Spirit is poured out "on all flesh," and "whosoever shall call on the name of Jehovah shall be saved." The apostle Paul frequently employs this last expression in this sense.

The use of the expression "all flesh"

It is interesting to recall here the different occasions on which the expression "all flesh" is used. It implies, as to its full accomplishment, the important fact that will take place at the end of this age, namely, that God will come out of the narrow circle of Jewish ordinances to act with regard to all mankind upon the earth. This is already true morally by means of the gospel. But it will be true as to the government of God at the end. Christ, in coming down to the earth, came into the narrow fold (although His work, as well as His personal presence, had a much wider extent), and He led His sheep out of it; and called other sheep also to form them into one flock, saved, set free, and finding pasture. The gospel afterwards was sent out into the whole world, in connection with Jerusalem or Galilee (I refer to its administration by means of the twelve),* and in connection with heaven by means of Paul. God will, in fact, deal at length with all flesh in His governmental power. {* As to this mission we have only the general statement of Mark, that they went everywhere (Mark 16:20). In verse 15 they are told to go into all the world. In Matthew 28 they are told in Galilee to disciple all nations — all the Gentiles — but this is another mission. As regards the passage in Mark, the reader will remark that the questioned passage, from verse 9, begins with Jerusalem and the ascension, as in Luke; in verse 7, they are told to go into Galilee, as in Matthew. These are distinct missions. In point of fact, wherever they went, the mission to the Gentiles (Gal. 2) was given up to Paul and Barnabas, who had already been on it. So far, the Matthew commission dropped. Mark's is individual, and a question of salvation; Matthew's is not. Luke's is carried out by the apostles, as the speeches shew throughout the Acts, only the Gentile part was given up to Paul.}

Isaiah 40:5. "The glory of Jehovah shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." Here the mind of the Spirit goes forward to the last days when Christ shall be revealed. But Jehovah, who was to bless, is come, and the divine testimony in the wilderness has been borne, even as the blood of the new covenant has been shed, although Israel, as yet, has not acknowledged it. Verse 6, 7. "All flesh" — even the people — "is as grass." Israel has not yet learned this, but the remnant have been blessed.

In Isaiah 66:16, God pleads "by fire and by his sword with all flesh." It is the judgment that extends to all.

Here, in Joel, it is the Spirit poured out upon all flesh, to manifest the presence of God, and the blessing that rests upon all men, and is no longer confined to the Jews.

We may compare the warning in Zechariah 2:13; the millennial song of Christ, Psalm 145:21: "Let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever"; the judgment of the apostates, Isaiah 66:24: "They shall be an abhorring unto all flesh." See also Genesis 6:12

Chapter 3

Circumstances of the last days detailed: the judgment of the nations

In Joel 3 the Spirit develops, with more detail, the circumstances of the last days — those days, in which God would bring back the captives of Judah and Jerusalem. This epoch precedes the time of peace and blessing, in which the curse shall be entirely taken away. It is the judgment of the nations, a judgment necessary for the vindication of the rights of God, with respect to His oppressed people, and for the manifestation, in the sight of the nations, of that which He is in His government of the earth. The ten tribes are not here in question, nor the general restoration of Israel. Before the full blessing of His people, God must resume His immediate government of them, in the same place where He had given it up, again taking possession of the seat of that government — a seat which He had chosen Himself. There will He plead in His power with all the nations that dispute His rights, manifesting Himself in the midst of His people, and acting as dwelling with them, maintaining their rights as belonging to Himself. Israel is His inheritance. The word "Jehoshaphat" means "the judgment, or the sceptre, of Jehovah or Jah." There, in judgment, He pleads with the nations for His people, whom they had scattered; and for His land, which they had parted.

He recounts all the grievances of His people, as done to Himself. By their means the same evils should be recompensed in judgment upon the nations that inflicted them.

The nations are called upon to prepare for war, they are all to assemble, they are to wake up, quitting their peaceful occupations, and come to the valley of Jehoshaphat. There Jehovah will sit to judge all the heathen round about.

And if the Gentiles are to awaken all their mighty men for the day of God, God on His part will cause His mighty ones to come down (v. 11).

The execution of God's judgment on the earth

But, however great the pride of the men of war, it was, after all, the judgment of God — the sickle of God reaping the earth. His press should be full, His vats should overflow; for the iniquity was great. In the Apocalypse the harvest is distinguished from the vintage, the first being the judgment that separates the good from the wicked and vice versa; the second, the execution of vengeance. Here it appears to me

that the two together present the general idea of the execution of the judgment, although the symbol of the winepress is the more forcible. What multitudes in that day should learn the consequences of their contempt of the word of grace, and of the pride that raised them up in rebellion against Jehovah of hosts! All governmental order, its grandeur and its power, should disappear before the judgment of God.

Jehovah Himself resuming the reigns of government on earth from Jerusalem

But Jehovah Himself should resume the reins of government on earth, and cause His voice to be heard from Jerusalem. The heavens and earth should tremble at His intervention. But if this intervention was the judgment of the rebellious, He who intervened, Jehovah, would be the hope of His people — Himself the strength of the children of Israel. And thus should they know Him to be Jehovah their God; dwelling in Zion, His holy mountain. Jerusalem should be holy, strangers should no more pass through it, profaning it as their prey. Nor this alone; but there should be abundant blessing on the land of His people; wine should flow down from their mountains, and milk from their hills. The rivers of Judah should flow with waters, and a fountain should come forth of the house of Jehovah, and water the valley of Shittim (compare Ezek. 47 and Zech. 14:8). Egypt and Edom should be made desolate; but Judah and Jerusalem should dwell in everlasting blessing, for Jehovah should have cleansed them. We perceive that it is effectual and sovereign grace.

Joel's prophecy confined to Judah, Jerusalem and Judea

It will be remarked also, that this prophecy does not go beyond the blessing of Judah and Jerusalem; that the scene of the judgment of the nations refers to the judgment accomplished in the land of Judea, where their armies will be assembled — accomplished to put Jehovah in possession of His throne upon earth; or rather, He takes possession of His throne by the execution of this judgment, and afterwards He bestows blessing on the people whom, in grace, He has cleansed. One devastating army is especially pointed out — that which comes from the north. It appears also that the desolation of the land, before the intervention of Jehovah, will be very great, so that the people will be a reproach among the nations; but woe unto those who should despise the people of God!

If this army announces the day of Jehovah, Jehovah Himself will interpose, that it may be in truth His own; and, in interposing, He delivers the people whom He loves.