

SPIRITUAL CAT SCANS

JOEL

Once, there was a football game between the animals and the insects. The two squads gathered on the gridiron for a real grudge match.

Dressing out for the animals were the elephant, lion, tiger and bear. Suiting up for the insects was the firefly, flea, gnat, and the butterfly.

Well, you can imagine the outcome... The animals dominated.

Every time the elephant ran the ball he gained 40-50 yards. The lion swept around the end for touchdown after touchdown. Defense for the insects was weak as a flea. And the offense was no better...

Every time the Yellow Jacket dropped back to pass he was sacked by the Bulldog. *Oops, that just slipped out...* Well, the halftime score was unbelievably pathetic... catch this... the [Animals 70](#), the [Insects 0](#).

You probably assumed the animals had the game locked up. But at the start of the second half a new player entered the game for the Insects - [the centipede](#). And his impact was both immediate and dramatic.

The centipede ran back the opening kick-off.

He scored every time he carried the ball. No one could tackle him.

He ran, passed, blocked. He was an incredible football player.

And on defense, every time the elephant touched the ball, the centipede tackled him for a loss. He dominated the second half, and led the Insects to a dramatic, come-from-behind victory... [Animals 70](#), [Insects 77](#)...

After the game, the elephant and lion were curious. They asked the flea, “[That centipede is a quite a player. Why didn’t he play in the first half?](#)”

The flea replied, “[Hey, it takes a centipede a whole half just to put on his shoes.](#)” *A centipede has so many feet he has lots of shoes... get it!*

As it turned out the football-playing centipede was one *big, bad bug*.

And this was the situation facing the prophet Joel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The Jewish nation was facing a *big, bad bug* - not a centipede, but a plague of grasshopper-like locust.

In an age before pesticides - and long before the *Orkin man* - a black cloud of locust had swept across the fertile fields outside of Jerusalem.

The plague had killed the nation’s crop, and crippled Judah’s economy. And Joel was appointed by God to call a wayward nation back to God.

Verse 1 begins, “[The word of the LORD that came to Joel the son of Pethuel.](#)” All we know for sure about the

prophet we learn from his introduction. And all He gives us is his name and parentage.

“Joel” means “Jehovah is God.” His name spoke of God’s nature.

God is sovereign... The God of the Hebrews does *whatever He likes, whenever He likes, however He likes, to whomever He likes* – God does as He pleases. He rules the universe. God is da’ boss!

And God’s sovereignty becomes central to the book of Joel.

We’re not given a date for Joel’s prophecy, but from the book’s content we assume it was written in the reign of King Joash - around 830 BC.

This would make Joel the first of the writing prophets.

Two other prophets were contemporaries of Joel - the Prophet Obadiah prophesied to Edom, while Elisha ministered to Israel.

In verse 2 Joel cuts right to the chase. He describes the seriousness of their situation... *“Hear this, you elders, and give ear, all you inhabitants of the land! Has anything like this happened in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?”* This was an unprecedented plague in the history of the nation. Never before had Judah faced circumstances of this magnitude.

And Joel spells out the disaster that has come upon God’s people.

He writes in verse 4, “What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten.”

Once I was in Nashville, Tennessee, and I learned that once every 14 years or so, Nashville is plagued by locust. Buried eggs hatch and locusts start to swarm. I’d be walking down the sidewalk, and these little critters would smack me in the face. The locust *bugged* me the whole trip.

A locust is a dull-yellow or red colored insect. They look like a short, plump grasshopper. A locust is about three inches long, and it has two antenna another inch or so long. Surprisingly, go up-close and personal with a locust, and you’ll notice it has a face that looks a lot like a horse.

Swarms of locusts travel at incredible speeds and multiply in enormous numbers. Swarms resemble a black cloud moving across the landscape.

A swarm of locust can be 100 feet tall – and four or five miles long. When the locusts are on top of you it looks like a solar eclipse.

But the most fearsome characteristic of a plague of locust is their ferocious appetite. A swarm of locusts will strip every green plant of its vegetation. They’ll devastate fig trees, barley fields, vineyards.

Locusts remind me of [Joey Chestnut](#). For the last three years [Joey “the Jaws” Chestnut](#) has won the Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Contest on Coney Island. The 2009 chow down was a dog fight between two contestants.

The 6’1”, 218 pound Chestnut and six time wiener *Takeru Kobayashi*.

Chestnut set a world record eating 68 hot dogs and buns in 10 minutes. Kobayashi finished second with 64. Chestnut took home \$20,000 in prize money, and the prestigious Mustard Belt - making Joey the [“top dog.”](#)

And Joey not only holds the record for hot dogs... there’s more...

In September 2006 he set a world record for waffles - 23 waffles in 10 minutes at the Waffle House Waffle Eating Championship in Atlanta...

In 2007 Joey pigged out on 45 pulled pork sandwiches in 10 minutes during the Myrtle Beach World BBQ Eating Championship...

In the same year he ate 103 Krystal hamburgers at the Krystal Square Off in Chattanooga, TN. If it’s not nailed to the floor Joey might eat it.

Joey Chestnut has earned the title [“America’s #1 Competitive Eater.”](#) Let me suggest you not invite him over for Thanksgiving Dinner.

But Joey Chestnut is a nibbler compared to a single locust.

The four locusts Joel mentions in verse 4 probably represent the four stages of a locust's development...

Chewers are the babies.

Swarmers are the moms who multiply in great numbers.

Crawlers have under-developed wings. They hop, but don't yet fly.

Consumers - "*the consuming locust*" are the full-grown adults. These are the insatiable eaters. These guys do the most extensive damage.

At the turn of the last century, a plague of locust swept over Israel and Syria for a total of 5 months. Scientists documented the spread of locust and their devastation. The mother bugs dug 4 inch holes - then laid 100 eggs in each hole. A single square meter of dirt contained 70,000 eggs.

When the eggs hatched billions of locusts were unleashed on the land.

The swarms were so thick they blanketed out the sky and sun. The swarm moved 400-600 feet a day, consuming and devouring every scrap of vegetation in sight. They even ate the bark off the trees.

Nothing was left - the earth looked as if it had been scorched by fire. Locust even have a nickname... they're called "**hunger incarnate.**"

This was the crisis Judah had endured. At best this devastation would cripple the nation's economy for

generations to come. At worse, their very survival was at stake. *This kind of plague would **bug** anybody!*

In the Chinese language words are formed by linking together symbols.

Take for example the word “**crisis**.” It’s the combination of the symbols for two words, “**danger**” and “**opportunity**.” And a crisis is both. On one hand, it poses *danger* - but on the other hand it creates *opportunity*.

And this is what the plague of locusts did for the people of Judah.

The locusts were God’s way of getting His people’s attention.

It was time for Judah to wake up to their spiritual condition. *Their love for God had grown cold. Their allegiance had drifted.* No one would ever minimize the loss caused by the crisis of locust, but the disaster was an opportunity to **wake up** and **sober up** in their responsibilities toward God.

Joel challenges the people of Jerusalem in verse 5, “**Awake, you drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the new wine, for it has been cut off from your mouth.**”

Here’s the only specific sin mentioned in the book - **drunkenness**.

In a few years idolatry will be the big issue, but in the days of Joel drunkenness and substance abuse were the vices of choice.

And 2800 years later in modern America, not much has changed.

According to Time Magazine two-thirds of Americans consume alcohol. America drinks enough alcohol each year for every citizen to down seven bottles of hard liquor, twelve bottles of wine, and 230 cans of beer.

Drunkenness is certainly the biggest social problem today that no one wants to talk about. How many violent and sexual crimes are fueled by alcohol and drugs? Especially, among teens and college students...

When you read about a violent break-in... or a date rape... or a vehicular homicide... or a case of domestic violence... there's a good probability the abuse of alcohol played a decisive role.

John Fielding referred to alcohol as "[the liquid fire by which men drink their hell beforehand.](#)" If you've ever had close contact with the life of an alcoholic, you won't consider Fielding's description an exaggeration.

Alcohol clouds your judgment, and impairs decision-making, and lowers normal inhibitions. It even deludes a person into thinking their invincible.

Intoxication numbs certain feelings that God wants us to address.

And if you've ever tried to love an alcoholic, then you are painfully aware of how alcohol can ruin a relationship. Call it, [hurt in a glass.](#)

I believe alcoholism is a *sickness*, but drunkenness is a *sin*.

There's no question, some people are chemically predisposed to alcohol addiction. It's genetic. But once that person realizes their biological make-up, it becomes a sin for them to take a drink.

An alcoholic is always one drink away from a drunk. The old AA saying is true, "Once you become a pickle you can never be a cucumber."

This why alcoholism is a *disease*, while drunkenness is *disobedience*.

An alcoholic should know he can't handle the booze. **Budweiser** is not his *bud*, nor does it make him *wiser*. It's impossible for him to drink *a few* beers with the boys. His *few beers* become *a few more beers*...

An alcoholic can never drink sociably. He's always one drink from falling off the wagon. That's why it becomes a sin for him to take that one drink.

Israel in the days of Joel had thrown caution to the wind. To escape the reality of what was bugging them drunkenness had spread like wildfire.

Imagine the affects of the locust plague... *unemployment was at an all time high - families couldn't make ends meet – home foreclosures were up - there was little money for healthy diversion... **sound familiar?***

And to escape life's harshness the people were getting plastered. They were destroying their family, their body, and their witness.

Notice 1:12 sums up the impact of the plague. "The vine has dried up, and the fig tree has withered; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree - all the trees of the field are withered; surely joy has withered away from the sons of men." Israel was *barren* and *bummed*.

Not just the shrubs, but their joy had withered. And they turned to artificial stimulants – they were getting a high from *Jack* not *Jesus*.

The Jews faced a crisis. But a crisis is an opportunity to drink deeply the refreshment God offers – not the numbing potions of this world.

How should Judah have responded to this crisis? How should *you* respond when a crisis strikes - and faith is tested - and joy withers?

Twice in the book – 1:14 and 2:15 – Joel cries out... "Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD."

Notice Joel gives us three suggestions...

Joel tells God's people to **pull back** from the crisis. They need to create some space and separation. Call an

assembly - go to God's house - gain His perspective.
Before you *face the crisis* seek *the Lord's face*.

Then **pull together** - gather your elders and Christian friends – call together people of faith - draw from their encouragement, and support, and prayer. In a crisis, seek help - *turn to a brother, not a bottle*.

And finally, **pull apart** from the world. Joel says *“consecrate a fast”* – cut off your normal intake of food, or entertainment, or sports. Change your schedule and priorities; and give yourself time to hear from God.

In a crisis: **pull back** - **pull together** - **pull apart**.

Notice Joel 2 begins, *“Blow the trumpet in Zion... (trumpet) and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the LORD is coming, for it is at hand; a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, like the morning clouds spread over the mountains.”* A day of devastation is coming.

The phrase *“day of the LORD”* appears five times in the book of Joel.

And it's not necessarily a 24 hour period. The Hebrew word *“Yom”* or *“Day”* can refer to *“an indefinite period of time.”* Often you'll hear the phrase, *“day and age.”* *“I can't believe she died of the measles in this day and age.”* We're not talking about a 24 hour cycle, but a season, or era.

“The day of the Lord” is a time when God takes over the controls.

My dad had an unusual method for teaching us in Sunday School.

For the first 15 minutes or so, he allowed the 5th Grade Boys class to talk about whatever we wanted - *girls, baseball, school* - it didn't matter.

But once the conversation died down my dad would say, "Alright boys, I've been quiet while you talked. Now I expect you to be quiet while I talk."

And he'd present his lesson – *without a peep from the gallery.*

In a sense, this is God's attitude in the world today. He's always at work behind the scenes, but on the world stage He's giving man his say.

For the most part, godless men are running the show. Yet on occasion God will shut man up. He'll silence all human voices with an event that forces men to listen to Him. This was the effect the plague of locust had in Joel's day. God stepped in to call the shots.

Whenever Scripture speaks of "*The day of the LORD*" it's talking about a time when God intervenes in human affairs. The plague of locust is one example. But ultimately the phrase refers to a time yet future.

It wasn't just the locusts that would come upon Judah. Verse 2 adds a warning, "*A people come, great and strong, the like of whom has never been; nor will there*

ever be any such after them, even for many successive generations.” Joel speaks of an invading army.

Think of the book of Joel as tri-focal vision...

Glasses today have become very sophisticated. You can't tell it, but the spectacles I wear are the combination of three lenses. If I look up a bit I see long range. If I focus straight ahead I see intermediate distances. And if I look through the bottom I can see up-close objects clearly.

Joel also provides us tri-focal vision.

His prophecy has an **immediate fulfillment** – the plague of locusts. But it also has an **intermediate fulfillment** – as we're told in verse 2, an army will come, probably the Assyrians. And there's a **long range fulfillment** - an invasion of Israel in the last days before the second coming of Jesus.

Chapter 1 speaks of the locust... Chapter 2:20 describes a northern army that will do **“monstrous things”**... And chapter 3 takes us out to the end of the age when the nations will be judged in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, or the Kidron Valley in the heart of Jerusalem.

Joel 3:14 ultimately speaks of a distant day. **“Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will grow dark, and the stars will diminish their brightness. The LORD also will roar from Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem; the heavens and earth will shake; but the**

LORD will be a shelter for His people, and the strength of the children of Israel.”

Read Revelation 6-19... “*The day of the LORD*” will rock the planet with “*Great Tribulation*” - cataclysmic judgments of an unprecedented nature. As Joel says in 2:11, “*The day of the LORD is great and very terrible...*”

Joel 2:3-5 gives us an example of how this tri-fold effect works.

According to verse 2 Joel is speaking of “*a people*” - an army. But they look and act like locust - verse 3, “*surely nothing shall escape them.*”

In verse 4 they have the “*appearance of horses*” – as we noted locust have the face of a horse. The Italian word for “*locust*” means “*little horse.*”

But in verse 5, these horses leap “*over mountaintops*” like locust.

Is the author confused over what he sees, or does he see multiple visions simultaneously? I believe the latter is happening in Joel.

Joel witnesses the locust... but he sees an ancient army that'll have a locust-like impact... He even sees a future army with Blackhawk helicopters spraying firepower and leaping over mountains.

How else could a Jew, living in the 9th century B.C., describe modern warfare, but with idioms associated with his own frame of reference?

Today is “the day of man.” Currently humans are *having their say* and *getting their way*. But the Bible teaches that human history culminates in “the day of the LORD.” The time is coming when God will have His say.

God gets the final word. In the end His will prevails on planet Earth.

In Genesis we learn that the Hebrews began their day with nightfall. Genesis reads, “The evening and the morning were the first day.”

Our days begin with daybreak, and end with nightfall. But the Hebrews began their days in the dark, and ended them in the light.

So it is with “the day of the LORD” – it begins with trouble for Israel.

The plague of locust in the days of Joel was just a foreshadowing of the coming invasion, and eventually the terrible devastations that occur in the Great Tribulation. Israel begins that final day in the dark, and only at the end will they see the light of Jesus, and embrace His Kingdom.

And this is how “the day of the LORD” works in our lives. What God does prophetically, He also does personally – in your life and my life.

There are times when God wants to get our attention. He sends a messenger to bug us – maybe not a bug, but a locust-like trial and hassle... maybe a tough economy, or an unexpected layoff...

In our minds these are *“monstrous things.”*

I want you notice two verses - 2:20-21. This is such a hopeful passage.

God says, *“But I will remove far from you the northern army, and will drive him away into a barren and desolate land, with his face toward the eastern sea and his back toward the western sea; his stench will come up, and his foul odor will rise, because he has done monstrous things.”*

Now the very next verse, *“Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done marvelous things!”* To me the contrast here is stunning – **“monstrous things... marvelous things.”** God is responsible for both.

God when He needs to get our attention He is not timid. He doesn't mind sending a plague of locust. He'll have His day and get His way.

But after the plague has subsided God will do *“marvelous things.”*

Drop down two verses and read verse 25 – there's no more merciful and encouraging verse in all the Bible - *“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among you.*

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you, and My people shall never be put to shame.”

Put to the test... yes! Put through the fire... yep! But put to shame - never! God's will for us is restoration.

God has power to *“restore the years that the locusts have eaten...”*

What sin chewed up and spit out – what foolish pride ruined – what stubbornness ripped off... God *restores* what sin *destroys*.

God can overcome the terrible consequences of sin in our lives.

He'll restore to you *wasted years*, and *untapped potentials*, and *lost opportunities*, and *neglected talents*, and *squandered blessings*. God has ways to compensate us for poor choices and foolish decisions.

Whatever mistakes we made in our youth... and in our marriage... and with our kids... and in our career... or in our ministry... God will *pick up*, and *wipe off*, and *put back*, and *make new*.

Spurgeon once wrote, *“Lost years can never be restored literally. Time once past is gone forever... but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the un-ripened fruits over which you mourned. The fruits of wasted years may yet be yours...”*

*Did you hear that, **The fruits of your wasted years may yet be saved and savored!*** As Spurgeon said, God has *“strange and wonderful ways.”*

If God can put bark back on a tree and cause grapes to grow again on a withered vine – He can fill my heart with joy again and make my life useful.

When Mickey Mantle came up with the Yankees, his manager, Casey Stengel told a reporter, “[This guy is going to be better than Joe DiMaggio and Bath Ruth.](#)” But it never happened. He never lived up to his potential.

Just before he died a premature death Mantle held a moving press conference where he admitted to *wasting his enormous potential and shortening his career* - on late nights and heavy drinking.

Tears came to his eyes, when Mantle confessed, “[One of the things I messed up, besides baseball, was being a father. I wasn't a good family man.](#)” Perhaps the mistakes you've made with your family are at the top of your list of regrets. There are mistakes I've made that I deeply regret.

Hey, if you don't have a few regrets in your life you're not being honest.

We all have regrets, but God can produce in our lives a bumper crop of blessing that will more than make up for our regrets and failures.

What comes next in this prophecy is no accident. Joel 2:28 is the same passage Peter quoted on Pentecost to explain the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the launching of the Church. In Acts 2:16 Peter says to the interested

onlookers, “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel...”

"And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh..." Joel is describing the end of time and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Jewish nation. Joel's focus is on **when**, but Peter sees the **what**...

What will restore Israel in the *last days* is the power behind God's reclamation in our lives *today*. The outpouring or filling or baptism of the Holy Spirit is what counteracts the chewing of the locust.

What *sin* eats away the *Spirit* will more than restore.

Have you been filled with the Holy Spirit? If not, why not?

Joel says God pours out His Spirit not on a select few... but on “*all flesh*” – *weak or strong, black or white, male or female, youthful flesh or elderly flesh*... “Old men dream dreams. Young men see visions.”

God wants to pour out – just dump on you His Spirit.

Think of the football coach who wins the game and gets a Gatorade bath. When Jesus gives you the victory, He also pours out His Spirit.

Jesus dumps on us a power – boldness and love – that works miracles.

The Spirit goes to work restoring and reclaiming and refurbishing and reimbursing to you the blessings God intended for you all along.

Let me close with a verse in the middle of Joel's prophecy.

About half-way through chapter 2... verse 13... this is the heart of Joel's message in more ways than one. "So rend (or rip) your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm."

Joel tells us to repent, come clean. Admit you've strayed. Come back to God this morning. He's not angry. In fact, He promises to treat you with kindness. God wants to forgive and restore - not judge. "*The day of the LORD*" might begin with darkness, but it ends in the light of His love.