



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

It's a God Thing - (Joel 1:1-15)

Pastor Greg Harris

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

So imagine that you have a doctor's appointment, and just a regular check up appointment, and say your doctor's office notoriously has hard places to find parking. So you're going to drive to that doctor's appointment, you're praying on your way that there would actually this time be a parking spot, because you don't want to be late for your appointment, it's at 11:40, you know you'll actually get in to see the doctor at 12:40, but you don't want to be late, so you're praying for that spot, and you come to the parking lot and the halo is over it, and it's <in a high voice> aahhh, <regular voice> a parking spot is there, and you park there and you think to yourself, that was a total God thing. Never happens, I never get a parking spot, but I got one today. See, when things go well for us or things turn in our favour, we're very quick to say, "That was a total God thing." It's just how we talk in this part of the world. But what about the things that aren't good things? What about the things that are actually more difficult? The hard things? Are those God things?

So, 11 years ago there was a bridge in Minnesota, and 8 lane bridge, that was used all the time for traffic, not unlike our Port Mann Bridge, people take it all the time for work and commuting. One particular day that eight lane bridge was turned into a one lane bridge because of some extensive construction they were doing on the bridge, and on that day, that bridge collapsed. About 13 people were killed, over 140 people were injured, many of them very seriously for the rest of their life. Is that a God thing? Or the wildfires that happen in BC every year, right? Someone throws a cigarette butt out their window or lightning strikes a dry field, and if a wildfire that you can't contain, you hear about it week after week of fire crews trying to contain this fire, but it's coming closer and closer to communities, it's destroying homes, it's uprooting lives, it's changing people's lives forever. Is that a God thing? See, we're going through the book of Joel in our next sermon series, and the book of Joel explores a lot of different themes, talks about what repentance looks like, it talks about what the coming of the day of the Lord is going to be like. But in this first part of the book of Joel, it describes a natural disaster, and the purpose that Joel writes this for is he's trying to put us on the seat in the doctor's office, the eye doctor's office, where we have God's word before us, and he's going to adjust our prescription so we can see the world more clearly. Joel answers the question, are good things and bad things God things, he answers that with an emphatic "yes." Both the good things and the bad things are actually God things.

So what we're going to do is, we're going to look at Joel 1:1-15, we're going to walk through the text to see what the text actually has to say, then we're going to contemplate a bit Joel's answer, that both



good things and bad things are actually God things. So if you have your Bible, let's open it up to Joel 1, if you don't have a Bible it will be on the screen for you as well. Joel 1:1,

“The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel.”

So before we go too much further, I just want to press pause for a second because I think we need to kind of orient ourselves to where are we in the storyline of the Bible, right? If Joel's a prophet, when were the prophets active in the people of God? God's big plan in the world is to save people from their sins through the life and death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ, who was born of a virgin in a time and in a place in history, and he was born into the people of Israel. He was going to redeem Israel from their sins and all who is not a part of Israel but who believes in him would be saved through repentance and believing in the Gospel. But the people through which Jesus came from started with a guy named Abraham.

A few months ago we did a sermon series looking at the life of Abe. Abraham was called by God, God was going to bless the world through Abraham, and Abraham had some kids, and his kids had kids, and their kids had kids, and eventually his family found themselves in a drought, and they had to escape where they were so they could actually find a place where there was food. So they went to a place called Egypt which had all kinds of food and water and everything. They're in Egypt and their family continues to grow and grow and grow, and eventually Pharaoh looks at them and says, “You guys would be really good employees. Slaves. You're going to build the pyramids for me. You're going to work really really hard.” And the people of Israel, these people who are descendants of Abraham, are crying out to the God of Abraham saying, “I thought you were going to save us to be a people for you. I thought we were going to have this relationship with you, we were going to have the land for ourselves. But here we are enslaved. Will you redeem us? Will you rescue us?” And God sends Moses. Moses comes to the family of Abraham, he leads them out of Egypt, they come into a land that God has prepared for them, and he makes them into a people, into a nation. He gives them laws, and these laws were governing their relationship with God. When they obeyed the laws God promised blessing, when they disobeyed the laws, God promised consequences. The role of the prophet was to speak to God's people, Israel, in times when they were sinning to remind them to repent of sin, so that they don't actually reap the consequences. The prophet would come with a word from the Lord to try to turn his people's hearts back to God, and back to living a life in light of what God commands. That's the role of the prophet. And Joel is a prophet. He's speaking to God's people, trying to turn them back to God and repentance.

What's interesting about Joel though, is that quite often prophets spoke about a particular sin issue. So Elijah was the name of a prophet who's quite well known. His whole message was on the basis of Israel worshipping a false god called Baal, and Elijah's job, through every aspect of his life, was to call them back from their Baal worship, to worship the one true God. See, Israel had a particular sin issue that Elijah was calling them out of. But what we have in Joel is something a little bit different. Joel's not primarily addressing a particular sin; what Joel is doing is providing some theological reflection on current events. So there's a podcast called *The Briefing*, it's by a guy named Al Mohler, and basically what he does is he talks about actual current events and he provides a Christian worldview to it. He



describes it and then he analyzes it. Well, this is what Joel is doing. This is his podcast called *The Briefing* where he's going to describe a natural disaster and then he's going to provide some theological reflection on it. So here's Joel's description of the natural disaster that he's going to respond to with the word of the Lord. So, Joel 1:2-4,

“Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation. [Here's what you need to tell everyone. Here's the crazy thing that's taken place that no one's ever seen before.] What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.”

See, Joel's not responding to a particular sin, he's looking at a natural disaster that took place in the land of Israel. He's saying, “There's nothing like this that's happened before. The locusts have come in and attacked the land so that there's nothing left. And everyone's going to be talking about this locust attack for generations, it's so severe.” Locusts are little bugs, kind of look like grasshoppers when they're little, they just kind of crawl around on the ground, kind of hop around and eat the grass. As they grow up, though, they get their wings and they start attacking trees and all kinds of other parts. Locusts have this ability to start as families, to gather and join with other families, they create a swarm, and eventually they become a massive herd that can decimate entire regions in short periods of time. It's like a cloud coming towards you, but instead of it being an actual cloud, it's a dark cloud of bugs, destroying every single thing in their midst. Joel's saying, “We've had a massive locust attack. There's nothing left.” That's the current event. Now he's going to provide some theological reflection on it. What he's going to talk about is he's going to basically make the point that we'll see later, that this locust attack, this natural disaster, is also a God thing. So here's Joel 1:5 -15,

“Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips. A nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white. Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the betrothed of her youth. Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the Lord. 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. The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree— all the trees of the field—are dried up. Surely the people's joy is withered away. Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. 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. Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.”



So Joel described the massive natural disaster, the locust attack, and he provides us theological reflection. His theological reflection is one of repeated explaining how devastating things are, and then commanding people to repent. So he'll describe how bad things are because of the attack, and then he'll provide another command. He goes back and forth. If you were in the original audience and you grew up going to Hebrew school, you would have had it very clearly laid out to you that Joel's point is that this is a God thing. Joel uses something called a chiasm to make his point. A chiasm is a Hebrew literary device, which, you're thinking to yourself, I'm glad I came to church because I get to learn about Hebrew literary devices, this is going to be great.

So, imagine you're in an English class, and you're supposed to write a very convincing paper, right? So, what does your English teacher tell you to do? "I need you to write me a five paragraph essay. You need to write an introduction where you say your thesis. Your thesis is that blue is the best colour. And then in your introduction you need to give a little bit of a heads up of what your three main points are, that's going to prove that blue is the best colour. So your three points in your paragraphs are going to be that it's the colour of the sky, and it's the colour of the sea, and it's the colour of my eyes. And you're going to write your paper, and you're going to conclude it by saying, 'And thus blue is the best colour,' and everyone who reads it is thinking to themselves, what a convincing case that blue is the best colour."

Well, Joel went to Hebrew school, he learned how to use a Hebrew literary device to make a really clear point, and the way that they did that was through a structure called a chiasm. Here's how a chiasm works. It's going to be on the screen for you. So in verse 5, Joel starts with a command, and then in verses 6 and 7 he describes an event. In verse 8 he gives another command, in verses 9 and 10 he describes an event. In verse 11 he provides a command, in verse 12 he describes an event, and then in verses 13 and 14 there's another command. You can see the structure of how words are being used to get to the point of point D, which is verses 9 and 10. So if you were sitting and you were hearing this being read to you, or you were reading what was in front of you, it would have been really really clear that something Joel's trying to drive your attention towards, his thesis, his big idea, is in verses 9 and 10. So here's what Joel 1:9-10 say,

"Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the Lord. The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails."

See, for Joel this was one of the most terrible parts of the locust attack. Not just that it devastated the land, but that it devastated the land to the point that the very way in which Israel was supposed to worship God was cut off from them. They had no option to come to the house of the Lord in worship because the locusts destroyed everything. See, God's the kind of God who's supposed to provide for his people what they need in order to worship properly, and for an attack like this to take place that cuts Israel's means of actually worshiping God, for that to take place, this is clearly a God thing. It's like God telling you, "Look, I want you to worship me by waving your right arm." And then in an accident you lose your right arm, and that was the only means through which God was wanting you to worship him. See, they were supposed to worship God through the grain offerings and the drink



offerings and bring them to the house of the Lord, but all of those options were cut off from them. It was like a little season of exile. Exile is a word that's used to talk about the experience of the people of Israel when they were removed from the land. So God promises to Israel, "I'm going to be your God, you're going to be my people. You're going to live in a land, and when you're in that land you're going to be able to engage in worship of me." But because of Israel's perpetual and unrepentant sin, there were consequences delivered to them and they were sent out of the land at various points in their history. Which meant they were removed from their ability to worship God the way that he designed for him to be worshiped. This is a little season of exile. Sure, they still live in the actual land, they still have their homes, they're not being kicked out by another nation, but they have no way to worship the Lord. This kind of thing doesn't just happen unless it's also a God thing. The point is crystal clear for the Israelites from Joel's words and the way that he makes his argument that this difficult thing, this natural disaster, it's a God thing.

So let's think about that answer a little bit, let's reflect on it. So Joel made his description of what was going on in the culture, he saw the natural disaster take place and provided his analysis, which was basically that this is a God thing, and we need to repent, that should be our response here. I think the challenge for us is that we aren't usually satisfied with an answer that says that both good things and bad things are God things. We like to think that the good things are God things and the bad things, we'll have some other answer for. One of those other answers, rather than saying it's a God thing, is saying that, well, it's a bad thing, and the reason it happened is because the devil did it and God couldn't stop it. So the way we view the spiritual world is that there are two equal, competing forces, the devil and God, and they're battling over every single little event. I have a little picture to show you to kind of - I think this is how we think of the spiritual world sometimes. That over every event in history, over every little part of our lives, there's this cosmic arm wrestling match going on, and sometimes God wins and we get the parking spot. Yay! Sometimes the devil wins and there's a wildfire.

See, when God gets his way, good things happen. When the devil gets his way, bad things happen. So bad things aren't God things; the devil did it. The problem is that that gives the devil way more credit than the Scriptures do. Job was a guy who was righteous before the Lord, who worshiped him rightly and who experienced horrific things in his life. All of his kids were killed in a windstorm, he lost all of his property and his wealth, he lost his own health. Here's the scene that describes how all of that took place. Job 1:6-12:

"One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.' Then the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.' 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' Satan replied. 'Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your



face.’ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’ Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.”

See, this is just one example of a text that makes it really clear that the devil does actually have power to do things, but only to the extent that God allows him. The devil can bark and he can bite, but he’s on a leash. God holds it. So we can’t just say, “Oh, the bad things aren’t God things because the devil did it,” because God’s holding the leash. It doesn’t get him off the hook.

Here’s another alternative that we provide, the second alternative to this idea, that we don’t like to say that bad things are God things because we’ll say, “Well, they’re just natural disasters,” right? A locust swarm, a bridge falling, a wildfire, that’s just a natural disaster. So sometimes we like to think of God as a cosmic watchmaker. This image has been used before but it’s a helpful one, right? A watchmaker has to have a really fine eye for detail, he has to put every little piece in the right spot, he has to make sure it’s crafted just perfectly to function the way he wants it to. And then, the watchmaker removes himself from the watch and just lets it go “tick, tick, tick, tick.” Sometimes we think that when it comes to the created order, God is a cosmic watchmaker who really cares about the details, but once he’s finished his work he steps back and lets it go “tick, tick, tick, tick.” But again, the problem with that viewpoint, that bad things happen not because it’s a God thing but because it’s just how the natural world works, is that the Scriptures also don’t let us stop there. So the experience of Job, let’s look at Job again, let’s go to Job 38:22-30, we’ll hear how it talks about God’s involvement in nature and in the animal kingdom.

“Have you [he’s talking to Job] entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle? What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth? Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no one lives, an uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens when the waters become hard as stone, when the surface of the deep is frozen?”

Who’s involved with all that stuff, the rain and the wind, who does that, Job? The answer is him. Job 39-41:

“Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?”

See, God’s saying, “Look, lions don’t even eat if I don’t give them their food. They can be way in the den or lying in a thicket, but the reason they catch their prey is because I’m involved. Baby birds get to eat and grow because I make sure they get their food.” See, the picture we have of God in his created order is not one of a watchmaker who makes and then steps back. We have a picture of a God who is intensely involved with the created order. So when we see a locust attack that destroys the land of



Israel, that cuts off Israel's worship, or we see a wildfire that destroys communities, or a bridge collapses, we can't just say, "Ah, that's just the way the natural world works. It's not a God thing, it's just the world." Because if we want our glasses to have the right prescription in them so that we see the world rightly the way God wants us to see it according to his Word, we have to not let him come off the hook. We have to say, no, actually the reason the natural disasters happen is because God let them happen. He doesn't remove himself from any of his involvement, and it happened because it was a God thing.

So look, it's one thing to say something like that. It's one thing to say, "The good things and the bad things are God things." But the challenge is that we live in the midst of bad things. We existentially, we emotionally feel the weight of the horrors of the bad things in which there's no shortage of examples. And there's a half truth in the idea that the devil can do things, right? The devil does have ability to act. So yeah, we can say that the bad things happen because the devil was involved, but remember, the devil's on a leash so God doesn't get off the hook. And yeah, natural disasters do happen because of the way that the world functions at this point. But remember how intimately involved God is with the created order still, so it doesn't get him off the hook. So at the end of the day, we have to sit with the reality that this is just a difficult doctrine. So we're going to want to focus on other primary causes for why things happen, like the bridge collapsed because the builders didn't pay enough attention to it, or it wasn't restored the way it should have been, and so let's focus all of our energies on the primary cause, which is all fair and good, but we need to realize if our glasses are seeing things properly, that doesn't mean that God wasn't still involved with it. It was still a God thing. We can think about the primary cause of a wildfire starting, because a guy threw a cigarette butt out of his window on the freeway, but who sends the rain? Surely one drop would have done, to prevent the massacre of a wildfire gone untamed. So yeah, it's the way the natural world works, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't a God thing. Regardless of whatever the primary cause for events are, God still allows bad things to happen. Good things and bad things are God things.

I've talked about my son in past sermons a lot, I've talked about how when he was quite young he had some medical concerns, and that drove us down to Children's Hospital to try to see what was going on, he was just a few months old at that point. Well, they did a bunch of testing at Children's Hospital and they sent us back a report of a diagnosis. The diagnosis was that my son's problem, the thing that causes a lot of his medical challenges and his developmental challenges is that he's actually missing in his chromosomes, genes have been deleted from them. He's got missing parts in his DNA. So that's a primary cause of a lot of the problems that my son faces is that he has genes deleted. But that doesn't get God off the hook, because God crafted him in the womb. And when he saw those genes trying to delete, he could have said, "Nope." But he didn't. Now look, it's not a good thing that my son has these challenges, but it is a God thing. Exodus 4:11 makes this case explicitly. It says,

"The Lord said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'"



See, God takes ultimate responsibility, even for the challenges in our health. They're not good things, these challenges, but they are God things. There might be other primary causes that are leading that situation to take place, but that doesn't get God off the hook, it's still a God thing. John, 9:13 says,

“As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ [Right, they see a blind man and they say, “Someone must have done something for this to have taken place, God. Jesus answered,] ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

So let's sit with that for a minute. Both the man's blindness, the bad thing, and his eventual healing that takes place later on in John 9, the good thing, both of them God things. The challenges that my son goes through on a daily basis, and the victories that he accomplishes, both God things. If we don't believe that to be true then our glasses don't have the right prescription in them and we're not actually seeing the world the way that it truly is. We have a God who is in control of all things, the good things and the bad things. Primary causes for difficulties don't get God off the hook, because he's invested enough to be involved. He's not a watchmaker. And he's powerful enough to act because there's no one who can outwork him. He's the most powerful being that there is. So if bad things happen, it's ultimately a God thing.

See the question that we're left with is not: does God have the ability to prevent difficulties? He does. We're also not left with the question: does God have an interest in his creation? He does. The question we're left with is why. Why does God let the bad things happen? We may never know. But as Christians we have a bedrock hope in Romans 8:28 where it says,

“And we know that in all things [like good things and bad things] God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

We ask God and he has an answer, but we might never know it. See, in order to get from where my son was having his medical challenges to actually get the diagnosis being sent to us, there was this season in the middle called the testing season, where I had to hold my son down while they put needles in his arms to draw blood from him while he's screaming at me to let him go. Or they have to do a CT scan, but he's not going to stay still enough because he's only a few months old, so I have to strap him to the board so he'll stay still, and he's looking at me with tears in his eyes, pleading to be removed. And I stand and I watch, and I let the bad thing happen. Now look, I'm strong enough to have stopped it. And I'm engaged enough in my son's life to have actually acted. And I love my son enough to want only his joy. And yet the bad thing happened. My son's lying on the bed, thinking to himself, why aren't you doing anything? What possible reason could you have for leaving me in this state of horror and torture? You can't have a reason. But I did.

Look, God is strong enough to stop our difficulties. God's involved enough in our lives to actually act and move. And he's loving enough to want only our joy. And yet we lie under the weight of our sorrows and our difficulties, asking him, “What possible reason could you have for letting this take place in my



life?” And the silence means we think he doesn’t have an answer. But he does. And we know that in all things, God will work for the good of those who love him. And Job said it well, Job 2:10,

“Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

Let me pray for us. Father, you’re good. And you’re wise and you know what you’re doing, and we don’t always know what you’re up to. Father, would you help us see the world rightly? Father, thanks for this passage from Joel, who helps us see that even the bad things are ultimately things that are God things, and help us trust that you are good and you will work together all things for our good. Lord, we know you’re for our good because you sent your Son. And he lived and he died, he rose again and he’s returning again to make all things new where bridges won’t collapse and wildfires won’t go rampant, and where every single person’s body functions the way it should. Until that day, Lord, would you help us trust you in the season that we’re in. Help us to accept both good and trouble from you, because you are God. We pray this for your fame and in Jesus’ name. Amen.