

Voices: Not-so-Minor Prophets: Joel

April 25, 2022

Common to the minor prophets, Joel is a book with messages of judgment and hope. Yet, Joel is distinct among the minor prophets because why God is judging Israel is never stated. We are unsure why God is calling these people to repent; we just know he is.

Other minor prophets draw on Scripture to interpret their experiences, but Joel is unique in the frequency with which he does it and the variety of books referenced—such as Exodus, Obadiah and Isaiah, to name a few.

We know that to motivate the people toward repentance, Joel tells the people about the Day of the Lord. He tells of a past Day of the Lord, but also of a coming Day of the Lord.

Drawing on Scripture—on Israel's past experiences and God's involvement within them—Joel speaks to what is to come. To speak to present experiences and provide hope for the people, Joel draws on Scripture.

Preaching repentance and hope

In preaching, we do the same thing. We stand on Scripture to interpret our lives and provide us with hope. We look back to what God has done to motivate the people toward repentance, toward returning to the Lord, and we encourage them with hope.

In Joel, God is calling a community to repent from their sins, their unfaithfulness. However, it is not enough just for this community to say the words and rip their garments. A display alone will not do.

The community must “rend their hearts” so they may “return to the Lord.” Yet even though the people should repent, it is not them who will bring about hope; it is the Lord.

In preaching, we encourage the people toward response, but remind them it is not their response that will elicit renewal; it is the Lord.

Preaching is about testifying to a God who has been, is and will be involved with humanity in love and hope. We speak about what God has done and promises to do so listeners might respond in repentance and in returning to the Lord.

In preaching, we testify to a God who hopes for his people to return to him and is forgiving all the while.

Purpose of preaching

Joel is a succinct reminder for us preachers of what our purposes are in the pulpit. First, we are to know the Scriptures; study is essential. Joel knew his (Hebrew) Bible.

Second, we are to see how Scripture can interpret our experiences. Preaching must be contextual.

Third, we are to preach in such a way as to encourage response. This is not to manipulate the people. No! Preaching, though, is fruitless if it is just an interesting word; it must be motivating. Joel is calling people to repent, to return to the Lord. He is motivating them to move.

Finally, preaching should include a word of hope. More specifically, hope is encouraging the people to see what God will do.

The people should repent, but we cannot begin to think it is our repentance, our returning to the Lord, that makes the Lord redeem. Joel

explains why the people should repent by explaining who God is.

“Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (Joel 2:13). Return to the Lord because of who the Lord is.

Cautions to preachers

Preachers should be wary of overemphasizing human sin to encourage repentance. Joel does not avoid the reality of sin. Unlike the other minor prophets, he does not get overly specific with it, but he still speaks about it in length.

Preachers should not avoid the reality that they and their listeners need to return to the Lord frequently. Even so, the very reason the people should repent is not based on what they have done but on who the Lord is.

Joel speaks of judgment and hope knowing they are not to be separated and are both the work of the Lord. We preachers cannot exact judgment on the people, but we should not neglect to speak to its reality in our Scriptures.

We preachers cannot provide hope and must remember to tell our congregants it is not what the preacher does nor what they do that can bring about the hope of redemption; only God can.

Joel is a reminder to preachers about what their call is: Allow Scripture to illuminate sin and provide hope.

Preachers, testify to a God who, story after story, is involved in the lives of human beings in the hope to make all things new.

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