

Desolation

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Preacher: Elliott Lytle

[0 : 00] All right, good morning to everybody. Hope you're doing well. As Alex said, my name is Elliot. Significant, but they were really named such in the centuries after they were written, mainly because they were noticeably shorter than the other prophets.

That's really all there was to it. They were like, this prophet is long and this one is short, so we're going to call these the minor prophets. And throughout these books, these minor prophet books, you see a lot of really common themes, a fairly common and prominent one being this call by God to the nation of Israel to repent, to turn away from sin and the things that are destroying them and to come back to him, lest judgment come upon the nation.

And you see that theme over and over, and I think because of that, that's why when we read through these books, they often seem to not have as much relevance to us today as some of the other things we see in Scripture, because it appears that God is giving a very specific warning to a very specific people at a very specific time.

And that probably contributes some to us giving them less attention. I kind of joked a couple of weeks ago, this is that portion of your Bible where you flip there and there's like no notes, right? Like nothing inspirational, no quotes you pulled from it a lot of times.

But these books, including the book of Joel, are part of God's Word to us. And that means that even though they do have a very, they had a very specific meaning to the people they were spoken to all those ages ago, God wanted those to be passed down to his people today as well.

[2 : 02] And that means that we should be excited about whatever we find in there because it's something that might help us to encourage the Father, amen? So that's like what we want to do with this series.

Now a couple of administrative notes to set it up. We're not exactly sure the time period that the events of Joel took place in.

There's quite a few contextual clues that tell us it was most likely happening around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. So if you've read the events in those books in the Bible, we're kind of in that period. There's also a thing about the way this book is written in that Joel doesn't, it's not written just from start to finish, it's written in kind of like parallel prose to get along the same message, right?

And so what that means is, as we kind of explore those themes each week, we're not going to read the book straight through from verse one to the end. When I told my wife that's how we were going to do it, she said, oh, please don't do that.

[2 : 59] But so if you're the kind of person that that's going to drive you crazy, that we're not just going to start at verse one and go all the way through, I promise you, we are going to read every verse in it, just not in that order, and I apologize to you for that.

You can take it up with Joel and God when you get there one day. So as we open the book and start looking at it, the backdrop to the story of Joel is that Joel is addressing this recent disaster that has befallen Israel, which is really this devastating locust swarm.

Now that's obviously something that we today probably don't identify with on an emotional level because usually it's not a locust swarm that is the thing that brings devastation and ruin into our lives.

But of course, here in modern life, we do have things that have the same effect. Things that come along and ruin our finances unexpectedly.

Things that come along and take away our stability or our peace. Things that come into our lives and rob us of something that is beautiful or meaningful to us, and we have to deal with that.

[4 : 12] And so as we go through the book, we really want to look deeply at all of the mercies that God wants to reveal through it. But before we get to some of the mercies that might feel more

familiar or more exciting to us, you really have to start in this place of desolation because that's where the book opens.

And that's where the people in the book are. This book is going to use this idea of the day of the Lord for both a place of judgment and destruction as well as a place of consolation and restoration. And what we're going to see is God's purpose is in both. So when we start by looking at a place of desolation and seeing how God's mercy, we might even call it a severe mercy, can be present in that.

That's how we want to engage it to think about it as God is in this just like he's in the rest. So we're going to start in Joel 1. We're going to be reading from Joel 1 chapter 1 and then jumping over to Joel 2.

If you don't have your Bibles, no worry. It's going to be on the screen behind me. So here we go. Joel 1 verse 1. The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel.

[5 : 27] Hear this, you elders. Give ear all inhabitants of the land. Has such a thing happened in your days or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it and let your children tell their children and their children to another generation.

For what the cutting locust left, the swarming locust is eaten. And what the swarming locust left, the hopping locust is eaten. And what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust is eaten.

Awake, you drunkards, and weep. And wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number.

Its teeth are like lion's teeth, and it has fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it down.

Their branches are made white. And then jumping over to Joel chapter 2, it says, Blow a trumpet in Zion and sound an alarm on my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming.

[6 : 31] It is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. Like blackness there spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people, the like of which has never been before, nor will it be seen again through all the years of all the generations.

Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the Garden of Eden in front of them, and behind them it is a desolate wilderness, because nothing escapes them.

And their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses as they run. As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains. Like the crackling of a flame of fire, they devour the stubble.

Like a powerful army, they are drawn up for battle. Before them, peoples are in anguish. All faces grow pale. Like warriors they charge. Like soldiers they scale the wall.

They march, each in his own way. They do not swerve from their paths. They do not jostle one another. Even each marches in its path, and they burst through the weapons. They are not halted.

[7 : 35] They leap upon the city. They run upon the walls. They climb into the houses and enter through the windows like a thief. Just kind of pause there again. The imagery that's being given is that nothing can stop this.

Nothing can stop this ruin. It gets into every part of your life. The familiar and the intimate. Nothing can stop it. The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble.

The sun and the moon are dark, and the stars withdraw. They're shining. The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great. He who executes his word is powerful, for the day of the Lord is great and very awesome.

Who can endure it? This is God's word to us. Now one of the common phrases that we use in our modern time when things aren't going very well is we say, when it rains, it pours.

And that's just a pithy way we have of noting that, you know, when things go wrong, it just often seems like they keep going wrong, right? Like they, you don't just get a little bit of wrong. So we say, when it rains, it pours, and that kind of sticks.

[8 : 46] The problem is it's also not true. Sometimes, I would argue a lot of times, it really does just sprinkle, right? Like we endure a lot of minor problems and setbacks and inconveniences every year of our life that are a pain at the time they happen, but they are just as quickly forgotten as they came into our lives.

Now I think the reason a phrase, when it rains, it pours, resonates with us is because desolation, like real destruction, is a thing in this world.

And it's those things that we tend to remember. So like if you've lived in eastern North Carolina for more than five minutes, you've probably had to endure a hurricane, right?

And if you're here for a couple of years, you realize most of those are a big nothing burger, right? Like they come through, they knock down a limb or two, they take out power for 10 minutes, they cause some minor damage, and then they're gone.

I've been here going on 24 years and seen a ton of those, and I don't remember any of the names of any of those hurricanes, right? They come and they go. But I remember Florence because I remember the widespread devastation that that hurricane caused here in New Bern.

[10:06] I remember it because we had just bought a house, and I remember sleeping in an exceedingly hot bedroom for six days without air condition while they worked to get power back on. I remember cutting down what seemed like every tree in the Croatan in my backyard over the period of those, and the evidence of that is still back there.

Right? You know, for the people in western North Carolina this past year that experienced Hurricane Helene, like that kind of devastation will leave a scar for a generation.

Like they'll be talking about that for years because desolation is a real thing in the world, and it haunts us. And so if that is the case, if desolation is real, then the question that a follower of Jesus has to ask is this, what does a follower of Jesus do in a moment of desolation?

Like how are we called to follow him in that period? What is the message that the desolations of this world should have for us? As we asked this this morning too, I think it's really important not to be flipping about how we approach it, right?

Because one of these churchy things that we do is to approach the really hard places in life with like sort of a cliché phrase about, you know, praising God in the bad times or even worse, to try to, it's tempting to try to put on kind of a false smile so that the people around you don't think you're weak or that you're losing your faith.

[11:36] The truth is, facing a place of desolation with faith in Jesus, whether it was caused by you and your sins or whether it's because of something or someone or something else, it's never going to be easy.

When we preach messages like this, they're not easy to preach. Living in a broken world is not easy. And I would just say before we even start, like I know in a room this big, many of you might actually be in a place of desolation.

And so I just want you to know, even though there might be some challenging things that Jesus gives to his followers in here today, I really want to say out of the front that the message of Joel here is not suck it up, buttercup.

It's not stiff upper lip, right? Like there may be certainly a place for that kind of resolve, particularly in life where maybe we're being overly dramatic about something that's really not that bad, right? Like sometimes there is just having some grit to getting through, but when we're talking about desolation in our life, the Bible says Jesus is not the straw that breaks the camel's back.

[12:52] And so we have to read it in light of that. So as followers of Jesus, we do have access to this source of life and desolation. So whatever I say today, if it is challenging, I would give you two encouragements to start.

One is first, take heart. Desolation isn't the only severe mercy of God that the book of Joel has, so more to come. But also, I would acknowledge that while facing hard things in life in like a godly way may seem hard to do, I would at least offer to you and suggest that facing it in a worldly way is no easier and probably worse.

Because really, what are your other options when your life is wrecked, right? Stubborn defiance. I will not repent. I will not stop doing the thing I am doing.

I will not take my desolation to God. I don't need him or anybody else. That was actually Pharaoh's response to it when God sent it in his life.

Doesn't go so well. The other thing I think is just despair. Like, to lose all hope that this ever could or does mean anything.

[14:10] And thankfully, Joel teaches us that there are some other lessons to learn about the mercy of God in the desolations of our life. And the first one is simply this.

I think desolation reminds us that we are in a world in conflict. You know, maybe one of the reasons we struggle with desolation in our life, and maybe not just desolation, but also minor inconvenience as well, is that somehow we've actually lulled ourselves into thinking that life should be easier than we experience it to be.

Now, part of that's probably just the blessing of sort of our modern moment and modern conveniences, right? Like, we've just learned to expect things to be easier. And I don't say this flippantly.

I mean, the truth is, life is hard. Like, it leaves deep hurt in our lives. And even when it doesn't, a lot of life just feels like a grind.

Like, it feels like just a slog from day to day trying to figure out what's going on. And I would argue the Bible tells us that really shouldn't surprise you. Like, if you took to heart what the Bible had to say about the world you've been born into, you really wouldn't expect anything different.

[15:27] One of the most famous scenes in cinematic history when it came out several years ago was the opening scene of the movie Saving Private Ryan. And it was kind of shocking to a lot of people because it was one of the first times a movie tried to, and there's only so much way you can capture this on film.

Like, the horror of battle is something you really can't experience unless you're in it. But what they wanted to try to do is in as accurate and shocking way as they could depict how horrible that was to take the landing beach at Normandy, right?

And so when you watch that movie, it's shocking because when the door goes down and all chaos just starts breaking loose and people are dying and getting ripped to pieces in a very gruesome way, a lot of people just weren't prepared for that's what it was actually like.

But what's interesting is in the movie, when it's depicting the landing craft heading towards the beach, what you see is a group of men who have no illusion about what's about to happen, right? And you know that because as it pans around the landing craft, what you see are stern and anxious faces. You see men very obviously praying.

[16:38] You see men kind of like with doing nervous tick kind of stuff, right? Like the things you do when you're really anxious about what's happening. You see men throwing up, like just vomiting, right? As you do when you're getting ready to go into something hard.

And that's because they had no illusion about what was going to happen. They knew that day's work was going to be dark and desperate. And the Bible tells us that's the kind of world we live in. The Bible tells us we live in a broken world, broken because of what our sin and our rebellion does to us and to those around us. Broken because we have an enemy that seeks to harm us.

And you certainly don't have to like that. Like you don't have to feel a certain kind of way about it. Like you're allowed to say, I don't like that. But if we understood the times, like if we knew that you were not born into a party on the beach but onto the landing pad at Normandy, at least you wouldn't be shocked when things like desolation comes.

In John chapter 10, Jesus says this to a group of people that are there. He says, The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, but I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.

[17:56] And the truth is, you see stuff like that, that message all throughout the New Testament. And we read it and quote it and say yes and amen, but then we kind of actually don't think the thief is ever going to come and actually steal, kill, or destroy.

And knowing and understanding what you are facing is in itself a mercy from God. And desolation helps us learn that. But thankfully, understanding the world isn't all that God gives to us because what Joel teaches us is that desolation can also preserve you from something worse.

So Joel opens this book by talking about a locust swarm that has devastated Israel. And based on the language he uses, it's one of the worst anyone can ever remember.

And it's already happened, right? Like they're living in that devastation. But then in Joel 2, he goes back to talking about the devastation. And in some ways, it kind of still sounds like the locust swarm they've endured, but he turns the language and he starts using things that look more like war imagery.

Swords and fire and chariots. And that's really intentional. Because like the other minor prophets, Joel isn't just telling them about the calamity that's already come.

[19:23] He's warning them that worse things are going to happen if Israel doesn't repent. He says, if you don't change your course, the locusts you face aren't going to be insects.

It is going to be the devastating force of an invading army. And if you read on in your Bible, that's exactly what happens. And honestly, I don't really think I have to press too hard on this point because I would wager that most of us in here know at least on some level that that's true. Like I think if I went around the room, a lot of people would say they could think of something bad that happened to them or some part of their lives that got ruined, maybe even by your own mistakes.

But you can actually also look back on it and say, thank God it happened because if it didn't, I was heading for something way worse. I am not happy that that brokenness and that thing happened to me, but I know today I might not be alive if it hadn't come into my life and stopped me in the path I was on.

So friends, hear me in this. God doesn't like it when anyone suffers. God never takes any joy in anyone's misery.

[20 : 43] Not even someone who deserves it. God says He never takes any joy in misery, but He does love us enough that if one desolation is what it takes to keep you from something worse, He may allow that.

Like if some part of your life getting ruined is what it takes to keep you from just slogging on in your sin towards an eternity without Him, He will show you that mercy.

Desolation should drive us to call out to God because it is never wasted if it results in earnest repentance or lament.

And we're going to talk a lot about that next week. Sometimes desolation keeps you from something worse. Desolation can also be used to God's glory.

And I think this is probably the hardest lesson but also the most powerful if we can let it get into our heart. So in John chapter 9, the first part of that verse, the first part of that chapter in the Bible tells the beginnings of the story of where Jesus heals a man.

[21 : 59] And it says this, He says, and as He, meaning Jesus, passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

And Jesus answered, it was not this man that sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in Him.

Now before we even talk about the rest of the story, let that part sink in. This happened so that the works of God's power might be revealed.

Now think about how that should at least offend your sensibilities, right? Like what that is saying is God let that happen. He let him go through his whole life with a debilitating handicap in a time, by the way, where there was no mercy for that kind of thing.

There was no help. There was no government program. And as a matter of fact, as you can see from the disciples' response, it was a time where if something like that happened to you, the presumption would have been you or your parents must have done something really bad for God to let that happen to you.

[23 : 15] And God let that happen so He could get glory? Like a pat on the back? I mean, the question you might rightly ask is like, what kind of God would do that?

That sounds like the cruel and violent pagan gods of the rest of the world. But then you read the rest of the story and I'm not going to read the entire chapter today.

If you haven't read John, please go check it out. It's actually one of my favorite stories in the Bible. But the cliff notes are essentially this. So Jesus heals him. He gets his sight back.

And everybody wants to know how he gets his sight back. Because everybody knows he was born blind. So it causes this big stir. And they bring in the religious leaders of the day to really conduct this whole inquiry.

And they bring in him and they question him and they question his parents. How did this guy get his sight back? And as they ask those questions, they become more and more agitated with their answers because their answers more and more just kind of testify to the reality of who Jesus is.

[24 : 18] That he is the saving king. And that's a message they're trying to snuff out. And then finally, they call the man back again. And they really just kind of try to threaten and pressure him.

And they say to him, man, just give glory to God. We know that this man Jesus is a sinner. And his response is really one of my favorite in the entire Bible.

And I'm just going to say, like, I don't have any scriptural or academic evidence for what I'm about to say. But based on his response, I kind of feel like that when he answers, it has to be in whatever the first century Jewish equivalent of Southern drawl is.

Because it is a really base answer, right? So they say, like, just give God, like, we know this guy is a sinner. What do you think about it? And his answer is effectively, well, whether or not he's a sinner, I can't tell you.

But one thing I do know is that I was blind and now I can see. And that's really all I got to say about it. It's not in the commentary.

[25 : 24] That's kind of how I hear it in my head. I got that right. Jesus uses the desolations in this man life to break the back of a rotten religious system with rotten ideas about how people draw close to God.

And yes, the man gets his sight back, but I would argue that that alone wouldn't have been enough to have endured all this in his life. But Jesus takes it and he uses it in a way that still echoes through the ages today.

We're reading about this man 2,000 years later in New Bern, North Carolina. And that doesn't mean that any of what he endured wasn't hard or wasn't even something to be lamented.

But it does mean it has so much more meaning than he knew. And again, if I can paint a bigger picture, again, I'm not trying to be flippant, but whatever he suffered, I imagine it is nothing to the joy he's enjoyed with Jesus for all these centuries since.

He probably doesn't even think about it anymore. And that means that all these trials we see in Joel have another purpose.

[26 : 43] And I know it's probably what you would expect to hear in church, but Jesus really is the answer to the desolations in our life. The Bible tells us that he walks with us in them and that he's not unacquainted with our sorrow.

Like he knows what it feels like. He tells us that he will comfort us when we fall. And all these things we see in Joel and the other prophets, they're pointing to something greater.

Because what the Bible says is Jesus doesn't just sympathize with us. It says Jesus endures desolation so that we don't have to. And we're going to see this theme over and over in Joel that all these momentary days of the Lord are pointing to a greater day of the Lord.

And the message of the gospel, like the good news in the Bible is really that Jesus, this saving king, has come to endure what was by all rights ours to endure.

He has come to bear our sin, to bear our shame, our desolation, that we never have to taste it again. He is made separate from the Father that we don't have to be.

[28 : 05] And so if you find yourself in that place this morning, a place of desolation, like I would just, I would encourage you, turn your eyes to Jesus. I really don't know of anything else that has any value in it.

And if you know that, if God's given you grace to see that desolation in your life has come to save you from something worse, then I would say repent.

Take that message and turn to Jesus. And if somehow through the pain that's going on in your life you can see that desolation is being used for God's glory, like there is a bigger story than just the one you're living, then I would say rejoice in that and turn to Jesus.

And really, if you don't have anything else to hang on to, again, just turn your eyes to Jesus and see the great sufferer. You can ask a lot of really good academic questions about the suffering in the world, but the one thing that Jesus coming to suffer on a cross does is it means you can never again ask does God love us?

Because you don't do that if you don't love someone. And when you turn to Jesus the thing we always get to remember, even in the worst things in our lives is that our fate is now glory because his fate was desolation.

[29 : 33] And that's the good news we cling to. Amen? So as the band comes up today, if you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus, I'm so grateful you're here.

I know coming to church is weird if you're not a follower of Jesus. And, you know, I would wager even if you're not a believer, you know the world is hard. You know that desolation is real.

And I guess the message I would have for you is just to know that Jesus cares about that. And what he's offering is not just a temporary fix.

Like what he wants to do is not just make your life a little better or help you be a little bit better of a person. Like make better decisions. That's part of it.

But what he's really offering you is the opportunity to step into a completely different kind of life. A kind of crazy eternal kind of life that even in a place of complete desolation can still say I'm completely safe.

[30 : 39] If that has any part of you wants to hear more about that you just have to cry out to him. We'll have some people down front we'd love to talk with you if you want to talk more about that.

There'll be a prayer on the screen. Maybe that's a way you want to express that. But if you want to come his arms are open. If you are a follower of Jesus and particularly if you're in a place of desolation or maybe just came out of one or who knows maybe just I pray not but maybe going into one.

Again there's no better place to turn than Jesus. I think the lie that followers of Jesus that we all have to face when devastating things come into our lives is that this means there's no hope for the future.

This thing that has taken out the thing I love the most means that my dreams for life my hope for the future is over. But Joel shows us that there is mercy from God in every season and every time and every place for those who love him.

And maybe this morning it's just a place to ask in faith for God to give you that again. Like you don't have to try to stir yourself up to it. You know fake it till you make it kind of thing. It's just you can ask God, God help me to believe that again.

[32 : 05] If you're a believer we're going to have the communion tables open and again it's interesting that when Jesus gave us something to remember him the thing that he gave us what he wanted us to remember is to remember him through the desolation of a broken body and spilled blood.

And we don't remember it to mourn. Like when we take it we take it as a praise to the God who through that broken body and that blood made it possible for us to be with him again.

Who made it possible for whatever evil we had done to be wiped away. And so when you're ready you can go to the table and take the elements back to where you're at and as you take them again that's Jesus inviting us to fellowship with him by remembering his desolation and suffering.

So that you'll also remember it's a testament that you'll share in all of his new life too. That you can never it's called communion because it means your communion can never be broken with him because of what has happened.

So you can come when you're ready. Father we give you this moment. Holy Spirit I would ask that you would penetrate into all the hearts here with whatever work you want to do.

[33 : 31] God I do just ask you and I pray for anyone here that is that is in a season of desolation that maybe this week you will just send them someone or something that's just a little bit of hope that they know their lives not over.

Father we give you this moment. Have your way in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.