1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Early Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah)

Theme: Where Are You?

Overview: The pre-exilic prophets sounded a strong refrain: "Come back to God." This study from three of the earliest Minor Prophets—Jonah, Joel, and Obadiah—asks where we stand with the Lord. Students will learn not to run from the Lord but to run with him, to return to the Lord because he is gracious and compassionate, to imitate his compassion toward others, and to call on his name, for the day of the Lord is near.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Authors

Each book bears the name of its prophet. Jonah son of Amittai was from Gath-hepher in Galilee and prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). Joel was the son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1). Obadiah, whose name means "servant of Yahweh," is otherwise unknown; 12 people in the Bible share his name.

Audience

Joel called the people of Judah to repent in the wake of a devastating locust plague and drought. Obadiah pronounced judgment on Edom for its mistreatment of God's people, offering comfort to Judah. Jonah's story was written for Israel, but its message centered on God's concern for the pagan city of Nineveh.

Date

These are among the earliest of the writing prophets, though their exact dates are debated. Obadiah may have been written as early as 845 BC (some date it as late as 586 BC). Jonah ministered around 760 BC, and Joel's date is uncertain, with suggestions ranging from the ninth to the fifth century BC.

Setting

Nineveh, the great capital of Assyria near modern Mosul, Iraq, was known for its idolatry and brutality in war. Judah faced the ruin of its crops by locusts and drought, which foreshadowed an invading army. Edom, descended from Esau, lived southeast of the Dead Sea and gloated over Judah's misfortunes.

Theme

God is sovereign over people and nations, and he calls all people to return to him. "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Joel 2:13). His judgment is certain—"the day of the Lord is near for all nations" (Obadiah 15)—but "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32).

Why Study These Prophets?

Like Jonah, we sometimes run from God. These prophets show that no one is out of God's view or out of his reach. This study calls believers to stop running and walk with the Lord, to return to him with all their hearts, to share his compassion even for those they would rather avoid, and to be ready for the day of the Lord.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Jonah 1:1-17

WEEK 2: Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7; 3:5-10; Joel 2:12-17

WEEK 3: Jonah 3:10–4:11; Joel 2:18-27

WEEK 4: Joel 2:28-32; Obadiah 15-17

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Don’t run from the Lord; rather, run with him.**

STUDY: Early Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah)

THEME: Where Are You?

LESSON TEXT: Jonah 1:1-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Proverbs 4:10-15; Hebrews 12:1-3; Luke 15:11-24

WHERE HAVE YOU RUN?

BY MARK SCOTT

The pre-exilic (previous to the Babylonian exile) major and minor prophets have a strong refrain in their prophecies, namely, "Come back to God." These inspired speakers pleaded with God's people to abandon their idols and run back to God. But Jonah ran in the opposite direction.

The book of Jonah is a narrative prophetic book. There is no question it is a story. But what kind of story is it? Historical story? Story "based" in history? Fictional story (similar to a parable)? As challenging as it is to believe the story as written, Jesus spoke about Jonah as if he was a real person and even tied his own resurrection—one of history's most verifiable facts—to it (Matthew 12:39-41).

Jonah's World

Jonah 1:1-3, 9-10

Jonah's world consisted of living in Gath-hepher (Galilee) and being a prophet in King Jeroboam's era (2 Kings 14:25). God interrupted Jonah's prophesying to Israel and commanded him to go to the pagan city of *Nineveh*. This great ancient city was built by Nimrod (Genesis 10:11) and was the seat of world power during Jonah's lifetime. The city was north of Babylon, east of Haran, and near modern Mosul, Iraq. It was three miles across and then later expanded to eight miles across. It had an impressive city wall with 15 gates.

But Nineveh was wicked. It was known for worshipping at least four gods (Nabu, Asshur, Adad, and Ishtar). It was also known for brutalities in war. Evidently there was no end to its *wickedness* (evil, as in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; cf. Nahum 3:1, 4, 16). No wonder Jonah wanted to run 2,500 miles in the opposite direction to *Tarshish*. He went to *Joppa* (modern Jaffa), paid the fare for the westward trip, and *fled from the Lord*.

Evidently, Jonah had previously told the sailors his identity (*a Hebrew* who *worshipped the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land*) and that he was running away from God.

Sailor's Worldview

Jonah 1:4-8, 11-16

The sailors most likely were not Israelites. Perhaps they had sailed from the west to Jaffa and were now returning home. But in this major section of chapter 1 we learn something of their religion and ethics (worldview).

This section is interesting because it looks like the verses, literarily speaking, form a chiasmus (a literary pattern that moves to a climax like the point of an arrow—see verse 8 where they ask the key question evident in the lesson title, "Who are you?"; events transpire up to that question and then fall away following it). Jonah is a prophet of Yahweh.

The sailors soon learn the Lord of heaven and earth is in charge of everything. His *word* came to Jonah (v. 1), he *sent a great wind* (v. 4), and he *provided a huge fish* (v. 17). God's sovereignty is in place throughout this short book.

These sailors were not novices. They had most likely encountered many storms. But this *violent storm* was a whirlwind or tempest. Even the ship was in danger. They were crying out to their gods and jettisoning cargo to lighten the ship.

The sailors were amazed by Jonah's behavior. He slept in the midst of this great storm (cf. Mark 4:35-41). Jesus slept on a storm-rocked boat because he was bone tired. Jonah slept because he was severely depressed. The sailors rebuked Jonah for his sleepy apathy. Their worldview came to clarity in verse 7. They believed their current trouble was caused by someone on the ship; someone had to be responsible. They *cast lots* as a means of discerning the will of the gods—a practice also used in Israel (Leviticus 16:8; Joshua 18:6; 1 Samuel 14:42; Proverbs 16:33).

Desperation caused the sailors to take Jonah at his word (at least he owned his disobedience) and toss him into the sea. The sailors did not want to follow Jonah's advice, but finally they threw Jonah overboard and pleaded for God to forgive them (*not hold them guilty*). When the sea calmed, the sailors experienced a religious paradigm shift. They *feared the Lord* and offered a sacrifice to God. We would love to know more about their future.

God's World

Jonah 1:17

Yes, it is God's world. It was his word that came to Jonah. It was he who sent a great wind. And it was the Lord that *provided* (numbered) a fish to swallow Jonah. In a certain Bible "type," Jonah was in the *belly* (intestines, bowels, or womb) three days and three nights. When there is a sovereign God, one can run but not hide.

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JONAH'S JERKY JOURNEY

BY DAVID FAUST

We all can relate to Jonah because at some point we all have tried to run from God. The Lord said go, and we said no. The Lord said speak, and we stayed silent. He sent us to Nineveh, and we headed for Tarshish.

Jonah thought he was taking the easier route when he "ran away from the Lord" (Jonah 1:3), but after he made that decision, everything literally went downhill. His jerky journey began when he "went down to Joppa" (v. 3). Onboard a boat, he hid downstairs "below deck" (v. 5), where his energy waned and he "fell into a deep sleep" (v. 5). Eventually he sank into the sea, for the sailors "took Jonah and threw him overboard" (v. 15). Whenever we run away from God, things always go downhill.

Running from God wears us out. Who can outrun an all-knowing and ever-present Almighty? David asked the Lord, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" (Psalm 139:7).

What Are You Running From?

Is there a "Nineveh" you are avoiding? Running from God can take different forms.

Do you ever try to escape responsibility? Israel's first king, Saul, stood a head taller than his peers. He was divinely appointed and anointed, but leading an unruly nation looked like an unpleasant assignment, and he felt intimidated. When the time came to introduce the new king to the public, everyone looked for Saul but couldn't find him. He finally turned up "among the supplies" (1 Samuel 10:22)—hiding in a storeroom surrounded by baggage. Come to think of it, we all have baggage that gets in the way and impedes our response to God. Do you ever feel like hiding when God calls you to serve?

Maybe you have run away from prayer. In the book of Acts, prayer fueled the believers' faith, empowered their ministry, clarified their decision-making, cemented their unity, emboldened their preaching, soothed their sorrow, and propelled them to take the gospel to other nations. Why, then, is prayer so infrequent and so feeble in churches today?

Without prayer, any attempt to restore the New Testament church is woefully incomplete. Without prayer, we're like Adam and Eve trying to cover ourselves with flimsy fig-leaf garments of our own making instead of relying on the provision and power of God. It took being thrown into the sea and swallowed by a huge fish for Jonah to rekindle his desire to pray and renew his service to God.

Do you ever run away from conflict? It's understandable why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Israel's enemies. Who wants to face rejection by preaching a confrontational message about repentance and righteousness in a hostile cultural environment? But as Oswald Chambers observed, "All noble things are difficult." Jesus said things like, "First go and be reconciled" and "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:24, 5:44). Conflict repels us, but the love of Christ compels us. If we love God and love others, we can't avoid difficult assignments and hard conversations.

Jonah's jerky journey shows that it's foolish to run from God. Whatever happens—even when we find ourselves tossed into a stormy sea—these words from James ring true: "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8).

Personal Challenge:

In conversation with your small group or a trusted friend, tell about a time when you tried to run from God, responsibility, prayer, or conflict. Commit yourself to walk with God, not run away from him.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What regular task or chore do you do readily? What task or chore do you avoid if you can get away with it?

2. For whom did you pray last week that God will draw them to himself?

Ask two people to read aloud **Jonah 1:1-17** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then, as a group, take turns recalling the major plot points of the passage without looking at your Bibles. How does the story start? What happens next? And then?

3. Throughout this passage, we see Jonah move "lower" and "lower." On what occasions do you see Jonah move "down"?

4. How had Jonah's belief about God's presence changed between verses 1 and 3?

5. Jonah was the trusted prophet and messenger of the Most-High God, and the people he met on the boat were pagan fishermen. How would you compare Jonah's words and actions toward God and those of the fishermen?

6. What can we learn about God from this week's passage?
    - What can we learn about ourselves or others?

7. We might think we're out of God's view and out of his reach. Jonah learned the hard way this wasn't true. What can you learn from his mistakes?

8. Based on what we've discussed, what are you doing well?
    - Based on what we've discussed, what could you do differently in obeying God this week?

9. Who needs to hear this story, and how will you tell them?

10. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7; 3:5-10; and Joel 2:12-17** as we continue our study of the Early Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah). You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Return to the Lord, for he is gracious and compassionate.**

STUDY: Early Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah)

THEME: Where Are You?

LESSON TEXT: Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7; 3:5-10; Joel 2:12-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Ezekiel 18:22-23; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Acts 26:20

RETURN TO ME

BY MARK SCOTT

The little town of Humboldt, Kansas, annually hosts the only uniquely Bible parade in America. It is held on the first weekend of October (this year it's on October 1). For years they have had Jonah's whale (great fish) as a float in the parade. The whale sprays water from its blowhole onto the crowd as it makes its way along the parade route.

People are enthusiastic about this "whale of a tale" in the book of Jonah. But as G. Campbell Morgan reminded us, only 3 verses in the book are about the great fish while 48 verses are about the great God.

One thing is for sure: Jonah was on the run. In chapter 1 he ran "from" God. In chapter 2 he ran "to" God. In chapter 3 he ran "with" God. And in chapter 4 he ran "counter" to God. God always desires for us to run to him in full repentance. Textual selections from Jonah 1–2 and Joel 2 underline our need to return to God.

Jonah's Return

Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7

Jonah found repentance in the belly of the fish. While people and animals have been found to survive in the bellies of great fish, Jonah's survival for three days and nights might have been miraculous. Sometime after the experience (maybe even when he returned to Israel), he penned his prayer from when he was in the bowels of the fish.

There was no sugarcoating his situation. Jonah called out to God in his *distress* (trouble or affliction). Reflecting typical Jewish thought, Jonah acknowledged that the depths of the sea were demonic and away from God. He felt as though he was in the *realm of the dead*. Jonah was confident God heard him, but he was conscious he was in the very heart of the seas with swirling currents and waves and breakers sweeping over him. Jonah knew his situation was dire—i.e., engulfing waters, deep, and seaweed—but he was confident he would yet see the temple again (Jonah 2:4). He even was confident he was experiencing the *roots of the mountains*.

Jonah's return to God was evident in the phrase, "But you, Lord my God." He knew God could (and did) bring him up from the *pit* (ditch or place of corruption). His life had been *ebbing away* (fainting), but he was confident God answered prayer from his holy temple (the symbolic place of God's presence on earth) and that there was a difference between God's people and other people (vv. 8-10).

The King's Return

Jonah 3:5-10

After Jonah was spit out onto dry land (U.S. Senate Chaplain Dr. Barry Black says that even a great fish cannot stand a bellyaching preacher), he went to Nineveh. Can you imagine how emaciated he must have looked? Jesus said that Jonah himself was a sign (Matthew 12:39). He walked through the city and pronounced his prophecy of destruction, which would come in 40 days (Jonah 3:1-3).

It must have been shocking to Jonah when the people of Nineveh (from the king on down) repented. In fact, their repentance showed up in *fasting* and *sackcloth*. The king even put out a *decree* (judgment) including people and animals. It's hard to say how much the pagan king understood what was involved in repenting to Yahweh. But he did so personally and led his people to do the same. God was so impressed that he *relented* (comforted) and did not destroy them—it is a good example of conditional prophecy (i.e., when judgment is declared but people repent, that condition of repentance reverses the judgment of God).

Israel's Return

Joel 2:12-17

Neither Jonah nor Nineveh had long-term repentance. Jonah would fail again within days, and Nineveh's repentance would last only around 100 years (see the book of Nahum). True and long-term repentance must go beyond skin deep. This is what the prophet Joel urged. A storm and a fish got Jonah's attention. The message of judgment got the king of Nineveh's attention. A locust plague (and drought) would get Israel's attention.

Fasting, sackcloth, and weeping are all evidences of repentance. But the real evidence is what takes place in the human heart. So, Joel said, "Rend your heart." Joel promised that God would be *gracious and compassionate*. God would bless the people if they would just turn to him. But it would take everyone (people, elders, children—even infants, bridegrooms and brides, as well as priests). Our returning to God ensures that God's name is not misrepresented among the nations of the earth.

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GREAT COMEBACKS

BY DAVID FAUST

Comebacks capture our imagination. Abraham Lincoln suffered several defeats at the ballot box before he was elected president. In 1915 Winston Churchill said, "I am finished," after leading a disastrous naval campaign, but decades later as England's prime minister he inspired the nation to persevere against the Nazi war machine. H.B. Reese lost his job working as a dairyman for the Hershey Company in Pennsylvania, then formed his own candy company (which failed), but ultimately he created a unique way of combining chocolate and peanut butter for his Reese's Cups—one of the sweetest comeback stories of all time.

Football fans recall the New England Patriots' epic come-from-behind victory over the Atlanta Falcons in the 2017 Super Bowl, roaring back from 25 points behind to win 34-28. On June 29, 1952, baseball's Chicago Cubs trailed the Cincinnati Reds, 8-2, with two outs and no runners on base in the top of the ninth. However, the next nine batters all reached base safely, pushing across seven runs, and the Cubs won the game 9-8.

At age 45, George Foreman returned to boxing after a five-year retirement and regained the world heavyweight title. In 1993, Monica Seles was the top female tennis player in the world when she was stabbed by a disturbed fan who obsessively supported a rival tennis player. She recovered enough to compete in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, then won a bronze medal in 2000 in Sydney. When Michael Jordan was a sophomore in high school, a basketball coach assigned him to the junior varsity team instead of the varsity, bypassing him in favor of a taller player, but eventually Jordan led the Chicago Bulls to three consecutive NBA titles. Surfer Bethany Hamilton lost an arm in a shark attack, but she returned to surfing and won the 2004 ESPY Award for Best Comeback Athlete.

Biblical Comebacks

You can find great comeback stories in the Bible. Joseph was sold into slavery, his father gave him up for dead, and false accusations landed him in prison, but eventually he became one of Pharaoh's top officials. After 40 years of obscurity in the desert, Moses returned to Egypt and led the Hebrews to freedom. Job lost his health, wealth, and children, but in time God restored his prosperity and multiplied his blessings.

Jonah looked like a goner when he sank into the sea, but three days later he was back on land and heading toward Nineveh to preach God's Word. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, but 70 years later the Jews came back from captivity and rebuilt the Holy City.

When Jesus said, "It is finished," his followers thought their dreams were dying with him. "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel," lamented the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:21). What a great comeback it was when Jesus emerged alive from the tomb! The Lord predicted another great comeback when he said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3).

Time to Return

The prophets often proclaimed bad news, but their messages also contained encouragement and hope. Joel urged, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate" (Joel 2:13).

Have you drifted away from the Lord? Have you neglected God, separated yourself from the church, and allowed your faith to wane? It's not too late.

Come back.

Personal Challenge:

Do you know someone who has turned a setback into a comeback? If so, what have you learned from them about faith and perseverance? In what area of your own life do you need to "return to the Lord" (Joel 2:13)?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When you think of a major turnaround, what do you think of? It could be from a favorite movie or book, a favorite sports team, a business, or almost anything else.

2. Last week we discussed that nothing is out of God's view or out of his reach. How did you demonstrate that this week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask the same two people to each read **Jonah 3:5-10**. Repeat the process with **Joel 2:12-17**.

3. How would you characterize Jonah's prayers from inside the fish? Focus on the images, emotions, and decisions that came up.
   - What did you feel as you read the prayers?
   - What did it remind you of?

4. What is the major turning point in Jonah 3:5-10, and why would it be a surprise to its original readers?

5. What parts of the king's proclamation in verses 7-9 could apply to us today? What parts would not?

6. What can we learn about God from this week's passage?
   - What can we learn about ourselves or others?

7. Sometimes change seems impossible. We're on a path we think we'll never leave; we can't pick a new direction. But these passages show that's not the case. What "turning points" in your walk with God is he currently offering you?

8. Based on what we've discussed, what are you doing well?
   - Based on what we've discussed, what could you do differently in obeying God this week?

9. Who needs to hear this story, and how will you tell them?

10. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Jonah 3:10–4:11 and Joel 2:18-27** as we continue our study of the Early Minor Prophets. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Imitate his compassion.**

STUDY: Early Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah)

THEME: Where Are You?

LESSON TEXT: Jonah 3:10–4:11; Joel 2:18-27

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: James 5:10-11; Exodus 33:19; Psalm 103:11-14

EXPERIENCE MY COMPASSION

BY MARK SCOTT

Can God change? Malachi 3:6 says, "I the Lord do not change." God is immutable (does not change), but that does not mean he is a creature of habit and is forced always to do the same thing in the same way. His character does not change. But his methods can vary, and sometimes his prophecies (judgments) are conditional (i.e., given with a view that if the people do repent then God relents from his judgments).

Once again we are combining emphases from Jonah and Joel. The picture of God in both of these minor prophets is one of compassion, which the Lord so wants us to experience. Jonah "finally" got to Nineveh and preached for the people to repent. The real surprising thing is that they did.

The City and the Prophet

Jonah 3:10–4:3

God always welcomes repentance. God saw that the Ninevites *turned from their evil ways*. So God *relented* (comforted) and did not bring on them the *destruction* (a form of the word for evil) he had threatened. The repentance was citywide, and Jonah was—upset. That seems most odd.

The NIV takes some liberty in paraphrasing it, "But to Jonah this seemed very wrong" (he was exceedingly displeased), but it does capture the idea that Jonah is really chapped. The Bible says he became *angry* (hot or burned). He expressed that anger three times with what seemed to be suicide threats (Jonah 4:3, 8-9).

Jonah's anger took the form of a complaint. His anger caused him to justify his trip to Tarshish and to speak against the loving character of God. He had wanted to *forestall* (prevent) going to Nineveh. Something is deeply wrong in the soul of a person who complains about the grace and compassion of God. Five great qualities of God are admitted by Jonah in his complaint against God (grace, compassion, slowness to anger, abounding in love—mercy or loving kindness—and relenting from judgment). Jonah is not in a good place.

The Plant and the Worm

Jonah 4:4-11

God addressed Jonah's anger with an interrogating question and an object lesson. "Is it right for you to be angry?" God asked. The object lesson is more involved. Jonah sat down east of the city under a shelter (probably to watch the coming judgment). When the judgment did not come, he pouted. So, God went to work to save the prophet. God *provided* (numbered or appointed) a plant, God provided a worm, and God provided a wind. There is no question who is in charge. God provided everything.

The plant grew quickly (maybe even miraculously). It provided shade for the angry prophet. His anger turned to happiness about the leafy shade. But by the next day a worm had chewed on the plant and made it wither. The hot Middle Eastern sun combined with the desert wind caused Jonah great distress. Again he gave his death wish.

But the plant and the worm served to drive home a lesson about the love of God—that grace is undeserved. Jonah did not plant it or make it grow. Its short life God alone could control. We have a classic "how much more" argument. If God cares for the plant, how much more does he care for Nineveh with its vast population, its spiritual confusion (*not knowing their right hand from their left*), and also many animals (a rather humorous way to end the book). An angry prophet stands in contrast to the compassionate God.

The Wine and the Oil

Joel 2:18-27

Jonah's object lesson was from the plant and the worm. Joel's object lesson (or maybe metaphor) was from wine and oil. Remember that the locust plague and drought had made war on Israel. But repentance would cause God to look with favor on his people. If they would just rend their hearts (Joel 2:13), God would bless. God was *jealous* (envious) for his people and *took pity* (compassion) on them.

Wine and oil became symbols of new days (fresh starts; new beginnings) for Israel. It is not accidental that both are used in the New Testament for the age of the Messiah (John 2:1-11; Mark 6:13; James 5:14). God will bless Israel and take away the scorn to the nations. The *northern horde* (Israel's enemies) would be judged (drowned in the sea and pushed into the desert).

Creation springing to life (as well as it being tamed) is also a symbol of God's compassion and restoration. Rain and abundance of crops indicate more than that the locust plague and drought are over. They tell the story that the Lord is God and that there is no other.

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THE YEARS THE LOCUSTS HAVE EATEN

BY DAVID FAUST

Farming is a difficult way to earn a living. Would you like your livelihood to depend on the weather? Too much rain (or too little). Higher (or lower) temperatures than normal. Fluctuating fuel prices. Shifting consumer demands. Farmers deal with all of these variables and more. It takes faith in God to plant and harvest as a way of life.

Ancient farmers had no tractors to make their work easier, no trucks to carry their produce to market, no manufactured fertilizers to help their crops grow. Droughts, fires, and floods could wipe out their crops and eliminate their food supplies. Without pesticides to fight back, farmers watched in desperation when locusts swarmed through their fields. These aggressive insects could ruin acres of grain in a few hours while their wings made a terrifying sound.

The prophet Joel foresaw a damaging plague of locusts in Judah. "The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails. Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed" (Joel 1:10-11). Even worse, the army of locusts foreshadowed an upcoming military invasion that would devastate the land. "Surely the people's joy is withered away," the prophet lamented (1:12).

What Is Consuming Your Dreams?

You probably don't wake up in the morning thinking about locusts, but are other worries eating away your confidence? "Locusts" come in different forms. A promising career gives way to unemployment. A happy marriage disintegrates into dullness and tension. Friends prove unfaithful. The church disappoints you. Youth yields to old age. Health surrenders to disease.

What should you do when "locusts" threaten to consume your dreams and devour your joy? Joel suggested three ways to respond.

Join others in prayer. Joel said, "Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord" (1:14). In a national emergency, the correct response was to gather God's people for fasting and prayer. On a lesser scale, the same principle applies to individuals. You don't have to face tough times alone. Ask the church's elders and other friends to join you in fasting and prayer.

Repent and turn to God. "Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" (2:13).

Rely on the Holy Spirit. Foretelling the Day of Pentecost, Joel quoted the Lord: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (2:28). Whatever "locusts" you face, the Spirit's power can make you an overcomer.

Renewed Hope

Joel's dire prophecies included an encouraging promise. God said, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten . . . . never again will my people be shamed" (2:25-26).

The Lord can restore the years the locusts have eaten. Either in this life or the next, the lonely will find fellowship. The brokenhearted will find comfort. The disappointed will experience fulfillment. The aching will find relief. Dark shadows will fade in the bright light of eternity. Temporary misery will be replaced by Heaven's joy.

Meanwhile, don't be surprised when some locusts show up. I recommend keeping a large flyswatter handy.

Personal Challenge:

What "locusts" are eating away at your life and making you worry? On a piece of paper or in your prayer journal, list the things you are worried about. Then write a brief prayer, giving them all to the Lord. Ask the heavenly Father to restore your hope and renew your faith.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What bothers you more—when bad things happen to good people or when good things happen to bad people?

2. What was your "I will . . ." statement last week, and how did you follow through?

Ask two people to read aloud **Jonah 3:10–4:11** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask the same two people to each read **Joel 2:18-27**. Then, as a group, quickly paraphrase God's promises in Joel and the story in Jonah.

3. What adjectives would you use to describe God in these two passages?
    - What adjectives would you use to describe Jonah?

4. Jonah 1:17 says, "the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah." Look again at Jonah 4:1-11. What do you learn about God's provision for Jonah?

5. What similarities do you see between how God treated Nineveh in Jonah 4 and Israel in Joel 2?

6. In Jonah 4:2-3, Jonah was upset that God gave Nineveh the same chances for repentance that Israel received. In what ways can you empathize with Jonah here? (Or is his behavior too far out of line?)

7. What do you learn about God and yourself from Jonah 4:10-11?

8. In Joel 2:25, God promised to "repay [or redeem] the years the locusts have eaten." The locusts represented not just insects eating crops but also a scavenging foreign army. It must have felt like a trauma that could never be healed. Yet God's promise came true. When has God redeemed something in your life that you thought was forever broken or lost?
    - What do you hope he might yet redeem?

9. What trait or attribute of God did you need to be reminded of this week?

10. Based on what we've discussed, what are you doing well?
    - Based on what we've discussed, what could you do differently in obeying God this week?

11. Who needs to hear this story, and how will you tell them?

12. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Joel 2:28-32 and Obadiah 1:15-17** as we continue our study of the Early Minor Prophets. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Call on him, for the day of the Lord is near.**

STUDY: Early Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah)

THEME: Where Are You?

LESSON TEXT: Joel 2:28-32; Obadiah 15-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Acts 2:17-21; Isaiah 55:6; 2 Peter 3:9-13; Romans 10:8-13

BE READY FOR THE DAY OF THE LORD

BY MARK SCOTT

The flip side of salvation is condemnation. We usually do not like to speak about it, but God's patience does have an end, and we should not presume upon it (Acts 17:30-31; Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9-10). The day of the Lord has come, is coming, and will come. It, of course, refers to some kind of judgment by God. James Smith wrote in *The Minor Prophets*, "Every local judgment is a harbinger of that final day when all sinners meet their doom at the judgment bar of God."

The early prophets Joel and Obadiah each had something to say about the day of the Lord. For Joel it was the signal that God was turning a new page in history. The locust plague and the drought were over, and God's kingdom was coming through his Spirit. For Obadiah it was that all nations should take a cue from the defeat of Edom for how they treated God's people.

Be Ready for the Spirit

Joel 2:28-32

And afterward is the start of this passage. After what? After God took away the locust plague and drought. After that, God's people could experience a fresh start and a new beginning. Joel did not tell his immediate audience exactly when this new day would come, but evidently it would unfold in layers.

This passage is quoted almost verbatim in Acts 2:17-21. While it is a good caution to not always borrow freight from the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament, nonetheless some passages are best understood in their prophetic fulfillment (what the scholars call "*sensus plenior*," meaning the fuller sense). At times what seems piecemeal and fragmentary in predictive prophecy can be abundantly clear when fulfilled.

When the Holy Spirit comes before the day of the Lord, the distinguishing mark will not be gender (as *sons and daughters* will prophesy), or age (as *young* and *old* will receive divine revelations). Cosmic signs (miracles) will break loose, but even those will not be the distinguishing marks. The main thing is that salvation will be available in Jerusalem.

The $20 million question is, "When?" It might have been that these cosmic signs (wonders in the heavens and on earth, blood, fire, and billows of smoke, the sun turning dark, and the moon becoming blood red) already literally happened during the days of Joel (none of us were there). It could also have literally happened on the Day of Pentecost (none of us were there either). It could just be figurative language for God turning a new page in history and judging nations (certain Old Testament passages do use language that way). It could refer to a time yet in the future. Or . . . it could refer to the "beginning of the end."

In other words, the fulfillment of it could have started in Joel's day, come down through Pentecost, and ultimately will be fulfilled in the judgment of God at the return of Christ. Having the Holy Spirit makes one prepared for any day of the Lord.

Be Ready for Deliverance

Obadiah 15-17

The book of Obadiah is the shortest prophetic book in the Old Testament. The prophet might have been the first to write his prophecy (maybe 845 BCE—although some would date it way later, e.g., 586 BCE). Obadiah means "servant of Yahweh," and 12 people in the Bible have this name.

His primary concern is the nation of Edom. This nation had its origin during the time of the patriarchs (Genesis 25:30). The children of Esau formed a great nation. But they opposed the Israelites when they came out of Egypt. God punished them more than once for this lack of kindness. Their land mass was large, but they would be made small by God's judgment. They were proud of their place, wealth, alliances, intelligence, and armies (vv. 3-9). They were guilty of harming God's people or being indifferent to them, gloating over the misfortunes of others, and looting the properties of the unfortunate (vv. 10-14).

So all nations should learn from Edom. God would pay them back (v. 15). Judgment would come home to roost. They desecrated sacred space (*drank on my holy hill*). Other nations would treat them as if they never existed. On the other hand, God would provide deliverance. Mount Zion would be a place of salvation, holiness, abundance, unity, victory, and expanse.

The last line of Obadiah is "and the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (v. 21). James Smith wrote, "The rest of prophetic literature is to a certain extent an exposition of the last line of Obadiah." Openness to the kingdom makes one ready for the day of the Lord.

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A STORM IS COMING

BY DAVID FAUST

If you pay attention, you can tell when a storm is coming. Dark clouds gather on the horizon and thunder rumbles before the wind and rain arrive. Radar pinpoints the location of an approaching tornado or hurricane. In the winter, forecasters warn when blizzards are on the way.

Four commonsense strategies will enable you to survive an approaching storm: (1) *Prepare ahead.* Don't wait till the wind is already blowing. Decide your survival strategy in advance. (2) *Heed wise warnings.* Stay informed. Don't listen to alarmists who fan hysteria and overdramatize every weather event, but pay attention to reputable meteorologists who warn about dangerous storms. (3) *Find shelter.* Don't stubbornly assume you are exempt from danger. Go to a safe place where you can ride out the storm. (4) *Help others.* Make sure your family, friends, and neighbors are aware of the approaching danger so they can find their way to a safe place, too.

The Storm of God's Judgment

The Old Testament prophets spoke about "the day of the Lord" as a time when God would judge his enemies. "The day of the Lord is near for all nations," warned the prophet Obadiah (v. 15). In the New Testament, the "day of the Lord" refers to an approaching time of reckoning, but it also includes notes of hope, joy, and victory for God's people. It is called,

- the day of the Lord (1 Corinthians 5:5),
- the day of judgment (Matthew 10:15; Romans 2:16),
- the day God visits us (1 Peter 2:12),
- the great day (Jude 6; Revelation 6:17),
- that day (Matthew 7:22; 2 Timothy 4:8),
- the day of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:8; 2 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16),
- or simply "the Day" (1 Corinthians 3:13).

Biblical faith rejects the idea that history merely repeats itself in a pointless, endless cycle. The Lord has a goal in mind and a purpose to fulfill. The universe is headed toward a climactic end—the consummation of the ages orchestrated by the Lord himself. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. We live in the middle—believing what God has done in the past, trusting him in the present, and looking toward the future with hope.

God's judgment is ahead. The four commonsense strategies mentioned above remind us how to survive the storm. (1) *Prepare.* Don't wait until it's too late. Make sure your soul is right with God. (2) *Heed wise warnings.* Take God's Word seriously. Don't ignore or dismiss what the Bible says. (3) *Find shelter.* The Lord wants to be your safe place—your refuge and strength. (4) *Help others.* Make every effort to ensure that your family, friends, and neighbors know the Lord.

Jesus talked about storms. He told about a wise man who prepared for the wind and rain by building his house on rock while a foolish man built his house on sand. Both houses faced the same kind of storm, but the one with a firm foundation survived while the house built on sand crashed to the ground (Matthew 7:24-27). In that Gospel's very next chapter, Jesus and his disciples survived a furious storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus "rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm" (Matthew 8:23-27).

Life brings many storms, and the Lord is the one who can calm them. Whatever lies ahead—including the final judgment—it's safer to go through a storm with Jesus than to be anywhere else without him.

Personal Challenge:

How often do you think about the Judgment Day? Jesus said a time is coming when "those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:28-29). Jesus also said, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). Thank the Lord that because of his grace, you do not have to face condemnation (Romans 8:1).

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. If you could send a message back in time to yourself three years ago, what, if anything, would you have done differently to prepare?

2. What was your "I will . . ." statement last week, and how did you follow through?

Ask two people to read aloud **Joel 2:28-32** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask the same two people to each read **Obadiah 1:15-17**.

3. What ideas, phrases, or themes were repeated between these two passages?
   - What differences do you see between them?

4. What positive aspects do you see in the descriptions of "the day of the Lord"?
   - What negative aspects do you see?

5. What can we learn about God in this week's passages?
   - What can we learn about ourselves or others?

6. The prophets used "the day of the Lord" to refer both to disastrous national events and a future final Day. In each, there are elements of judgment, destruction, new beginnings, and an end to sin and injustice. But the promise in Joel 2:32 is clear: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Where can you see the hand of God at work already, preparing you and saving you?

7. Based on what we've discussed, what are you doing well?
   - Based on what we've discussed, what could you do differently in obeying God this week?

8. Who needs to hear this story, and how will you tell them?

9. What area in your life do you need to "call on the name of the Lord"? Use that for this week's "I will" statement: "This week, I will call on the name of the Lord by . . ."

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.