

# 1

## The day of the locust

*Please read Joel 1:1–20*

### **The prophet's introduction to his book (1:1–4)**

The word of the Covenant LORD which came to Joel the son of Pethuel (1:1).

Joel, like many other prophets of the Lord, is known only as a 'voice' crying in the wilderness. He is identified as the son of Pethuel, but we know nothing concerning him or his father, except what may be deduced from reading his book. The information about Joel's ministry is so scant that it is difficult to determine whether he was one of the earliest prophets of Israel or one of their last prophets. He may have ministered in the ninth century before Christ, or in the fifth century before Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of this anonymity is to keep the reader's

concentration focused on the message, not on the man. Generally it is important for a congregation to see its preacher live out the word that he proclaims. But sometimes the Lord may order circumstances so that his people know very little about the person appointed to bring God's word to them. He may arrange this kind of situation just to emphasize the divine origin of the prophet's words all the more.

We know that the word of the Lord '*came*' to Joel, son of Pethuel. But we know little more about the precise way in which God's word was revealed to him. More literally, the opening phrase of this book says the word of God '*was*' to Joel.<sup>2</sup> No true prophet of the Lord ever created by himself the divine word that he delivered. God's word always came by the divine initiative. As a consequence, this word must be heard with the same awe demonstrated by Israel as the trembling nation stood at the foot of the shaking, smoking Mt Sinai. Whether this message appeals to us personally or not, it must be accepted as God's word and not man's word.

Hear this, you elders;  
pay close attention, all you inhabitants of the land.  
Has this [kind of situation ever] been in your lifetime,  
or in the lifetime of your fathers? (1:2).

At the outset it may be appropriate to note that the words of the prophets under the old covenant very often came in poetic form. The translation of Joel's material in this commentary will attempt to reflect something of the literary structures of Hebrew poetry. Although this unique form initially may appear a little strange in translation equivalents, great benefit may be gained as the reader begins to sense the subtle emphases of the inspired

writer as they are brought out by the poetic form of the various oracles.

The basic element that makes for poetry in the Scriptures of the old covenant is not rhyme or rhythm, as is the case with much of the world's poetry. Instead, it is parallelism of expression that principally characterizes Hebrew poetry. In an infinite variety of arrangements, similar or contrasting thoughts are expressed in ways that balance one another. In the opening verse of Joel's prophecy, the admonition, '*Hear this*', is strengthened by the parallel phrase, '*Pay close attention*'. In a similar fashion, the poetic parallelism indicates that this admonition is addressed first to '*you elders*' and then to '*all you inhabitants of the land*'. The abiding value of this prophetic word is underscored by the balancing phrases, '*in your lifetime*' and '*in the lifetime of your fathers*'.

This poetic form of expression may not be found in every verse of Joel's prophecy. But a great deal of the message of the book has been strengthened by the use of poetic parallelism. Interestingly, this paralleling of expressions represents a form of poetry that generally may be represented in other languages. The attempt to transfer poetic rhyme or rhythm from one language group to another generally results in an unnatural mode of expression. But the translation from one language to another of concepts in parallel modes of expression is at least a feasible possibility.

### **The people to whom he speaks**

The structure of the opening statement of Joel's prophecy emphasizes the fact that God speaks first to *the elders*. Presumably the elders have been around the longest, and should have experienced most kinds of human situations. Yet Joel will

show them something remarkable, something they have never seen before.

The attitude of the elders of a church is crucial in determining the receptivity of a congregation to the Word of God. If the leaders are not hearing and having their lives changed by the power of God's Word, the people will not hear. The crowd enthusiastically received Jesus riding on a donkey with acclamations on Palm Sunday. They would have crowned him king. But through the encouragement of their leaders, by Friday they were shouting, 'Crucify him' (Matthew 27:22).

Elders, be careful how you hear. Your double honour means double accountability. The message of the book of Joel is directed to you first. Be sure you are quick to hear this word.

But don't get the wrong idea. Joel also addresses *the inhabitants of the land*. All people have a solemn responsibility to hear the word of the Lord for themselves. Every human being has the obligation to hear the Word of God and respond to its implications for his or her life. No one can say, 'The elders made me do it.' You cannot cast the blame for your failure to conform to the requirements of God's Word on the leaders of the church.

Joel gives the people notice. He will bring them a message that will be startling, never before heard. Never, either in their lifetime or in the lifetime of their fathers, has such a word been declared.

### ***The message and its transmission***

What is the message? You may not like it. But be sure you pay close attention.

Concerning [this word]:  
to your sons make it known,  
and your sons to their sons,  
and their sons to the generation afterward (1:3).

Joel appeals to the genealogical principle that always has been at work in God's dealings with his people. He is concerned that this word from the Lord be passed on to generations all across the ages. Often God's people have the privilege of communicating to others a warm message of salvation. But now a word of judgement must be passed down to the generations to come.

This charge to transmit God's Word across the generations is repeated frequently in Scripture (cf. Exodus 12:26–27; 13:8; Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:6–7, 20–23; 32:7–9). But the particulars in this case indicate that Joel is making 'an unmistakable allusion' to the plague of locusts that God had sent on the Egyptians many years previously.<sup>3</sup> As God once plagued the stubborn persecutors of God's people in Egypt with a hungry locust horde, so now he will send a similar plague on his own people (cf. Exodus 10:2, 6).

How is this message to be passed on? By people talking about it. Tell it to your sons, and show them how to tell it to their children, so that their children can tell it to their sons and daughters. Not just the prophet, the preacher, or the elders are to speak this word. All the people must spread the message that has come from God. It is an enduring message, and its relevance will not change over the generations.

What is the word that the Lord has spoken to Joel? It is a word explaining how God's judgements work even among his own

people. Judgement begins at the house of God. This spiritual truth from Joel does not come first as a warning, but as a simple statement of fact. It always has been this way, it always will be this way, and right now it is a reality that must be faced. Judgement begins at the house of God.

The plague of locusts

The little left by the crunching-locust

the gnawing-locust has eaten,

and the little left by the gnawing-locust

the grinding-locust has eaten,

and the little left by the grinding-locust

the champing-locust has eaten

(1:4).

The people in Joel's day knew quite a bit about locusts. They knew far more about locusts than people know today. A culture's concerns can be detected in part by its language, and when a language has nine different words for 'locust', it is clear that some of the most terrifying nightmares of that culture were all about locusts.

And for good reason! A great portion of the world has known first-hand the meaning of a locust-plague, but the Middle East in particular has experienced their devastations. These destructive creatures have been seen in hordes that blackened the sun as far as 1,200 miles out at sea. In 1889 a host of these insects covered a 2,000-square-mile area with an estimated 120 million insects per square mile. In 1881 a locust egg-mass was uncovered that weighed 1,300 tons.<sup>4</sup> One report on locust activity notes that 'One female grasshopper that lays eggs in June ... may have eighteen million living descendants by October.'<sup>5</sup>

Joel uses four of the nine biblical words for 'locust' in this

single verse. He depicts a progression. The prophet may be talking of four different stages in the development of a single type of locust. Or he may be speaking of four different species of locust. Or he may refer to four kinds of locust-plagues as a reflection of the biblical imagery of the completeness of God's judgement by the use of the number four.<sup>6</sup> But the picture is clear: locusts, locusts and more locusts. One swarm would be enough. But these destructive creatures virtually suffocate the land like the celebrated birds of Alfred Hitchcock's film. The ecological balance has gone wild.

Look at the little things that swarm all about in God's world. How can anything so seemingly harmless as a locust or a caterpillar threaten human life? Yet it happens even today. When the lowly tent caterpillar begins to move, the ancient trees of an area may be totally decimated. Aeroplanes may disseminate poisonous sprays. Trees may be surrounded with burlap or tin. Yet the plague of swarming things continues to spread.

### ***A loss of joy***

But what do these pests have to do with the purposes of God? That is the very point to which Joel speaks. God is the one who orders his creation to bring about a devastation of everything that might bring joy to life. A person may choose to be completely secularistic in his viewpoint. He may read God out of the disasters of nature altogether. But the word of the Lord from Joel points in another direction. These phenomena are ordered by the Lord.

So long as you perceive your calamity as coming simply from nature, you will expect the plague to stop 'on its own', just as you assume that it started 'on its own'. You will be slow to perceive any lesson God would have you learn from your calamity. You

will try to ignore the things you have lost and cling to the things that remain: 'Well, at least I've got my health; or my savings; or my job; or my family; or my pleasure in my work.' But God's Word speaks of a thoroughness of judgement that leaves little behind. He will continue to deal with his people until they have learned the lesson he wishes to teach. This chastening judgement on God's people progresses from one object to another. It falls on the fields, then on the beasts and finally on man. Man's judgement is seen particularly in his loss of joy (see especially 1:12, 16).

### ***Judgement begins with the house of God***

Behold the thoroughness of the judgements of our God when he brings men to account. Consider this truth from his Word. Judgement begins with the house of God. This emptiness, this hollowness, this lack of joy over life could well be the consequences of a judgement coming from him.

We see it happening in the present hour. The believer's judgement comes in the here and now. See that the chastening hand of the Lord may be in your losses. Understand that his intent may be to bring you back to himself. When your money slips through your fingers before you can close your fist, when one sickness comes on top of another, when you have more of the things of this world but get less enjoyment out of them, consider that the Lord may be teaching you something. Learn the lesson of Joel.

But divine judgement in Joel ultimately spills beyond the borders of Israel and expands to eschatological proportions. The judgement by locusts anticipates the Lord's finalizing judgement among the nations. So it is not surprising to find the Old Testament imagery of devastation by locusts taking on



apocalyptic dimensions in the book of Revelation. In the coming Day of the LORD, locusts wearing iron breastplates will ascend from the pit of hell. These seemingly insignificant creatures will swell in size so that they look like horses dressed for battle. The whirr of their wings will sound like the thundering of horses' hooves. They have teeth that look like those of the lion, and in their tail is the sting of the scorpion. This hellish mass is directed by a king related to Satan himself (Revelation 9:2–12).

So the prophet introduces his message with a pointed declaration. Although judgement ends by calling all the nations of the world to account, it begins with the house of God. This is a message especially needed by a complacent Christianity today. The church of Jesus Christ too often assumes that it stands outside the realm of the judgements of the Lord. But God's Word points vigorously in the opposite direction. Even the non-Christian may escape judgements that fall on God's people because of their sad neglect of the light that has been given to them, though eventually all people will stand before the Lord.

Having introduced the subject of God's judgement, Joel proceeds to develop his theme along three lines in this first chapter: firstly, judgement now requires response (1:5–14); secondly, judgement now anticipates God's great day (1:15–18); thirdly, judgement now calls forth prayer (1:19–20).

### **Judgement now requires response (1:5–14)**

Wake up, you drunkards;  
weep and wail, all you who get drunk with wine (1:5).

'*Wake up!*' See what is happening to you. Don't let yourself drift into a state of joylessness and misery like a man descending into a drunken stupor. Be aware of what is going on in your life.

You may be sliding into a state of misery without even realizing it. First you have a bitter dispute with your wife over a trivial matter. Then you make a rash decision at work that causes your company to lose money. Then you overindulge at the dinner-table knowing all the time you should be restraining your appetite. Before you know it, life has lost all its joy. What should you do?

Wake up! Shake off your lethargy, '*you drunkards*'. That is what Joel calls you—you over-indulgent, self-centred people! You have become numb. You are so satiated with pleasure that you cannot see the obvious.

'*Weep!*' Ask God to expose your lack of holiness, to reveal to you your sin, and to give you a godly sorrow. Ironically, the way to restoration of joy in life is through the vale of tears. Only godly sorrow will lead to the joy of restoration.

Don't say you had rather not bother with the self-searching that is necessary for a true repentance. Don't appeal to the fact that you repented in sorrow over your sin at an earlier moment in your life. Repentance must be a part of the Christian's experience every day.

'*Howl!*' Normally the drunkard is marked by abandonment to revelry. But when you see that joy has been cut off from your life, moan before the Lord. You will be mourning anyway. Express your misery to him in a godly way that will do some good.

So Joel begins by focusing on the current loss of material pleasures. The things that once gave so much enjoyment don't satisfy any more. This is an experience common to mankind, but

to Christians in particular. They get caught up in the things of the world, and so the Lord sees to it that all their pleasures leave a bitter taste in their mouth. Wake up to the true nature of your circumstances. Weep and howl!

### ***A loss of the enjoyments of life***

Verses 5-7 give two reasons for wailing, weeping and howling. First, the people are to weep before the Lord because all the enjoyments of life have been taken from them: '*Weep and howl ... for the new wine is cut off from your mouth*' (1:5). Pleasures are gone. Once life was filled with enjoyment, but no more. So what should you do?

Turn your sorrow in a Godward direction. If Jesus communicated anything in his ministry, it was the fact that sinners should turn to the Lord. His first word was 'Repent!' (Matthew 4:17). Remember his parable about the prodigal son? This parable was addressed specifically to the Pharisees who had lost their joy. 'We *had* to celebrate and be glad,' says the father to the pouting elder brother who represented the Pharisees, 'for your brother was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (Luke 15:32).

Weep and howl before the Lord if you have lost your joy. Turn to the Lord, and he will perform his wondrous work of restoration.

### ***A devastating judgement***

The second reason for weeping and howling is found in verses 6-7:

For a nation has invaded my land, strong, and without number.