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JOEL

A 3-Week Group Bible Study

By Greg and Kayla Gibson

WEEK 1 OF 3 • GENERAL / MIXED GROUP EDITION

The Land Mourns — Joel 1:1–20

Scripture Scope: Joel 1:1–20 (ESV) • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

PARTICIPANT STUDY EDITION

Synchronized Section-by-Section with the Leader Guide Edition · Includes Group Reflection Workspace

Joel — 3-Week Group Bible Study (Participant Study Edition)

Week 1: The Land Mourns (Joel 1:1–20)

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- **The title:** "The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel" (1:1). Nothing else is known of Joel himself, and the book does not name a king, so its date is debated. Its message does not depend on settling the date.
- **The voices:** The LORD speaks through Joel to elders, priests, farmers, drinkers, and all who live in the land. In chapters 2–3 the LORD's own "I will" answers the people's cry.
- **Its form:** Prophetic poetry built around a locust disaster that strips the land, which becomes a window onto the day of the LORD.
- **The structure:**
  - The land mourns, and the people are called to lament and fast (chapter 1).
  - The day of the LORD, the call to return, the LORD's restoration, and the promise of the Spirit (chapter 2).
  - The nations judged in the valley of decision, and the LORD dwelling in Zion (chapter 3).
- **Why it matters:** Joel teaches God's people how to lament honestly, how to return to the LORD with all their heart, and how to hope. The LORD is gracious and merciful, he restores what was lost, and he pours out his Spirit on all flesh. Peter quotes Joel on the day of Pentecost.

How This 3-Week Study Works

You may notice this study is shorter than our usual eight weeks. Even though we are 8weekbiblestudy.com, stretching Joel to eight weeks would have left it thin on content, and we never want to trade quality for quantity.

Designed for weekly small groups, mini-churches, and community gatherings (75–90 minutes per session) rather than daily homework checklists, this study is three weeks rather than the series' usual eight. Joel has 73 verses in three chapters (in the ESV), and each chapter is one movement of the book: lament, return and the Spirit, and the valley of decision. Three weeks follow the book's own shape without padding. Each week invites you to lament, return, and hope in the LORD together through six repeatable sections:

- **Section X.1 — Opening:** Sets the scene, the Week at a Glance, Head, Heart, and Hands objectives, the Opening Frame, and the Opening Entry Question.
- **Section X.2 — Historical & Literary Context:** Places the week's passage inside the structure of Joel and the ancient Near Eastern world.
- **Section X.3 — Movement 1:** The week's first guided passage: Guided Scripture Reading, Anchor Verses, Teaching Narrative, and Group Discussion Questions.
- **Section X.4 — Movement 2:** The week's second guided passage, following the same flow.
- **Section X.5 — Canonical Horizon:** Traces how the passage echoes across Scripture and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- **Section X.6 — Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer:** Moves the week's study into everyday life, previews next week, and closes in prayer.

Key anchor verses are printed in each section for quick reference. Longer focal passages are read aloud together from the ESV.

Choosing a Bible Translation: Top 5 Translations Compared

Every English Bible translation falls along a spectrum between two primary approaches: word-for-word translation (formal equivalence, which prioritizes literal accuracy to the original phrasing and sentence structure) and thought-for-thought translation (dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes immediate modern readability by translating idioms and ideas into natural contemporary expressions). Here is how five widely used English translations compare:

- **ESV (English Standard Version) — Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Follows the wording and sentence structure of the original Hebrew and Greek closely while using modern English; well suited to close study.
  - Cons: Because it tracks the original sentence structure, some phrasing can feel more formal than everyday speech.
- **NIV (New International Version) — Balanced (Between Word-for-Word and Thought-for-Thought)**
  - Pros: Widely read; balances accuracy to the original languages with natural, everyday readability.
  - Cons: Because some idioms are rendered as modern expressions, a few literal wordplays or technical terms can be less visible.
- **NLT (New Living Translation) — Thought-for-Thought**
  - Pros: Warm and conversational; reads smoothly aloud and helps readers follow the big picture of long passages.
  - Cons: Because it prioritizes meaning over literal phrasing, it can be harder to use for close word study.
- **CSB (Christian Standard Bible) — Optimal Equivalence (Balanced)**
  - Pros: Stays close to the original words where possible while smoothing awkward phrasing into natural modern English.
  - Cons: Because it is a newer translation, some well-known verses may sound different from the wording many readers remember.
- **KJV / NKJV (King James Version & New King James Version) — Traditional Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Historic cadence that shaped English literature and church history; the NKJV updates archaic pronouns ("thee/thou") while keeping the classic rhythm.
  - Cons: Often reads like older English poetry, with complex sentences and archaic or formal vocabulary that can be harder for modern readers to follow.

This study quotes the ESV.

Greg & Kayla's Recommended Study Bibles

Having a trusted study Bible on hand is one of the best ways to go deeper as you read through Joel:

- **Greg's Favorite Study Bible:** The MacArthur Study Bible (ESV), which contains extensive explanatory notes beneath almost every verse, ideal for detailed study.
- **Kayla's Favorite Study Bible:** The ESV Study Bible, containing over 20,000 study notes, articles, and explanations.

The 3-Week Joel Study at a Glance

Week	Title & Passage	Movement 1 / Movement 2	Canonical Horizon
1	**The Land Mourns** (1:1–20)	Hear This, You Elders (1:1–12) / Consecrate a Fast (1:13–20)	Creation groans; the Lord to whom we call
2	**Return; I Will Pour Out My Spirit** (2:1–32)	The Day and the Return (2:1–17) / The LORD Becomes Jealous for His Land (2:18–32)	Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord; the Spirit poured out at Pentecost
3	**The Valley of Decision** (3:1–21)	The Nations Judged (3:1–16) / The LORD Dwells in Zion (3:17–21)	The Judge of the nations; the river of life and God dwelling with his people

WEEK 1 OF 3

WEEK 1 SESSION GUIDE · JOEL 1:1–20

Week 1: The Land Mourns

Scripture Scope: Joel 1:1–20 (ESV) • Focal Passages: Joel 1:2–4; 1:10–12; 1:13–20 • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

Section 1.1

Opening: The Land Mourns (Joel 1:1–20)

Opening

Joel opens with a question meant to stop everyone in their tracks: "Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?" Wave after wave of locusts has stripped the land. What one swarm left, the next devoured. The vines are bare, the fig trees splintered, the fields ruined. The grain, the wine, and the oil are gone, and with them the offerings at the temple. Joel calls everyone to mourn: those who drink wine, the farmers and vinedressers, the priests who minister at the altar.

Then he calls for more than sadness: "Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly." The day of the LORD is near. The chapter ends not with an explanation but with a cry: "To you, O LORD, I call." Even the wild animals pant for God, because the streams have dried up.

Week 1 At a Glance

Scripture Scope	Joel 1:1–20 (a disaster unlike any in living memory, waves of locusts, a call to mourn that widens from elders to drinkers to farmers to priests, offerings cut off from the temple, a fast and a solemn assembly, the day of the LORD near, and a cry to the LORD joined by the panting beasts)
Focal Passages	Joel 1:2–4; 1:10–12; 1:13–20
Literary & Structural Anchor	The circle of mourners keeps widening: elders, drinkers, the nation like a grieving bride, farmers, priests, all the inhabitants, cattle, and wild beasts. Field and temple suffer together. 1:15 names the day of the LORD for the first time; Weeks 2 and 3 will unfold it. The chapter ends in a cry (1:19–20), not an explanation.
Big Idea	When disaster strips the land, God's people are called to lament together and cry out to the LORD, because the day of the LORD is near.

Week 1 Learning Objectives (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	**Know How to Lament:** Learn how Joel calls the whole community to mourn, fast, and cry out to the LORD in a time of ruin.
HEART	**Bring Grief to the Lord:** See that Jesus is the Lord to whom we call, who wept and who feeds the hungry, and that lament is safe in his presence.
HANDS	**Cry Out Together:** Take one step to bring a loss, your own or someone else's, honestly to the LORD with others.

Opening Frame: The Land Mourns

Hosea ended with an invitation: "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God." Joel opens in a land already in ruins. Wave after wave of locusts has stripped the fields, the vines, and the fig trees; grain, wine, and oil have failed, and even the offerings at the temple have stopped. Joel does not explain the disaster away. He calls the elders and all the people to listen, to remember, to weep, and to gather for a holy fast and cry out to the LORD. This is a 3–week study: this week we read chapter 1, next week chapter 2, and in our final week chapter 3. The question for this week: what do we do when everything we depend on has failed? Before we read together, take a moment to share with the group:

Opening Entry Question (Icebreaker)

1.1 Q1 (Opening Entry Question): What is a story your family tells from one generation to the next, whether funny, hard, or memorable?

Section 1.2

Historical & Literary Context: When the Locusts Came (Joel 1:1–20)

Entering the World of a Land in Ruins

1. Historical Background

Joel names no king, and scholars propose dates from the ninth century BC to after the exile. The temple is standing, with priests, offerings, and elders leading the community.

2. Cultural Setting

Grain, new wine, and olive oil were the staples of daily life and the basic temple offerings. When locusts and drought destroyed them, both table and altar went empty.

3. Literary Structure of Joel 1:1–20

- **The title** (1:1)
- **The call to remember and tell** (1:2–4)
- **Drinkers, the nation as a grieving bride, and farmers** (1:5–12)
- **Priests and a solemn assembly** (1:13–14)
- **The day of the LORD near** (1:15–18)
- **The cry to the LORD** (1:19–20)

4. Key Themes

Lament; memory across generations; the land and the temple suffering together; fasting and solemn assembly; the day of the LORD; crying out.

5. Theological Considerations

Joel does not explain the disaster in detail; he calls the people to turn toward God. A disaster in Scripture is a call to seek the LORD, but not every present trouble in someone's life is a readable punishment (Luke 13:1–5).

6. Relevant Scholarly Insights

1:15 plays on sound in Hebrew: "destruction" (shod) "from the Almighty" (Shaddai). The four Hebrew locust terms in 1:4 (gazam, 'arbeh, yeleq, chasil) may refer to developmental stages, distinct species, or poetic intensification for successive waves of swarms; either way, the picture is total devastation.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.2)

> **1.2 Q1:** Joel tells the people to tell their children about the disaster, "and let your children tell their children" (1:3). Why might God want a disaster remembered across generations rather than forgotten?

1.2 Q2: When the crops failed, the temple offerings failed too. How do hard times in daily life affect our worship?

1.2 Q3: Joel calls the whole community, not just individuals, to mourn and cry out. What is the value of lamenting together rather than alone?

Section 1.3

Movement 1: Hear This, You Elders (Joel 1:1–12)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Summary of Joel 1:1** — The word of the LORD comes to Joel, son of Pethuel.
- **Reader 1: Joel 1:2–4** (focal passage) — Hear this, you elders and all inhabitants of the land: has anything like this happened in your days or your fathers' days? Tell your children, and let them tell theirs: what one kind of locust left, the next ate, wave after wave.
- **Summary of Joel 1:5–9** — Wake up and weep, you who drink wine, for the sweet wine is cut off; a nation as strong as lions has invaded the land and stripped the vines and fig trees; lament like a young woman in sackcloth for the husband of her youth; the offerings are cut off, and the priests mourn.
- **Reader 2: Joel 1:10–12** (focal passage) — The fields are destroyed and the ground mourns; the grain, wine, and oil fail; the farmers and vinedressers are ashamed; the vine, fig, pomegranate, palm, and apple trees dry up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

Joel 1:2: 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?

Joel 1:10: The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes.

Teaching Narrative: Hear This, You Elders

1. The Word of the LORD (Joel 1:1)

The book's authority.

2. Has Such a Thing Happened? (Joel 1:2–3)

A call to see, remember, and tell.

3. Wave After Wave (Joel 1:4)

Retold briefly. Total devastation.

4. Wake Up and Weep (Joel 1:5–9)

Retold briefly. Drinkers, a grieving bride, empty offerings.

5. The Ground Mourns (Joel 1:10–12)

Field and farmer together; gladness dries up.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.3)

1.3 Q1: "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?" (1:2). Why does Joel begin by asking people to recognize how serious the disaster is?

1.3 Q2: Joel calls everyone to wake up and weep (1:5). Why can comfort or busyness keep us from noticing what is wrong?

1.3 Q3: Joel says to lament "like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth" (1:8). What does this picture say about the depth of loss God wants his people to feel?

1.3 Q4: "The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns" (1:10). What does it mean that even the land is pictured as grieving?

1.3 Q5: Joel says "gladness dries up from the children of man" (1:12). Why does shared disaster drain a whole community's joy—and how can a church support one another honestly when gladness feels far away? (Personal losses may remain private, with full freedom to pass.)

Section 1.4

Movement 2: Consecrate a Fast (Joel 1:13–20)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Reader 1: Joel 1:13–14** (focal passage) — Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; spend the night in sackcloth, for the offerings are withheld; consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the people to the house of the LORD, and cry out to the LORD.
- **Reader 2: Joel 1:15** (focal passage) — Alas for the day! The day of the LORD is near, and it comes as destruction from the Almighty.
- **Summary of Joel 1:16–18** — Food is cut off before their eyes, and joy from the house of God; the seed shrivels and the barns lie in ruins; the cattle groan and wander, and even the flocks suffer.
- **Reader 3: Joel 1:19–20** (focal passage) — To you, O LORD, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures and trees; even the wild beasts pant for you, because the water brooks are dried up.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

> **Joel 1:13:** Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.
>
> **Joel 1:14:** Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.
>
> **Joel 1:15:** Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.
>
> **Joel 1:19:** To you, O LORD, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field.
>
> **Joel 1:20:** Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.

Teaching Narrative: Consecrate a Fast

1. Priests in Sackcloth (Joel 1:13)

Leaders lead in lament.

2. Consecrate a Fast (Joel 1:14)

A holy gathering of the whole people to cry out.

3. The Day of the LORD (Joel 1:15)

Near, and from the Almighty.

4. Food and Joy Cut Off (Joel 1:16–18)

Retold briefly. Barns, cattle, and flocks.

5. To You, O LORD, I Call (Joel 1:19–20)

The prophet's cry joined by the panting beasts.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.4)

1.4 Q1: "Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests" (1:13). Why is it important for spiritual leaders to lead the way in lament and repentance?

1.4 Q2: "Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly" (1:14). What might it look like for a church today to gather to cry out to the LORD in a time of crisis?

1.4 Q3: "Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near" (1:15). What do you think of when you hear "the day of the LORD"?

1.4 Q4: Joel cries, "To you, O LORD, I call" (1:19). Why is turning toward God, rather than away from him, the right response to disaster?

1.4 Q5: "Even the beasts of the field pant for you" (1:20). What does it teach you that even the animals are pictured as longing for God?

Section 1.5

Canonical Horizon: Creation Groans; the Lord to Whom We Call

Tracing the Thread Across Scripture

Joel's portrait of a mourning land and panting beasts resonates with Paul's picture of all creation groaning as it waits for redemption (Romans 8:22–23), and Jesus, who wept and had compassion on the hungry, is the Lord to whom we call. Turn to each passage as the connections are traced.

1. Creation Groaning (Romans 8:18–23)

The whole creation groans as it waits for redemption. Joel's panting beasts belong to that groaning, and to the hope of a renewed creation.

2. The Lord Who Weeps (Luke 19:41; John 11:35)

Jesus wept over Jerusalem and at the grave of Lazarus. Lament is safe in his presence.

3. The Lord Who Feeds (Mark 6:34–44)

When the crowd had no food, Jesus had compassion and fed them. He is the Lord to whom we call.

4. The Day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:1–11)

The day of the LORD, already near in Joel, is gathered up in the day of Christ's coming, a day to watch for in hope, not to fear in despair.

Anchor Verse (ESV)

> **Joel 1:19:** To you, O LORD, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.5)

1.5 Q1: Paul writes, "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (Romans 8:22). How does Joel's picture of a mourning land help you understand this verse?

1.5 Q2: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). How does it comfort you that Jesus himself lamented?

1.5 Q3: Paul says "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" but believers are "children of light" (1 Thessalonians 5:2, 5). How does Christ change the way we think about the day of the LORD?

Personal & Group Application (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	Joel calls the whole community to see the disaster, mourn together, fast, and cry out to the LORD.
HEART	Jesus is the Lord to whom we call; he weeps with us and will renew all creation.
HANDS	Faith brings losses honestly to the LORD and gathers with others to cry out.

Section 1.6

Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer

Application

Take a few minutes to move this week's study into everyday life. Discuss these three questions together and write down what you want to remember:

1.6 Q1: Following Joel's pattern of turning disaster into prayer ("To you, O LORD, I call," 1:19), what helps believers bring hard losses honestly to God rather than hiding them? (Personal hardships may remain private, with full freedom to pass.)

1.6 Q2: Without sharing anyone's private story aloud, how can believers practice patient, compassionate presence with someone who is grieving rather than rushing to fix their pain? (Personal plans may remain private.)

1.6 Q3: How does Joel 1:14–19 invite believers to set aside focused time to pray in hard seasons—whether through quiet prayer, setting aside a distraction, or (only where medically safe and wise) another form of self-denial? (Personal practices may remain private; no one should feel pressured to fast from food.)

Looking Ahead to Next Week

Recap: In Week 1, we saw a land stripped by locusts, heard the call to mourn and fast, and joined the cry, "To you, O LORD, I call."

Transition: Next week the day of the LORD comes into view like an army, and the LORD calls, "Return to me with all your heart," then promises to restore and to pour out his Spirit.

Week 2 Overview — Return; I Will Pour Out My Spirit (Joel 2:1–32): Movement 1, The Day and the Return (2:1–17), covers the alarm, the darkness of the day, and the call to rend hearts. Movement 2, The LORD Becomes Jealous for His Land (2:18–32), covers restoration of the years the locusts ate and the Spirit poured out on all flesh. The Canonical Horizon traces Pentecost and the promise that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Focal Readings to Preview

- Joel 2:11–17
- Joel 2:18
- Joel 2:25–32

My One Concrete Step for the Week Ahead

Write down or name aloud the specific rhythm, boundary, or conversation you want to practice before next week's gathering:

Closing Prayer

Close your time together by inviting each person to share a one-sentence takeaway or prayer request, then pray together along these lines:

Closing Group Prayer

LORD, you hear the cry of your people and of all creation. We bring you our honest lament for the losses in our lives and in our world. We pray for those who have lost work, land, or loved ones, and for those who feel that you have gone quiet. Thank you for Jesus, who wept with the grieving and fed the hungry. Teach us to cry out to you together. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.