

Joel 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Joel chapter 2. Blow a trumpet in Zion, sound an alarm on my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people. Their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the Garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them.

Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run. As with the rumbling of chariots they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle. Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale. Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall. They march, each on his way. They do not swerve from their paths. They do not jostle one another. Each marches in his path. They burst through the weapons and are not halted. They leap upon the city. They run upon the walls. They climb up into the houses. They enter through the windows like a thief. The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The Lord utters his voice before his army. For his camp is exceedingly great. He who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the Lord is great and very awesome. Who can endure it? Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your

God. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Consecrate a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather the people. Consecrate the congregation. Assemble the elders. Gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, Where is their God?

Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people. The Lord answered and said to his people, Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied, and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations. I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his vanguard into the eastern sea, and his rearguard into the western sea. The stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things. Fear not, O land, be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things. Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green. The tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication. He has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and there is none else, and my people shall never again be put to shame. And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men, shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my spirit, and I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

[4 : 40] The relationship between the locust invasion of chapter 2 and that of chapter 1 of the book of Joel is debated by commentators. On the surface of things, the events of this chapter might seem to be different from the events of chapter 1. Chapter 1 seems to look back to something that has already befallen the people, while chapter 2 anticipates some disaster yet to strike.

John Barton, responding to Hans Walter Wolff, however, challenges the sharp differentiation between the events of the two chapters. He argues that nothing can really be said about the time reference of the prophecy on the basis of the verb forms used. It is possible that chapter 1 is predictive, even though it uses perfect verb forms. Chapter 2 could even be referring to a past event, despite its use of the imperfect. Chapter Hajiyeve observes that in verses 3 to 9 of this chapter, perfect and imperfect verb forms can be found in parallel statements, undermining any argument that rests heavily upon the tenses that are used. Barton's understanding is that both chapters refer to the same locust invasion. He also disputes the idea that the language of this chapter is heightened to such a degree that would legitimate the judgment that chapter 2 refers to a greatly intensified disaster, perhaps even a disaster of a completely different kind. Chapter 1 already referred to an unprecedented event, the report of which would be passed down through the generations.

It also related the judgment to the day of the Lord in verse 15. Is it a new wave of the locusts, the next stage in a multi-stage disaster, or is it a shift from literal locusts to locusts as a symbol of some greater form of invasion, or is it the same disaster described in heightened language? Despite key similarities such as those that Barton identifies, and the danger of overstating the escalation of the crisis, the threat of the locusts in this chapter does seem to be elevated from that of the preceding chapter. Leslie Allen remarks, the impression given is that earlier motifs are taken up and transposed into a higher key, a more strident setting, and a faster pace. Whether this represents an escalation of the initial crisis in a newer and more devastating wave, or a shift from a literal locust assault to an assault by some other force, metaphorically represented by the locusts, or a greater manifestation of some threat that is symbolically represented by locusts, or a simply more vivid and powerful description of the same disaster, is a matter that the interpreter of this chapter will need to determine. Throughout this chapter, Joel uses the language of military invasion, with warhorses, chariots, a mighty army, warriors, soldiers, and the storming of cities to describe the host that is descending upon the people. These, however, are similes and metaphors. It might be a little odd if a locust swarm were being used as a metaphor for an invading army, while being itself compared to an army at several points. As a metaphor, a locust invasion is a powerful one, not least because it evokes the Exodus narrative, presenting Judah as a new Egypt. The eighth plague in Exodus chapter 10 is also described as unprecedented, as such a quantity of locusts had never been seen before or would be since. A crucial dimension to consider is the way that the Lord relates to the locust invasion in places like verse 10. The locusts are presented as the Lord's own host, coming on his great day.

While this could be an instance of prophetic hyperbole, such hyperbole would seem to me to be excessive, exaggerating the significance of the invasion of the locusts by downplaying the import of the day of the Lord. A locust invasion could be utterly devastating, but whether such an event would be altogether without precedent in its destructive power upon the nation, and whether the report of it would go down through the generations is more debatable. The apocalyptic note on which the description of the locust invasion concludes stretches the idea that a merely literal locust invasion is in view to breaking point in my judgment. Furthermore, this chapter focuses its portrayal of the locusts' attack upon their assault upon the city, their scaling of its wall, and their unhindered entrance into its buildings. While locusts could invade urban environments and human dwellings in such a manner, indeed such an invasion is mentioned in the eighth plague in Exodus chapter 10, the far greater threat was their consuming of the crops in the fields. While Exodus 10 does mention the locusts entering all of the houses in the announcement of the plague, when the devastation wrought by the plague is described, nothing is said about what they consumed indoors. The devastation was overwhelmingly in the fields and on the face of the land more generally. In verse 20, the Lord promises that he will remove the northerner from the people, which would be a strange way to refer to the locusts. On balance, I think that the locust invasion refers to the waves of judgment that fell upon Jerusalem from Babylon in the years leading up to its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, and perhaps even after the downfall of Gedaliah as governor too. These waves stripped the land of its people and destroyed its national life. As the land is symbolized by agricultural images, the successive locust invasions are an utter despoliation of its life, ultimately leaving the land with nothing. A watchman in a tower on

Jerusalem's walls look towards the horizon as a thick black cloud approaches rapidly from the north. Fear striking his heart, he sounds the alarm on his trumpet. The city is thrown into tumult as the sun is blotted out by the vast locust army that fills the skies. As this invading force nears the city, the watchers on the wall can see that the black cloud has a fire behind and before it, consuming everything in its path. Lands as verdant as paradise itself before it are left like a smoking and desolate wasteland in its wake. Nothing can halt its rapid advance, and then, as it comes even nearer, they start to hear the sounds. At first a low hum, then a growling rumble, accompanied with the crackling sound of a great fire approaching. What initially seems like a cloud from a distance is now seen to be a living, swarming mass moving in perfect unison, like a well-disciplined military force.

[10 : 46] Within the thick black cloud that is now shrouding the heavens can be seen the appearance of something like myriads upon myriads of military charges galloping towards the city, not diverting from their course for any obstacle in their way. Terror grips everyone. The colour washes from people's faces.

The wave crashes into the walls of the city, but rather than spending its force upon them, the wave ascends the walls, spills over the top of them, and descends into the city on the other side.

It bursts into houses. It fills all of the places. By this point, the rumbling sound has been accompanied with the thunderous shaking of the earth. Indeed, the whole cosmos seems to be unsettled.

The people look up, and it is as if the very heavens are being extinguished above them. The sun and moon darkened, and the stars covered. The imagery of cosmic judgment here is reminiscent of places like Isaiah chapter 13, verses 4 to 10 of that chapter.

The sound of a tumult is on the mountains as of a great multitude. The sound of an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together. The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle. They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens. The Lord and the weapons of his indignation to destroy the whole land. Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty it will come.

[12 : 04] Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt. They will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them. They will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another. Their faces will be aflame. Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light. The sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. We might also observe here that the disasters being described follow the pattern of the final wave of the Egyptian plagues before the concluding capstone plague of the killing of the firstborn. The plagues of the Exodus came in three successive cycles.

In the final cycle there were three waves of plagues. The hail mixed with fire, the locusts, and the darkness. Here we have fire going before a thick cloud of locusts, and then the blotting out of the heavens. All of this suggests that the lights are finally about to be turned out over Judah.

We might also pay attention to the theophanic elements of the imagery here. A black cloud, advancing with a thunderous sound, surrounded by fire filled with living creatures, moving in perfect unison, accompanied by the dreadful voice of the Lord, heralded by the blast of a trumpet. All of this is the sort of imagery that we might associate with events such as the Lord's appearance to his people at Mount Sinai, or the throne chariot vision of Ezekiel chapter 1.

The day of the Lord imagery here is also similar to that found elsewhere in the book of the 12. For instance, in Zephaniah chapter 1 verses 14 to 18. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.

[14 : 16] Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed, for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. Here in Joel chapter 2, the imagery is of Zion, the Lord's holy hill under extreme threat, with a terrible and unearthly army approaching it.

However, the hero discovers that this army is actually the army of the Lord himself. What then does this correspond to historically? My suspicion is that this is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians, but in a way that reveals the greater army behind Nebuchadnezzar's army, the army of the Lord himself.

As a vision of the day of the Lord, however, there is a telescopic character to the imagery. As in the Olivet Discourse in the Gospels, where such language is used of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, such imagery relates to specific historical events, as the Lord comes in climactic judgment.

However, the imagery of such passages does not merely narrowly refer to a specific event in history, but to the broader theological reality of the day of the Lord more generally, a reality that can be expressed in even more pronounced and dramatic ways. The day of the Lord, as depicted in the book of the Twelve, should be paradigmatic for our thinking about the concept more generally.

We should not think that the concept of the day of the Lord is exhausted either in its referent or its meaning by the events of the downfall of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians, for instance. This is one reason why the determination of the more precise historical reference of such a prophecy is of secondary importance. Whatever the most immediate historical events to which the day of the Lord described by Joel related, the reality of the day of the Lord transcends any specific manifestation of it, still awaiting its fullest and most comprehensive expression at the end of all things. This can be indicated in part by the way that the language of the day of the Lord in the prophets and elsewhere in scripture is constantly recycling imagery that's used of previous events.

[16:18] We've already seen here imagery taken from the story of the Exodus, for instance, and the destruction of Egypt. There is imagery taken from Isaiah concerning the destruction of Babylon still awaited. In the New Testament, imagery from this chapter will be taken up again and applied to the time of the apostles. In verses 12 to 17, there is a turn in the text. From this announcement of coming judgment, there is the promise of divine mercy and restoration if the people will only return to the Lord with all of their heart. Behind this we might hear things like the words of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 3. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. In Exodus chapter 34 verses 5 to 7, the Lord appeared to Moses and declared his name before him, after the sin of Israel with the golden calf. Here the Lord's declaration of his covenant name is recalled, serving as a spur for the people to repent and turn to him. One might hope for mercy from such a God. The words here also seem to recall words from the book of Jonah. In Jonah chapter 4 verse 2, this covenant statement of the Lord is recalled. But then also in chapter 3 verse 9, the king of Nineveh makes a statement that's very similar to the words of verse 14.

Who knows, God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish. Verse 15 recalls verse 1, once again a trumpet is being blown in Zion. However here it is not the warning of the approaching horde, rather the trumpet blast is a summons to an appointed fast and solemn assembly.

The whole congregation, the rulers, the elders, all of the children, down to those who are still at the breast. No one is to be excused, even those who have just got married are expected to present themselves before the Lord. Led by the priests, the people should plead for mercy from the Lord, that they should be spared the threatened disaster. As they have no grounds in their own character or actions upon which to make their appeal, they appeal to the honour of the Lord. The Lord has attached his name to his people. He has brought them out of Egypt. But now the danger is that the people will become a byword among the nations, and as they become a byword, the Lord himself will be seen as powerless. One might think here of the way that the Lord insists in Ezekiel chapter 20, that he acted for the sake of his own name, not on account of anything that the people had done, or anything of their own deserving. Had the Lord treated his people as they deserved, they would have been cut off entirely. After the people's turning to the Lord after his invitation in verse 12, a great reversal starts to occur from verse 18. Verse 18 does present some challenges for the interpreter. Has something happened off the stage of the text between verses 17 and 18?

Have the people heeded the word of the prophet and performed the repentance that they were charged to perform? Has the Lord relented from a disaster that he purposed? Or is this another predictive statement within the frame of the initial prophecy itself? Whatever we determine, the Lord's jealousy for his people and his land means that he will not let them go. He loves them. They are his own people and land, and so he will not allow anything, even their own sin, to snatch them from him. He assures them that they will no longer be a reproach among the nations. He will provide them with the grain, wine, and oil that were stripped from them in chapter 1. He would remove the northern enemies that had plagued them from them, and drive them away out of the land. The description of the driving of the enemies into the sea might recall the description in Exodus chapter 10 of the removal of the locusts by the wind of the Lord into the Red Sea. The land that was stripped and despoiled by the locusts in chapter 1 and the earlier part of chapter 2 is now made verdant and fruitful once more. The fig tree and the vine are giving their full yield. The land formerly struck by drought and fire is now enjoying abundant seasonal rains. These rains serve as Israel's vindication, the mark that the Lord is accepting them, that they are in the right before him as his people. The threshing floors once barren of grain, particularly the threshing floor of the temple itself, now overflow with produce. Looking back to chapter 1 again, what the locusts had eaten, what they had stripped from the land formerly, would be restored to the people. We should note here that they are described as the Lord's great army, just as they are in chapter 2. The Lord would bless his people, and most of all with his own presence in their midst. And a further day of the Lord is awaited at the end of the chapter, a day of the Lord where not just rains, but the Spirit himself will be poured out on all flesh. The prophets of Israel embodied the word of the Lord, presenting it to the people as representatives of the Lord and prosecutors of the covenant, and also representing the people to the Lord. In many ways, they incarnated their message.

They performed it through prophetic sign acts. They had to eat the word as a scroll in the case of Ezekiel, or in the case of Jeremiah, the words of the Lord being placed upon his lips, or in the case of Isaiah, his lips being touched with a burning coal. However, for most of the people, the powerful word of the Lord was far from them. It did not animate them and give them life. It was a condemning word from outside of them, rather than a word that was written upon the tablets of their heart. The promise of the new covenant is that the word of God will be written upon the hearts of the people. As the Spirit was placed upon the 70 elders in Numbers chapter 11 to assist Moses in his rule of the people, Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp, and after Joshua wondered whether they should be silenced, Moses expressed the following desire. Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them. Here in Joel chapter 2, the prophet seems to be foretelling the fulfillment of Moses' wish.

[22 : 16] This would be accompanied by cosmic portents, events in the symbolic heavens that would represent the significance of what was taking place. Sun turned to darkness, and the moon to blood. Elsewhere in scripture, such language is used of the downfall of great nations and empires. However, the day of the law that is awaited here is not primarily a day of destruction. It's a day that offers the hope of salvation. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. In Obadiah verse 17, the prophet foretold this deliverance, and also the purification of the people in the city of Zion. But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape, and it shall be holy, and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions. Joel quotes that earlier prophecy here, referring both to those who call on the name of the Lord, and those whom the Lord calls. On this great day of the Lord, where there would be the destruction of the enemies of the people, as Obadiah and Joel both proclaim, it would primarily be the Lord's salvation that would be displayed. Mount Zion and Jerusalem would be places of deliverance, and as great judgments of God were wrought in the heavens, he would pour out his Spirit upon his people, pouring out the anointing of his people, not just upon the leaders of his people, but upon all of the people, in a manner similar to that described in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 33 to 34.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their guard, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor, and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. A question to consider. This passage from the book of Joel is perhaps most famous on account of Peter's use of it in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Why do you believe that Peter selected this particular passage, and in what manner did he see it being fulfilled in his own time?