

Lesson 19 "Crime Does Not Pay" Joel 1:1-3:21 and Obadiah 1:1-21

The Minor Prophets are included in this study of the Divided Kingdom because they help us see the "why" of God's righteous judgments. They exposed sin, pleaded for repentance, and promised a future hope because of God's love and mercy and grace.

Just as Hosea showed us the heart of God, in today's lesson Joel shows us the hand of God and, if you will, in Obadiah we see the mighty heel of God. The hand of God controls destiny and moves history. The heel of God crushes His enemies.

Aristotle advanced the theory that history moves in cycles. He said first a tyrant arises who seizes control of a nation or a group of people and rules until his dynasty ends. Then control gradually passes to a ruling family of aristocracy. Their power deteriorates until control passes down to the people, and this is what he called a democracy. But a democracy also deteriorates and gradually yields to the breakdown of all power, and anarchy ensues. Out of anarchy a tyrant again seizes control, and on goes the cycle of history. There's a lot of truth in that theory.

The Bible, however, says that God is behind the whole course of human history. The hinge on which history turns is spiritual – God's

Spirit is at work among men, and you can't understand human events if you don't first recognize that fact.

One of the most meaningful statements ever written in the Scriptures was said at the time of the flood when God told Noah, "My Spirit will not strive with man forever." (Genesis 6:3) Whenever that statement is uttered it means that judgment is at hand. For God's Spirit strives with man by patiently restraining evil so that human life can go on. God tries to win men to Himself by holding back the destructive forces in human events. But at last God's patience reaches an end and there comes a time – repeated throughout human history – when God says, either to an individual or to a nation, "My Spirit shall not always strive with men." And when He removes His Spirit – the controlling force of life – everything collapses. That's when catastrophe occurs and judgment strikes. And that's essentially the message of the book of Joel.

This young man Joel was a prophet to the kingdom of Judah, the Southern Kingdom. He was probably a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We don't know much about Joel, but he was one of the most far-sighted men who have ever written in the pages of God's Word. Joel wrote about judgment now . . . judgment in the near future . . . and judgment to come at the end of the age.

The book opens with what was happening now . . . an invasion of locusts. Few of us here can appreciate this type of destruction. Maybe we've seen it on some TV documentary, but locusts (a kin to grasshoppers) number in the billions – often blackening out the sun and they have strong lion-like teeth. They devour everything in their path and they make a whirring noise as they travel. (Makes me shiver just to think about it.) Coupled with this total destruction was drought. Imagine the complete economic calamity that ensued in the land.

Now the Day of the Lord is not just one event in human history. We will find in this prophecy that the Day of the Lord is any event in which God moves in judgment, at any time. But judgment is also culminating and building up in cycles to the "great and terrible" Day of the Lord that Joel speaks about in chapters 2 and 3.

The great and terrible Day of the Lord is that period described by the Lord Jesus Christ as a time when there will be tribulation as has never been seen since the creation of the world, nor ever will be. And it was given to the prophet Joel to see across the intervening centuries of time, and to describe it, and to illustrate it by events taking place in his own day.

To the common Jew, the phrase "the Day of the Lord" meant that day the Lord would reap havoc on their enemies and give new prosperity to the Jewish nation. Joel was saying this locust invasion

was like experiencing the Day of the Lord judgment coming upon them now. Every crop and vine was devoured and a famine had come, but why? Everyone was certainly aware of what had happened – but what they didn't see was where it came from. It was not just a happening of nature or a set of coincidental circumstances; God's hand was behind this. He was trying to get Judah's attention.

So Joel called for sackcloth, a holy fast and repentance.

1:16 "Has not the food been cut off before our very eyes – joy and gladness from the house of our God?"

WAKE UP!! Repent . . . this is from God! This didn't just happen. This isn't just one of those freak occurrences of nature. This happened because God commanded it, working through nature, and we need to learn a lesson from this. "Heed the lesson," this prophet says, "for if you learn the lesson now from this minor-league example of the Day of the Lord, you'll save yourself the awful heartache that is certain to come at the last great and terrible Day of the Lord."

Joel was simply pointing out that God's hand allowed catastrophes like this to occur to make people aware of the spiritual background to life. Life is not merely a cycle of eating and drinking and getting money to do so. Behind all the commonplace things of life there is the controlling hand of the Spirit of God. Man needs to wake up to the fact that God is talking to him, that God has something to

say to him. God wants to bless us but we won't listen, that's the problem. And God shakes us up with something to make us listen. This is what God did in the first chapter of Joel.

In chapter 2 Joel leaps over a great span of time to the end days, using this invasion of the locusts as a picture of the invasion by a great army into the land of Israel in the last days. You might not see that by just reading this book by itself. It's only by examining the whole stream of prophecy Scriptures together that we can detect that Joel is speaking of the future invasion by an army of men instead of an army of insects. But he goes on to describe this, and again he calls it the Day of the Lord:

Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old, nor ever will be in the ages to come. (Joel 2:1b-2 NIV)

Does that sound familiar? That's the language the Lord Jesus used in Matthew 24. "For then there will be great distress," Jesus said, "unequaled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again." (vs. 21) Then the prophet describes how the land is scorched behind them as this great army advances, and he describes

the army itself: "They have the appearance of horses." (2:4) Fear grips the hearts of the people as they see this invading host drawn up for battle. Nothing can resist them or stop their march. The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. And then we come to a very significant passage:

**The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars no longer shine. (Joel 2:10 NIV)**

Anyone who spends time with the prophetic passages of Scripture soon learns to look for interpretational landmarks. Certain prophetic symbols occur again and again throughout various books of prophecy to give you a landmark so that you know where you are. This darkening of the sun and the moon, and the stars withdrawing their light is one of these landmarks.

You remember that this is also part of Jesus' great discourse on the Mount of Olives. He refers to this time when the sun shall be darkened and the moon will not give light and turn to blood and the stars will fall from heaven. (Matthew. 24:29) It appears also in the books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation. It always marks the same event in human history. It's an interpretational landmark pointing to the last days before what is called the great and terrible Day of the Lord. This section, then, seems to describe the invasion of Israel that is also foretold and described by the prophet Ezekiel in chapters 38

and 39 – a great army invades the land from the north and, sweeping down across the land, destroys everything there and captures the city of Jerusalem.

But God promises that this northern army will be dealt with in that land. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel all say so. Here Joel, also, adds his voice to the chorus of prophets and God reveals the purpose behind this great invasion:

"Even now," declares the Lord, "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, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing..." (Joel 2:12-14a NIV)

(We saw that when Jonah preached to Nineveh, didn't we?) Israel refused to repent and we know what happened to them.

We also know that God does not delight in judgment. What He seeks is a heart that will listen to Him, heed Him, and open the door for the blessings that God wants to pour in. In order to get that person or nation to listen and turn, God will permit all kinds of harsh things to obstruct their wayward path. But all He is after is that repentant heart. "Rend your hearts and not your garments." God is utterly unimpressed

by our hypocrisy. We may fool others; we can even fool ourselves; but we don't fool Him. Unless our heart is really rent before Him, torn garments mean nothing.

Something that happens frequently in prophecy now occurs. After leaping over this great span of years to the end days, the prophet returns to the event of the present hour – the locust plague in the land. He tells the people that, just as God in that great future day will deliver His people and drive away the northern armies, so today, in this present catastrophe, He will restore the land from its barren condition and its desolation. And Joel in beautiful language describes the restoration of the land ending with God's promise in vs. 25, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten..."

Again, as is often the case with these prophets, Joel suddenly leaps ahead again and writes the great passage that the apostle Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost.

"And afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming

of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

(Joel 2:28-32a NIV)

And there Peter ended his quotation.

So what's that all about? Well, here the prophet Joel, who has already seen beyond to the time of the invasion of Israel, now sees something different – a still somewhat undefined time in his vision. He says that there is going to be an indeterminate period when God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh, when no distinctions will be made between classes or ranks of people, when both men and women will proclaim the voice of God as He pours out His Spirit upon all kinds of men everywhere.

To us the mystery has been revealed. It's the Age of the Spirit in which we live, the day that began on Pentecost when God first poured out His Spirit on the church.

Peter also quotes Joel concerning the sign of the end of that age, "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible Day of the Lord shall come." That's the end of this church age. We have the sign of the beginning and the sign of the end. No man knows how long this church age will last.

In chapter 3 the prophet again returns to the end times and beyond when he sees that God will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem:

"I will gather all nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land. (Joel 3:2 NIV)

Jesus said, "When the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him . . . All the nations will be gathered before Him" (Matthew. 25:31-32), and then the Son of man will judge them and say to the righteous, as a man divides the sheep from the goats, "Come and enter into the inheritance of my Father," and to the unrighteous, "Depart from me." This is the valley of judgment.

In preparation for this, God instructs the nations of the world with startling and amazing words:

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears... (Joel 3:9-10a NIV)

Think about that. We remember the quote, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks" found in [Isaiah 2:4](#) and [Micah 4:3](#), but in Joel quite the opposite is said. The fulfillment of Joel's prediction comes first. That's why nations are at war and will remain at war in one way or another until the time God says to do the opposite and, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks."

Just as Jesus said, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars . . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matthew. 24:6-7), and so it shall be until the end. That's what Joel was saying.

Then we come to another verse that is often quoted:

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine
[again, that familiar landmark]. (**Joel 3:14-15**)

This is that great and terrible Day of the Lord that is to come. What does this mean "Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision"?

Some think it's the picture of many thousands waiting in the moment of decision, hanging between the choice of heaven and hell. Perhaps it's justifiable to interpret it that way, but that isn't what this

verse means. It isn't man's decision that is talked about here – it's God's. God will enter the valley of decision and the multitudes of the nations will be gathered before Him. All the world will be there on this Day of the Lord – the final day of judgment of the living nations of earth when Jesus Christ returns – and the effect will be as the prophet describes it:

Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. And Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her. (Joel 3:17)

You see, the future is in God's hands. It isn't in men's hands. If it were, we'd make a mess of it. It isn't in the Devil's hands. If it were, we would be on our way to destruction – everyone, without fail. The future is in the hands of One who is preparing something that eye has never seen and ear has never heard. Neither has it ever entered into the heart of man, the wonderful things that God is preparing for those who love Him.

To those repentant Hebrews who heeded Joel's words, this was a message of good news – a message of hope. God had not abandoned them. Their experience with the locusts seemed like they had experienced the Day of the Lord, and their awareness of the northern kingdom's tragic deportation seemed like God's anger might never quit. But God is always in control.

Before we take a look at Obadiah, what is there in Joel for us that would make a difference this week . . . today? You know that God will use various methods to get our attention when we've allowed a distance to come between us.

- Sometimes it's economic – there's nothing like losing a job to refocus you back to God.
- It may be professional – business decisions that turn out poorly remind you that you're trying to do it on your own without consulting God.
- It may be health – it's often said that God may have to put you on your back to get you to look up.
- It may be natural disasters like those so fresh in our memory this past year. So, why is it that people don't return to God?
 - 1) Some may think, "It's too late. I've gone too far." Joel reminds us God is gracious and compassionate; slow to anger and abounding in love. We should know that and feel confident to encourage others with that truth. It's never too late!
 - 2) Some may think "I tried that before. Nothing changed. My pockets weren't overflowing, my loved one still died. I've lost everything. What good did it do me?" You can already see the flaw in that logic. Repentance is drawing to God because you recognize sin. . .

you need a Savior . . . there are eternal consequences at stake, not just relief from earthly problems.

3) Some may think "God is through with me." My past repentance has been like a yo-yo. I'm weak spiritually and never gain any ground on my besetting sins. That's a lie from Satan – pride saying even God can't do that! Joel 2:25 "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten . . . you will praise the name of the Lord your God, who has worked wonders for you."

Everything that has brought devastation to your life, everything you've ever done that disappointed God is past. That sin was paid for at the cross. Repent, confess and receive forgiveness. Believe that God means what He says. Victorious living is God's desire for us. He can – and will – enable us. Our future is held safely in His hands.

Now a quick look at the shortest book in the Old Testament. Obadiah – just 21 verses of condemnation – shows us the heel of God as His enemies will be crushed out of existence. This is one of the seven books of the Old Testament not quoted in the New – the others being Nahum, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.

The name Obadiah means "the servant of Jehovah;" he fulfills the position of a servant. He comes and does his work and fades into the background; he delivers his message and is gone.

The book of Obadiah tells the story of two nations, the nation of Israel and the nation of Edom, a country to the south of Israel that is now usually referred to as the Negev. Behind the story of these two nations, is the story of twin brothers, Jacob and Esau who struggled even in the womb. Jacob was the father of Israel, and Esau, his twin brother, became the father of the Edomites.

All the way from Genesis through Malachi, there is struggle and unbroken antagonism between the two nations. In the last book of the Old Testament (Malachi) God says, "I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau." (Malachi 1:2) Why? The trouble with Esau, Obadiah says in verse 3: The pride of your heart has deceived you.

In the New Testament we discover that there is a perpetual antagonism within the nature of the Christian. In Galatians 5:17 we are told that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; they are opposed to one another.

The terrible thing about pride is that it traps us, it tricks us and it trips us up. Pride is the root of all human evil, and pride is the basic characteristic of what the Bible calls the flesh that wars against the Spirit. The flesh is a principle that stands opposed to God's purposes in human life and continually defies what God is trying to accomplish. Each of us has this struggle within us if we are Christians, and its basic

characteristic is revealed here as pride. That is the number one identifying mark of the flesh.

Proverbs 6:16 says: "There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him." And what is number one on the list? A proud look. Everything else that follows is a variation of pride. That was the problem of Edom.

We remember that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a self-satisfying pot of stew and that the Edomites refused to let the Israelites pass through their land during the Exodus. In the battle for Palestine they fought against Israel. They lived for food, spoil and vengeance. It's significant that nowhere in the Old Testament is any specific mention made of the gods of the Edomites. However, as we learned last week, after Amaziah's victory over the Edomites, he brought back their idol images and bowed down to them, whatever they were. Unidentified or not, it's for sure Edom's primary religion was based on "Self."

Now Edom lies south of the Dead Sea. Its cities of Petra, Teman and Bozrah were fortified and nestled in rock-walled ravines. Petra was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. 700 feet high in rock cliffs homes were chiseled out. The reference in vs. 3 to "you who live in the clefts of the rock" is a very literal reference to the nation of Edom. If you've had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land, you may

have gone down into the Negev area and visited the city of Petra. This amazing city is approached through a tremendous fissure that runs for a mile or more right through the rock, a narrow file only a few yards wide that brings you at last into an open place where temples have been carved out of the living rock.

That was the capital of Edom. That was the ancient city, whose people felt that because of these natural defenses they were impregnable. They lifted up their hearts in pride and, as the Lord speaking through the prophet says, the pride of their heart is deceived; they thought that nothing could overthrow them, but God said it would be done. And just a few years after the time of Jesus, the Romans came in and destroyed the cities of Edom and took this impregnable fortress. It has been in ruins ever since.

Obadiah pointed out Edom's pride. There are three characteristics of the proud: 1) self-sufficiency 2) self-righteousness and 3) being self-appointed critics and judges. Edom said, "Who can bring me down to the ground?" The proud man says, "I don't need anyone else, I can take care of myself."

Obadiah also pointed out other signs of pride: vs.10 violence – Edom rejoiced when Jerusalem fell. Furthermore, they took an active part by helping to catch fleeing Israelites, delivering the survivors and sharing in the loot after the capture of the city.

Vs.11-13 they stood and watched and gloated over another's misfortune.

Vs.14 exploitation – when calamity fell, Edom took advantage of it and moved in on a captured people; took advantage of the fact that these were fugitives, and used their trouble and their misery to their own advantage.

But verse 15 is the key verse, isn't it? "As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head." Sort of a reverse Golden Rule. In other words, God had determined judgment upon Edom, and there was no escaping it. The heavy boot on God's heel would crush Edom and her pride. God is forever set against the sin of Esau.

One of the grandsons of Esau was a man named Amalek, who withstood the Israelites on their way into Canaan. In Exodus 17:14-16 it's recorded that God said to Moses, "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses said, "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." That is what God is saying about the flesh. He will never make peace with it.

But the day of triumph is for Jacob (verses 17, 18).

God has His heart set to destroy Esau. That's the whole story of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the human heart; He has come to destroy Esau and all these characteristics of the flesh. He will destroy

them in those who are His and bring Jacob into the full inheritance of all his possessions – and the weapon He used was the judgment of the cross.

Isn't it interesting that when you get to the New Testament you find these same two principles personified again in two persons who meet in the pages of the Gospels face to face. In the last week of our Lord's sufferings, He stands before Herod. Herod, we are told, is an I-du-me-an, which is another spelling of Edom – he is an Edomite. Jesus before Herod – the representative of Jacob and the representative of Esau face to face. Herod the Edomite, proud, arrogant and rebellious, watches the cruel mockery of the soldiers as they strip the Lord down and dress Him in his royal robes. The Gospel writer says that Herod plied Him with many questions, but for the son of Esau there is no answer from the Son of Jacob. He has nothing to discuss with him. There can be no compromise. God has nothing to say to the flesh, nothing at all except judgment.

And what is the final issue of that account? The prisoner went out to a cross and a grave, and from it He emerged a king; but King Herod went on to disgrace, exile, and, finally, to a grave in a foreign country. Beyond that he is a prisoner, bound by chains of his own making, eternally.

Every book in the Bible has application for us today, even if it is just one short chapter. From Obadiah I'd like us to think about a couple:

First, if you hold grudges like Esau did or try to take revenge, your own failure is certain and revenge is never satisfied. It's like a snarling dog you have to keep feeding so it doesn't bite you. Romans 12:19 "Vengeance is mine . . . I will repay" says the Lord. God knows if you've been done wrong. We're to forgive as we've been forgiven. It's not easy, but it's right! He's able to right all injustice. Just as the wind whistles through those rocks in Edom today, the Lord will deal on behalf of His people.

Second, if you think you're secure in what you have earned or erected, your position is sure to change. The name of the game is still to "walk humbly before your Lord." All that we have . . . all that we are belongs to Him. So . . .

Joel's message: God's plan has a hope and future for those who repent.

Obadiah's message: God's plan has retribution and destruction for those who do not.

Like the Edomites, there is much in this world that is plunging headlong toward certain doom. Satan would like to sow the seeds of pride even among Christians. Our prayer is simply this, "make us like

Christ . . . an authentic servant, a people-helper, a caring individual, a forgiver, a grace-extender, a humble Child of God willing to wait for God's timing in all things."

Let's pray.