

The Years the Locusts Have Eaten

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

August 4, 2024 AM Sermon

Doctor Stan Mast

Joel 2:25

I want to share with you today the Gospel in a Minor Key from the prophet Joel. He is one of those Minor Prophets near the end of the Old Testament. Often we don't pay much attention to them because they are short and strange, and the Gospel they preach is in a minor key. To help you feel that I've asked Dr. Visser to play Amazing Grace in a major key and then in a minor key. The tune is the same, but it's different, a bit odd, almost off key, but still lovely and moving. Hear the Word of the Lord in Joel 2.

"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten." This is surely one of God's most comforting and most uncomfortable promises, as gorgeous as a hillside full of flowering trees and as gnarly as a twisted old oak on a sand dune, a perfect example of the Gospel in a Minor Key, full of good news that is complicated. "The Lord will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten... my army that I have sent among you." What on earth does that mean? And how does it apply to our lives?

It was breaking news on Israel's news media, and it spread like wildfire through the land. An army was coming, invading Israel from the north and the east. "At the sight of them," says verse 6, "nations are in anguish; every face turns pale." It was an army of locusts, those grasshopper like insects with an appetite as ferocious as a turbo charged weed wacker, each locust able to eat his body weight per day. A huge cloud of locusts was sweeping into Israel like an invading army, like dawn spreading across the mountains, says Joel, like a wildfire roaring across the prairie, like cavalry horses thundering at full gallop. Before its onslaught the earth shook the skies seemed to tremble, and the sun and moon were darkened. "At the sight of them... every face turned pale with terror."

Why would bugs cause such terror? Because of the utter devastation they left in their wake. What had been green and fruitful was left bare and dried up. As a result, all the animals died for lack of food. Poverty, starvation, and death were soon to follow. No wonder Joel 1:12 says, "Surely the people's joy is withered away."

That's where this verse touches our lives. It is for those times when your "joy is withered away," when the joy of life has been eaten by a swarm of evil. Having been a pastor for over half a century, I've seen a lot of withered joy. A good friend of mine ran a successful business, but then a trusted employee embezzled half a million dollars, and his three biggest clients cut back their accounts by a third, and then the recession hit. He lost his business, his car, his home. And his children rebelled. When I showed this text to his wife, she wept and said, "That's for us. Our joy has withered."

You don't have to be an adult to lose your joy. I knew a little boy who was stung by a bee and had a terrible allergic reaction that nearly killed him. He became nervous around bees, and then around everything. He fell apart at school anytime there was a threatening situation. None of the other kids would play with him. The locusts ate away his entire first grade year.

Most of us have lost years to the locusts. The CRC certainly has in the last 10 years. Maybe they are devouring your joy right now. Perhaps you could relate to Esther in that liturgical dance, stuck in a hard place, no turning back, bringing you to your knees.

If so, this prophecy of Joel has a wonderful gospel word for us, but first it has a jarring note, a minor key. We hear it at the very end of our text, where God calls this swarm of locusts "the army that I sent among you." Wait! This terrible plague of locusts is the army of the Lord? He sent it among us? I told you this is a difficult promise. It confronts us with the age old mystery of God's relationship with suffering, the mystery that has shaken the faith of many a child of God. How can a good God be involved in something as bad as an army of locusts?

And that's not the end of the difficulty surrounding this lovely text. In verses 11 and 12 of this chapter, Joel says an even harder thing. "The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? Even now return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God."

That must have hit ancient Israel like a slap in the face. Joel says, “These locusts come from a God as a distant early warning that the Day of the Lord is coming. “Wonderful!” cried Israel. “We’ve been waiting for the Day of the Lord, that great day when God will finally visit this earth and destroy all his foes, and ours. We’ve been victimized, persecuted, tortured, marginalized by the forces of evil. So we rejoice that the forces of evil will finally get their comeuppance. Bring on the Day of the Lord.” But Joel says, “Not so fast, people of God. You think you will enjoy that day, because those sinners will get what’s coming to them? It won’t be a great day for you, unless you repent of your own sins right now.”

What a slap in the face! Your life has been devastated by this terrible plague. You have seen the destructive power of evil eat away the joy of your life. And God says, “What you need to do it repent.” And you want to shout, “Me!? I need to repent?! But I’m the one devastated by sin and evil. Why should I repent? I’m the victim here. Let those other people repent, the really bad ones, the criminals, the monsters.”

How can we make sense of this discordant stuff? This Minor Key seems to ruin a wonderful promise. Well, we can say two things. First, we must remember Jesus words about the mote and the beam. Remember how he said that it is always easier to see the little speck of dust in the other person’s eye and totally miss the log in your own? Israel could clearly see how wrong the surrounding hostile nations were. Here God reminds them that they aren’t exactly perfect either. And if they want to experience the joy of this great promise, they must look in the mirror and repent of their own sin.

But, second, we must remember Job, who reminds us that not all suffering is the direct result of our own sin. That was the case with this plague of locusts for Israel, but Jesus warned his disciples that you can’t always connect your suffering with your own sin. The story of Job is a perfect illustration of that. Job suffered terribly, but he hadn’t done anything wrong. He didn’t deserve the misery that had fallen on him. The book of Job makes it very clear that God didn’t send it on him, though God had allowed it for reasons Job simply could not understand. It was a mystery to him, as it is to us.

But even when suffering is not in any way our fault and even when we cannot understand how a good God could possibly be involved in it, Joel’s call to repent is still important. Why? Because suffering can make us bitter, move us to doubt God, even drive us away from him. Then the call to repent is simply a call to return, to come back to God. Even if you can’t understand the mystery of how God is involved with something as evil as locusts God has good news for us.

If we return to him, there is new life beyond our imagining. That is the promise here, the Gospel in a Minor Key, a bit tangled, more than a little troublesome, but good news nevertheless, and great good news. If we come back to God, he will repay us for the years the locusts have eaten. What does that amount to? Listen to verses 19 and 20. “I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations. I will drive the northern army far from you... and its stench will go up...” God promises to destroy the locusts, replace the lost crops, restore the joy of life, and never again reduce his people to such a low state.

How nice for Israel! But what does that mean for us? Is this a promise that God will repay his people for everything we have ever lost? Can that be true for us? Does God promise to make up for our losses, to renew our resources, to restore the joy of life? Is the Good News that good? Absolutely!

In fact, this ancient promise to Israel is not just a little footnote in an obscure minor prophet. It is a vivid historical example of the classic biblical doctrine of divine retribution, of divine payback, turned in a Gospel direction. Usually, we think of divine retribution as God’s promise to punish the wicked, pay them back for their rebellion against him to balance the moral books of life. We know that teaching well, but here in Joel 2 divine retribution means something more.

God’s justice demands the balancing of the books, but God’s mercy freely gives every blessing in Jesus Christ. II Corinthians 4:17 puts the promise of Joel 2 in classic gospel terms. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” That echoes Jesus’ firm words in Matthew 19:29, where Jesus disciples ask him what they would receive in return for all they had lost when they decided to follow him. You will receive “many times for in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.” “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.

Earlier I mentioned Job. He is the perfect example of this teaching about the Gospel side of divine retribution. His life had been utterly devastated by the locusts. He lost his possessions, his standing in the community, his children, his sense of fellowship with God. But at the end of Job, the Lord repaid him for the

years the locusts had eaten; even more new possessions, new children, new acclaim, and a dramatically greater sense of God's majesty and love.

No, he didn't get back the 10 children who had died. In that sense, the past cannot be repaid. There are some losses that cannot be restored in this life. Ten years of cancer may not be repaid with ten years of health. A messy divorce may not be repaid with a wonderful new marriage. The loss of a satisfying job may not be repaid by an even better one. My father's years of Alzheimer's disease were not followed by years of clear thinking. You may not see the complete fulfillment of this great gospel promise in your earthly life.

But that doesn't mean it won't be fulfilled, because, of course, this earthly life is not all there is. As II Corinthians suggested, all the troubles of life are just the beginning, the preparation for eternity. At the end of the Narnia Chronicles, C.S. Lewis says it beautifully. In The Last Battle, the heroic children at the heart of the Narnia stories have all been killed in a car crash. But they have discovered that life has just begun for them. "All their life in this world and all their adventures had been only the cover and the title page. Now at least they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one earth has ever read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before." Or, as Amazing Grace sings it, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing his praise than when we'd first begun." In Eternity, God will repay the years the locusts have eaten.

Don't dismiss this as pie in the sky by and by. It is the Gospel for here and now in a Minor Key, God's final word to his suffering people. It is a central tenet of the faith we profess in the Apostles Creed. "I believe in Jesus Christ who will come again to judge the living and the dead." Though sin may abound in this life, God's grace will abound to all eternity. The locusts cannot win, not here, not there, not ever.

What can we do with this Gospel in a Minor Key? Two things, the two things we should always do when we hear the Gospel—repent and believe. If the cloud of locusts is descending on you or you are sitting in the midst of a bare and fruitless field, refuse to focus on the bad people around you and refuse to turn away from God. Instead, return to God. His call to repent is not a slap in the face. It is the hand of God extended in welcome. Turn around, come back, return home. "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and me, calling, O Sinner, come home."

To do that, of course, you'll have to believe. Trust that God's mercy and grace and love will not allow the losses of life to be the final word. The final word is Jesus. Jesus died for you. Jesus rose for you. Jesus reigns for you. And Jesus will return for you. When he does, one of the 10,000 blessings he will give you is this. "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten."

©Dr. Stan Mast