

# Ash Wednesday

## GOD'S INFLAMED HEART

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Paul Jaster

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near –  
2a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
nor will be again after them  
in ages to come.*

*12Yet even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
13rend your hearts and not your clothing.*

*Return to the LORD, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.*

*14Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the LORD, your God?*

*15Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;*

*call a solemn assembly;  
16gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.  
17Between the vestibule and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.  
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,  
and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
a byword among the nations.  
Why should it be said among the peoples,  
'Where is their God?'"*

*Two passages from Joel bracket time between Ash Wednesday and Pentecost. The first is Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (the first lesson for Ash Wednesday). The second is Joel 2:28-29 quoted in Acts 2:1-21 (the first lesson for Pentecost). And smack dab in the center is the cross. So, "Joel...+ Jesus +...Joel" forms a great chiasm that crosses the entire season.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Flammable Material—the Bare Stubble of Crop Failure**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Damn Locusts!...and Disastrous Crops*

Joel starts out with an ecological disaster. The "dark clouds" and the "blackness spread over the mountains" is another one of those ravenous swarms of "desert locusts" that periodically devastates Middle Eastern crops. Joel 2:3 says, "Fire devours in

front of them, and behind them a flame burns.” They hit the land like wildfire, and there is nothing to do with the stubble left behind except to burn it into a sooty ash like the ashes for Ash Wednesday. Today we have so saturated the earth with pesticides that we cannot fully appreciate the magnitude of this particular threat to life and survival. But, we do have impending ecological and economic disasters of our own that have us all on edge. And there is a swarm of other pesky problems that “bug” us. The politicians will remind us of it daily from now until November.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unrent & Unturned Hearts of Dis-spirited People***

Unlike the politicians, however, Joel does not see in this invasion the fickle cruelties of Mother Nature, our abuse of the environment, or poor disaster-planning by those in charge. Rather, Joel sees in it the judgment of God on people headed in the wrong direction and lacking of the proper spirit of obedience and faith behind their daily rituals and sacrifices. Thus, Joel issues God’s persistent call to “return to me with all your heart” and to “rend your hearts and not your garments.”

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Ash Heap of a Greater Disaster***

Joel is so passionate and urgent in his call because he knows that an even greater disaster is impending. Not just a transitory, life-threatening “ecological” disaster but the barren ash heap of an ultimate and “eternal” one, which he and his ilk call “the day of the Lord.” This is how Joel diagnoses the current situation: “Locust as Forerunners of the Day of Yahweh” (Hans Walter Wolff’s title for Joel’s first chapter in the Hermeneia series). In other words, the fiery ashes accompanying this pestilent invasion is a foreshadowing of an impending judgment that will hit the land like wildfire and leave behind nothing but stubble to be burned: a kind of divine

cremation. This day of God's impending judgment is so terrible and threatening that it demands the full and immediate response of a "national emergency." It requires putting "national repentance" on the "fast-track" (in both senses of that word): fasting, weeping, and wailing. This is for everyone! Even those whom the Torah normally exempts from fasting, community lament, and national mourning: the aged, children, breast-fed infants, and couples on their honeymoon.

And yet, even this fast-track "disaster response" is "iffy." Joel knows that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Still the very best "gospel" he can offer is a very typical lifting of the hands and shrugging of the shoulders ("Who knows whether God will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?"), and a very desperate prayer that appeals to the covenantal promises of God and God's own sense of pride: "Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" Without faith in Christ, God's grace is "iffy." A big "perhaps."

## **PROGNOSIS: Flammable Material—Fruit that Befits Repentance**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *God's Inflamed Heart*

Add Jesus-and-the-cross and the prognosis changes. Joel's desperate wish becomes hope fulfilled and prayer answered. God practices what God preaches. In Jesus' death upon the cross, God rends God's own heart and not God's garment (the gospels make a big point that the tunic of Jesus is not torn). Instead, the heart of God is torn between God's judgment and God's mercy, the law and the gospel, God's judging word and God's saving word. To use the fiery imagery of Joel, God's heart is inflamed with both jealousy and passion. Little did Joel know it, but Jesus on the

cross becomes “Jehoshaphat” (YHWH judges), the place of judgment (see Joel 3:9). But, since it is Jesus (the Son of God) who suffers God’s judgment for us, the child born to Mary and adopted by Joseph is also indeed what God (through the angel) named him, “Jeshua,” (YHWH saves, Matt. 1:21). In human medicine, an inflamed heart is a sign of weakness (as is the cross). In heaven’s medicine, it is a sign of divinity, the very character of God. On the cross, the true character of God is proven and revealed in its most ultimate (eternal) expression: “God IS gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” The Day of this Lord (Good Friday) is simultaneously a day of judgment and of salvation. But, it is the flaming love of God that wins out over the fire of God’s wrath.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Pouring out of Spirit...and Grain, Wine and Oil*

Ironically and aptly, the forerunner of this day, John the Baptist, eats “locusts” (Is this the bible winking its eye and having some fun with us?), and proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Yet, the baptism of Jesus is even “greater” (just as John said). It is not a rite of preparation in “hope of” salvation—a wish and a prayer like Joel chapter 2. Rather, it is “almost” (in a penultimate sense) salvation itself. For with it comes the pouring of the Holy Spirit and an invitation, not to fast, but to feast with the Lord—both of which Joel predicted. The pouring out of the spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28-29) is quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21) in response to those who supposed those first inflamed Pentecost-ers to be drunk with new wine. (They were! It was just of another vintage than the skeptical on-lookers supposed). And God’s promise “I am sending you grain, wine and oil” (Joel 2:19) is fulfilled in Jesus, especially in the multiplication of the loaves, the turning of water into wine, every meal that he

ate with sinners, the anointing of his body before submitting to the “baptism” of his death and resurrection, and the bread and wine of the last supper. Jesus “swallows” death and in its barren place gives us a foretaste of the Messianic feast. Hmmm...fiery Spirit, grain-wine-oil, Holy Communion & Baptism. It’s all so sacramental! These are the corporate rites and liturgical actions that turn, rend, and inflame the hearts of God’s spirited-people. And this, in turn, fulfills the promise and is the very worship God seeks.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fruit that Befits Repentance***

Faithful reception of the Word and Sacraments and the fiery outpouring of Christ’s Spirit results in the fruit that befits repentance rather than the desolate ash heap of disaster. This too is flammable stuff (in a powerful, explosive, expansive, exciting, and constructive kind of way). This fruit is always in the singular (“fruit of the spirit” NOT “fruits of the spirit”) because it is worked by one Spirit and one Lord and it has one purpose and goal: the healthy, life-giving nourishment of the world. In Galatians 5:22, Paul lists two sets of three: love, joy and peace & patience, kindness and generosity. No doubt, there are many more, but any one of these would be a good focus as part of one’s Lenten discipline. We may still desire high-tech pesticides to deal with the desert locusts. But the fruit of the Spirit does a far better job of addressing what really bugs people.