

## THE MINOR PROPHETS

*Joel 3:9-21*

This is a survey lesson primarily for background. All the classes should know the difference between the major and the minor prophets, how many of each there were, and where their books are found in the Bible. Even the youngest children should be able to say that a prophet is one who speaks for the Lord, and all above the Primaries should know the general tenor of a prophet's message.

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### Doctrinal Points

*It is not the Lord who judges us; we judge ourselves by our own choices.*

*Anyone who reads the Bible believing it to be the Word of God and wishing to live as the Lord would have him live receives enlightenment from it.*

*Faith is not genuine unless we try to live according to the truth we learn.*

*Any selfish feeling, if unacknowledged and unchecked, leads to more and more selfishness.*

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### Notes for Parents

We are all familiar with the Lord's command in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:20): "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." And the Gospel of Mark (Mark 9:45-46) describes hell as a place "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." In the New Church we believe that hell-fire is not a physical fire but the same fire that, as we sometimes say, "burns us up" when we are angry and resentful because we think we have been injured. And the worm that does not die is the same worm that is at work when we say, for example, that someone is just "eaten up" with jealousy. We all know that a

person really can let little petty jealousies, or selfish indulgences, or feelings of resentment eat into his soul until there is nothing left there of kindness or unselfishness or happiness. That is what the Lord means when He says through the prophet Joel (Joel 1:4): “That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten.”

The twelve books of the Minor Prophets, the last twelve books of the Old Testament, are very short, but they are full of practical lessons for us, once we realize that in them the Lord is speaking to us and not just to a nation and time of long ago.

Joel warns us that the “day of the Lord,” the day of judgment, is sure to come to each one of us, but it is not something far off which we can forget about most of the time. We are making our own judgment day by day as we choose to be selfish or unselfish, kind or unkind, proud or humble in the little affairs of everyday life. Every day is judgment day, for every day we are forming the character which we are going to keep to eternity. So Joel tells us to fight these enemies within ourselves now. He says: “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong.” And he is describing all of us as we are every day when he says: “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”

This last verse is a good one for all of us to learn and remember. Teach it to the children and tell them what it means, and then whenever you see them hesitating, trying to decide whether to be good or naughty—and we do often see that in them, and in ourselves too—just remind them: “The day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.” When you say that, because it is a verse from the Word the Lord is speaking through you to the child and the effect is much greater than if you used your own words.

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### Primary

Spend part of the time showing the children the twelve books of the Minor

Prophets in the Bible, reading the names, and calling attention to the length. Read the first verse of a book whenever it includes, “The word of the Lord came,” or, “The vision,” in order to impress upon the children the fact of revelation. Have them learn the names *Hosea*, *Malachi*, and *Joel*. Then follow the outline given in their notes and questions.

We have learned that there were four prophets called the “Major Prophets”: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Each one of these four is a long book in our Bible. Ask someone to show you where these books are in the Bible, and see how long they are.

In addition to the four Major Prophets there were twelve *Minor* Prophets. Their books were so short that all twelve could be written on one scroll. They are the last twelve books of the Old Testament.

Read their names in the Bible and then see how many you can remember. Try to remember at least the first and the last.

You can also easily remember Joel, from whose book our lesson for today is taken.

How many chapters are there in the book of Joel?

What is the very first verse of the first chapter?

You see, Joel, like Ezekiel, said that his words were given him by the Lord. He pointed out the sad state into which the people of Judah had fallen.

Next he warned them of the disaster that was to come.

He told them to fight against their evils.

Finally he prophesied that the Lord would spare the good and would someday restore His church.

Now let us read verse 14. *Multitudes* means “a great many people,” and *decision* means “making up one’s mind about what to do.” Can you guess what the “valley of decision” is? It is just where every one of us is every time we are trying to decide whether to do right or wrong; and the Lord is very near us then, trying to help us to decide to do right.

The valley of decision is the life we live every day here on earth.

Almost every hour of the day we have a decision to make between right and wrong.

The Lord is always near us trying to help us decide to do right.

Remember this whenever you feel like being naughty.

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### Junior

With this class do more with the facts that are known concerning the Minor

Prophets and with the general characteristics of the prophetic function. The lesson in Joel 3:14 is important.

The last twelve books in the Old Testament are called the “Minor” Prophets. This is because they are very short books—Obadiah has only one chapter—and the whole twelve were written on one scroll. Several of them are records of a single vision or prophecy each, but in some there are prophecies extending over a considerable period of time. All of them make the definite claim to inspiration and have always been so accepted.

Some of the Minor Prophets date and place themselves, giving the names of the kings of Israel or Judah in whose reign the prophecies were given. Others do not. Scholars have differed as to the time of these undated books, but the order in which they were originally placed, which is the same in our Bibles, is felt by many to be substantially correct with the exception of the book of Obadiah, which is believed to belong to the period of the captivity. Hosea, Amos, and Jonah were prophets in Israel and Amos also prophesied in Judah. The first three and Jonah were contemporaries, living in the period around 800 B.C. The last three, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, prophesied in Judah after the return from captivity. Haggai, especially, was the prophet who urged completing the rebuilding of the temple. Several of the Minor Prophets were given messages concerning the coming of the Messiah. The fourth chapter of Malachi, the last chapter in the Old Testament, is such a prophecy. We shall refer to it when we begin the study of the Gospel of Mark.

The prophet Joel, from whose book we are taking our assignment for today, is believed to have lived in Judah in the time of king Uzziah, who was the third king before Hezekiah. Joel, like all the other prophets, was sent to point out the sins into which the people had fallen. Read the first four verses of the first chapter. Now read Matthew 6:19 and Mark 9:43-44, 47-48. You see the Lord Himself spoke in the same language in which Joel spoke, pointing out to us that our many little selfish desires and wrong thoughts are just like destructive insects which eat up the good

things in us and finally, if we let them have their way, destroy all our possibilities for heavenly character.

After this, like the other prophets, Joel is given a promise of restoration for the good. Read chapter 2:21-32. This is a famous passage, especially because part of it was quoted by the Apostle Peter (Acts 2:16-21) on the day of Pentecost when the Apostles were given the “gift of tongues.”

In the part of the third chapter which we have taken for our lesson, Joel shows the people just what the coming of the Messiah will mean to every individual. The prophecy was fulfilled when Christ came into the world. The selfish and evil found His coming a great threat, and they crucified His physical body, hoping in that way to get rid of Him. But the good, who longed for the truth to teach them how to live rightly, found in Him their full satisfaction and joy.

Do you think this all happened a long time ago and doesn't have anything to do with us? Do you think the Lord provided for the preservation of certain inspired prophecies just as a record of the history of one particular nation? We should know better. All the prophecies recorded in the Bible are messages from the Lord to people of all nations and times, and so they are messages to us. Read verse 14 of our chapter. Every one of us is in the valley of decision every day of our lives in this world. Every day we have choices to make, choices between doing what we know is right and letting our natural selfish feelings govern our words and deeds. And when we are facing these choices, it may help us to choose rightly if we remember that the Lord is always at hand to help us if we look to Him. Choosing what is right from day to day and from hour to hour is the only way to make progress toward the sunshine of heavenly life. The “day of the Lord” is always near us in the valley of decision.

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### Intermediate

This is a particularly good lesson for children of this age because it is a “difficult” age when children are apt to be especially irritating and parents find

them hard to take. The Sunday school teacher can help a great deal by showing an understanding of how the children feel and putting into their minds thoughts which will help them toward self-control. The pupils' notes on the lesson have been written with this in mind.

The last twelve books of the Old Testament, Hosea to Malachi, are called the Minor Prophets. They are short books—Obadiah has only one chapter—and in the days when the Old Testament was preserved on parchment scrolls they were all written on one scroll. The visions and prophecies which they record were given over a period of about four hundred years, from the time of Uzziah king of Judah, the third king before Hezekiah, until about a hundred and fifty years after the first return from captivity. This means from about 800 B.C. to 400 B.C. Jonah, Hosea, and Amos prophesied in Israel, and Amos also prophesied in Judah. The others all spoke to the people of Judah. Obadiah's prophecy is believed to have been given during the captivity. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied after the return.

Several of them were contemporaries and also contemporary with one or more of the Major Prophets. We know that there were many prophets all through the history of the children of Israel. We read in several places of "companies" of prophets, and in the Benedictus (which we sometimes sing), it is stated, "As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began." So we are not to suppose that the Lord has spoken to mankind only through those prophets whose names we find in the Word. But we may rightly assume that the message of all those other prophets was a message given by the Lord just to help the people to whom it was originally spoken, while the visions and prophecies recorded in the Word are for all people in all times. So it is not particularly important for us to know just when these Minor Prophets lived or just what they themselves and the people of their time thought their words meant. What is important is to find out what they mean for us.

Joel is one of those whose message describes something that happens to people over and over again, something that may happen

to us if we do not take care.

Did you ever have a day when everything seemed to go wrong, and your mother finally said, “I guess you must have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed this morning”? There was more truth in what she said than you think. Look back over such a day and see what really happened. Perhaps you didn’t want to get up; so you were cross. Because you were cross, you were impatient and perhaps you tore something when you were dressing and had to stop and find something else to put on. So you were still crosser when you came downstairs and you found fault with your breakfast and wasted so much time fussing about it that you were almost late for school and forgot to take your homework along. So it went on all day, and all the while you were blaming other people for the things that were happening instead of seeing that it was your own cross, selfish feelings that were spoiling your day. Each mistake made things a little worse. Listen to what Joel says (Joel 1:4): “That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten.” Each little cross feeling was like a destructive insect eating away at the good, happy feelings you might have been enjoying.

Joel tells us that if we let such things go on in us, there will come a time when it is too late for us to change. Perhaps you know some elderly person who is always cross and disagreeable. No one likes him and he is not at all happy, but he has become so used to being what he is and to blaming other people for everything that happens to him that he no longer wants to be any different. Do you suppose he was always that way? No; once he was a dear little baby and then an innocent little child. But sometime or other he began to let his selfish feelings grow. Perhaps he got up on the wrong side of the bed one morning and just let himself keep on going from bad to worse until now he cannot change. When he dies, he will not be able to enjoy heavenly happiness, because he has lost the ability to be unselfish.

Joel calls the time when the final separation between the good

and the evil is made “the day of the Lord.” Read Mark 13:32-37. Some people think of the “day of the Lord” as meaning only the day when the Lord was born into the world. That was indeed a day of judgment. But we should notice that even at that time it was not the Lord who judged the people: they judged themselves. The ones who had remained loving and unselfish welcomed the Lord and followed Him. Those who had lost all interest in anything but themselves hated and crucified Him.

The “day of the Lord” comes for each one of us when we finish our life in this world, and we need to remember that every day each of us is forming himself into the kind of person he will be forever. So in a sense every day is a day of the Lord. The part of the third chapter of Joel which we have for our lesson starts with a “call to arms.” What it means is that we should look at ourselves honestly and recognize the faults that are threatening our happiness, and fight them now while we can. For selfishness and good cannot live together. If we choose the good each day, the Lord can be with us and lead us to happiness, but He cannot make the choice for us. Read verse 14. We are the multitudes. The valley of decision is our everyday life. And the day of the Lord is always near in the valley of decision.

*Basic Correspondences*

palmerworm = the false destroying the good  
locust = falsity of the sensuous  
valley of decision = our everyday life

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**Senior**

More should be done in this class with the nature and purpose of the books of the Prophets, pointing out especially the fact that their message is timeless and universal. The teacher should be familiar with all three chapters of Joel and be able to use this book as an example throughout the lesson period.

Now we pass to the Minor Prophets. They are called “Minor” because their books are short. All twelve were written on one scroll, whereas each of the books of the Major Prophets needed



a whole scroll. Several of the books of the Minor Prophets are records of only one vision or message. They all claim to be revelation: in most of them the very first verse contains the words, “The word of the Lord came,” or, “The vision which came.” They are all accepted as inspired in the Jewish canon of Scripture as well as in ours.

In some of these books the historical place of the prophet is specifically stated, but in several it is not, and scholars have spent much time and effort in trying to place these, and have differed and still differ in their conclusions. Study of the text of Scripture is interesting and useful, but scholars may be wrong. They are handicapped by the fact that they assume the prophecy to be limited in its statements to things which the prophet himself has witnessed, rejecting the implications of inspiration. For example, Joel speaks of a plague of destructive insects and a drought, and the attention of the scholars is directed toward finding out when in history such physical conditions prevailed. But we know that the conditions which Joel describes are pictures of spiritual conditions which may be present at any time in the life of the individual or of the world. So it does not really matter particularly just when Joel lived or just what his message meant to the people of his day.

We have noted before that all the prophets had the same function: to point out the evils in the heart and the falsities in the mind, to warn of the inevitable results of persistence in the wrong course, and at the same time to assure the good of the Lord’s constant presence and protection, and to promise them eternal happiness if they remained faithful through their trials and temptations. We know that from the beginning there were prophets (Luke 1:70), many prophets of whose names and messages no record has been preserved. We may assume that the message of these unremembered prophets was specifically to the people of their own nation and time. But the prophecies which, under divine providence, have been preserved in the Word are shown by that very fact to have been spoken by the Lord to all men in all times. It is not their meaning for the ancient Jews which we should look for, but their

meaning for us.

Swedenborg tells us that anyone who reads the Bible reverently, believing it to be the Word of God and desiring to find in it the truth which will show him how to live rightly, receives enlightenment from the Lord to the extent of his ability and need. This has proved true throughout the history of the Christian Church. In the Minor Prophets, for example, devout men have always found many verses, such as Micah 6:8, which even in the letter were clear directives for life, and they have also found some verses, such as Joel 2:25, in which the inner meaning shone through the letter so clearly that they have brought comfort and strength. Our early American literature is especially full of references to the Minor Prophets.

But it is only the knowledge of the law of correspondence, revealed by the Lord in His Second Coming, which “opens” these books and makes every verse applicable to our daily lives. In Revelation 10:7 it is prophesied that one day “the mystery of God should be finished.” That day came when the Lord opened the Word. This does not mean that if we know the law of correspondence, every verse in the Minor Prophets will be clear to us as soon as we read it. In order really to understand the inner meaning of any verse in Scripture we not only have to study but we have to have reached the point in our regeneration at which that particular verse will be accepted by us and used for further progress. But with even a little honest study we can know the general meaning throughout, and we need such knowledge for our daily life and as a preparation for experiences yet to come.

So, for example, we can see in the book of Joel the teaching that the little selfish desires and wrong thoughts to which we yield day by day are like an army of destroying insects coming across a fruitful land. They eat up the good things that are developing in us and they keep our minds closed against the truth we should be receiving, causing spiritual drought. We see people in our communities, and in the newspapers we read about others, who have gone far astray into degenerate living and crime, and we sometimes

wonder how they could have reached such a state. Read Joel 1:8-13 and see how it expresses their condition and the feeling people have about them. None of them came into that state all at once; it was little by little, day by day, as they let the destroying thoughts and feelings control their minds and hearts.

In the second chapter Joel speaks of the coming of the “day of the Lord.” This pictures the time when our opportunity to change our life is over, when we have made ourselves the kind of people we shall be to eternity. For the evil it is a terrible and tragic day. Even for the good it is a day in which they realize how many opportunities they have wasted and how far short they are of what they ought to be; but since they recognize their weakness and need and look to the Lord, there is the beautiful promise in verses 18 to 27, teaching that the Lord will spare them and bring them into heavenly happiness.

Then follows chapter 3, in which the two states—that of the evil and that of the good—are summed up and shown in clear contrast, and we are presented with the choice and taught that we are making our choices now, every day of our lives as we resist our little everyday temptations or yield to them. The case in which we all find ourselves during our lives in this world is pictured for us in verse 14, which we should learn and think about often: “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”

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### Adult

Since most of us are inclined to ignore the Minor Prophets, except perhaps for the story of Jonah and certain clear and well-known verses in the others, the point to be stressed is that there is no part of the Word which does not have a message for us if we are willing to study it, using the means which the Lord has provided in His Second Coming. The book of Joel can be used to show how much practical help is in these books for us.

The last twelve books in the Old Testament are known as the Minor Prophets. Of these books William Hayden in *Our Heavenly Father's Book* says:

[They] are placed in the Hebrew canon as one volume, or book, being written on a single roll or manuscript. This was done for convenience, on account of their brevity; the whole amounting to little more than the contents of a single book of some of the larger prophets, as Isaiah or Ezekiel. Neither the nature of their contents nor the date of the writings furnish a reason for their being classed together. The earliest one probably belongs to the time of Uzziah, eight hundred years B.C.; while the last one may be placed as late as Nehemiah, or 433 B.C. Nor are we certain that the order in which they are placed in our Bible is the exact chronological order in which those prophets lived and wrote, although it is very nearly the same.

Scholars have spent much time and effort on the study of these books, but for the most part their object is to place the books historically, trying to relate the literal statements to specific events in the history of Judah and Israel. Yet simple, devout Bible readers have always found some passages at least directly and clearly meaningful, and we find many verses from these twelve books quoted with effect in our older literature.

In the New Church we know that there is no part of the Word of God which does not have a universal and timeless application. Many prophets, true prophets, have spoken for the Lord to the people of their time “since the world began,” and their names passed out of remembrance when their particular mission was over. But it was not so with the prophets through whom the Word was given. Their message was not to their times alone. If we read any one of the Minor Prophets with a general knowledge of correspondence and a sincere desire for instruction, we shall be rewarded beyond our expectation. We are taking the book of Joel as an example in our lesson today. His book is short—only three chapters—and is one of those which contains no definite statement which places it historically. Hayden says of Joel:

Joel, a name formed by contraction from the two Divine names, Jehovah and Elohim, has been by some interpreted to mean *the worshipper of God*. He was a prophet of the Lord. His birthplace is unknown. He was the son of Pethuel, and lived in Judah, and delivered his prophecy in or near Jerusalem. From all that can be learned, most commentators agree in placing him in the reign of Uzziah, King of Judah, about 800 B.C.,

thus making him in part a contemporary of the three prophets, Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. His book is a single continuous prophecy. Under the figure of an army of locusts, and other destructive insects soon to invade the land, devouring every green thing and leaving the country desolate, he describes the moral desolation of the times, picturing the evil and false things which, creeping into the hearts and minds of men, consume all their good dispositions and true thoughts, leaving only a spiritual waste in the nominal Church. There is an exhortation to repentance, and an assurance that the Lord will come and execute a judgment on all wicked men who thus desolate and destroy the Church, and that He will some day restore genuine fertility by establishing a new Church. It is declared to be a “Word of the Lord” spoken to the prophet from the unseen world. As such, it is quoted in the New Testament. See Acts 2:16, Rom. 10:13. Its place in the canon has never been called in question.

Even this brief summary of the superficial meaning of the book immediately suggests its application to our own lives, if we remember that the condition of the church in the world is such as is its condition in the individuals who compose it. Each one of us is a church in least form. How far is each one of us allowing the palmerworm, the locust, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar to work within him, eating up the good in his heart as fast as it develops and closing his mind against the rain of truth from heaven? We all know, for instance, how a sense of injury—often based on misunderstanding and quite unwarranted—can build up in the mind a barrier between former friends and, feeding on trifles, can, like the swarms of locusts, shut out the sun from the life. How impossible it is to argue with one in such a state! His mind is closed to any truth which would show him his own folly. We know how a bit of idle gossip or a malicious remark, if allowed to go unchallenged, can work in the mind of the bearer as well as of its author and destroy kindness and clear judgment. We do not have to look outside of our own minds and hearts to find this army of destroying insects.

Joel points out the desolation which results and also points out that we may at any time, if we will, check such an unhappy trend in ourselves by turning to the Lord for correction and help, because

the Lord is always at hand. The beautiful promise in Joel 2:23-27 is spoken to each one who will examine himself, recognize his own faults, and fight against them in the Lord's strength.

The particular assignment which is our reading for today is the culmination of Joel's whole message. It is an urgent and immediate call to arms against the evils which are at work in us. The "day of the Lord" in the letter refers to the coming of the Messiah and its result for the ancient Jewish Church. We should note that the Apostle Peter considered this prophecy of Joel fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). But all the Messianic prophecies have a personal as well as a general meaning. Just as there is a time in the life of every regenerating individual when the Lord was born in his life, so there is a time when a final judgment takes place. It is the day when the seed which we have been developing in this earthly life is fully formed and falls to the ground, the day of our passing out of this world into the spiritual world. In AC 10596 Swedenborg says: "The life of man after death is the life of his love, and the life of his faith; consequently such as has been his love, and such as has been his faith, during his life in the world, such his life remains forever. The life of hell is for those who have loved themselves and the world above all things; and the life of heaven for those who have loved God above all things and the neighbor as themselves. These are they who have faith; but the former are they who have not faith. The life of heaven is what is called eternal life; and the life of hell is what is called spiritual death." This is a very straightforward and plain putting of the case as it is, and it should make us think very soberly. This world is the place where we make our choice. Our life here is given us for that purpose. And what Joel is pointing out to us is that we cannot keep putting off our choice. It is made from day to day and from moment to moment. "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision." What we choose today is of vital importance to us. The moment of decision is always now.

The Lord says the same thing many times in the Scriptures in one way or another, notably in Matthew 24:42-51, in all the par-

ables of the Judgment in Matthew 25, and in Mark 13:32-37, in which we find the words, “Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.”

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### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture*, n. 57: “Enlightenment is from the Lord alone, and exists with those who love truths because they are truths and make them of use for life. With others there is no enlightenment in the Word. The reason why enlightenment is from the Lord alone is that the Lord is in all things of the Word. The reason why enlightenment exists with those who love truths because they are truths and make them of use for life, is that such are in the Lord and the Lord in them. For the Lord is His own Divine truth, and when this is loved because it is Divine truth (and it is loved when it is made of use), the Lord is in it with the man . . . ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ These are they who are in enlightenment when they are reading the Word, and to whom the Word shines and is translucent.”

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Who were the four Major Prophets? *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel*  
P. How many Minor Prophets were there? *twelve*  
J. Why are they called “Minor”? *wrote shorter books*  
P. Where do their books come in the Bible? *end of Old Testament*  
J. How do we know they were inspired? *all claim to be the Word of the Lord*  
P. Which is the first of the Minor Prophets? *Hosea*  
P. Which is the last? *Malachi*  
J. Which one is Joel? *second*  
J. How many chapters are there in his book? *three*  
P. How does he describe the evils that work in our hearts? *destructive insects*  
J. What does he call the judgment day? *day of the Lord*  
J. What does the judgment day mean for us? *when we die*  
J. What is the “valley of decision”? *our everyday life*  
J. What does the day of the Lord bring to the evil? *hell*  
J. What does it bring to the good? *heaven*  
I. What would you say is the most important thing we learn from Joel?  
*every day all of us are forming ourselves into the kinds of persons we will be forever*