

## What Is Joel 2 Really About?

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During a telephone conversation with an old friend, prophecy featured as a major topic. My friend brought up the subject of a list he had made of the prophetic events for which we should be watching. People who have been in the church for decades believe that, because of all the sermons and articles they have heard and read over the years, they have the future timeline of prophecy nailed down. What has been preached as speculation has, in the minds of many, become dogma.

A few days after the phone call, my Bible opened to the second chapter of Joel. As many know well—especially because of the fact that we sing about it from our hymnal—this chapter describes an army attacking, running upon the walls and climbing in, even leaping through, the windows. Clouds and darkness cover the sky, the very earth quakes, trumpets blare, and flames blaze all around. It is a thoroughly unsettling account of a people totally unable to defend themselves against an overwhelming onslaught!

Because of the mention of trumpets and the timing of “the day of the Lord” (Joel 2:1), we frequently read these verses (or sing them) on or around the Feast of Trumpets. However, they often go unexplained—or at least they are not shown to be describing what they are literally about. We think we are reading about a mighty, nearly invincible army attacking a defenseless people pale with fear and suffering many agonies (verse 6). In literal terms, though, we are wrong.

### *A Strong, Implacable Nation*

The book of Joel is a prophecy divided into three chapters. The prophet begins by describing an event so singularly extreme that it has never happened before, one that demands to be related to succeeding generations, as it will never occur again. It is a warning to the people about the dangers of turning from God.

What Joel describes is an attack by invading swarms of locusts. The assault almost seems coordinated: “What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten” (Joel 1:4). As he goes on to relate, the devastation has been so complete that nothing is forthcoming: There will be no new wine, no figs, no wheat, no barley, no pomegranates, no dates, no apples—not even anything that could be used to make an offering to God (verse 9).

So, in verse 14, the prophet urges the people to sanctify themselves, fast, and gather together to beseech the Eternal for mercy, for conditions are dire.

Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels under the clods. Storehouses are in shambles. Barns are broken down, for the grain has withered. How the animals groan! The herds of cattle are restless, because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep suffer punishment. O Lord, to You I cry out; for fire has devoured the open pastures, and a flame has burned all the trees of the field. The beasts of the field also cry out to You, for the water brooks are dried up. And fire has devoured the open pastures. (Joel 1:16-20)

Joel captures the depth of the dearth, devastation, and the urgency of the moment. This is what a day of judgment from the Lord looks like: scarcity, destruction, pain, wailing, fire, and drought. Death cannot be far behind. Only a return to God and His subsequent compassion can fix such a dire situation.

Before we move on, we should consider the drought the prophet mentions. Droughts do not come and go quickly. It takes time to dry up the rivers and streams. Judea had probably fallen on hard times caused by drought for an extended period before the army of locusts attacked. Indeed, in areas like Africa that are periodically subject to being overrun by locusts, there is invariably at least a year-long drought prior to the land being covered by uncountable millions of locusts. If the drought is part of God's punishment on an apostatizing people, their backsliding had been ongoing for a good while.

To make a nearly impossible agricultural situation even more difficult, Joel announces that a "nation" (Joel 1:6) has come upon his land, and its population is "strong, and without number." The nation of which he speaks, as we have seen, is not made up of humans but of locusts. God says, "[That nation] has laid waste My vine, and ruined My fig tree. He has stripped it bare and thrown it away; its branches are made white" (verse 7).

### *An Army of Insect Soldiers*

Joel 2 is a more complete description of this nation of insects that has overrun Judea, describing the individual soldiers and their actions. We must read these verses carefully to notice that he is describing the locusts metaphorically to raise the reader's emotional response.

Joel 2:4 says they have "the appearance of horsemen"; they do not actually look like horses or *have* horses, but they run as horses do, headlong and swiftly. This is also a reference to their warlike activity, since the Bible connects horses with war (see Proverbs 21:31). This exact comparison is made in Revelation 9:7, part of the description of the fifth trumpet plague: "The shape of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle."

Verse 5 describes their assault as so exceedingly massive and heavy that the beating of their wings sounds like chariots on the move. Two verses later, Joel depicts their rush toward their prey, writing that they run "like mighty men, . . . every one marches in formation," up and over the walls. Nothing stops or hinders them. They are a determined, unstoppable force.

In the King James Version, verse 8 reads, ". . . when they fall upon the sword, they shall not be wounded." The translators of *The Amplified Version* seem to have a better grasp of the situation, rendering this as, "And they burst through and upon the weapons, yet they are not wounded and do not change their course." Locusts certainly would not be hurt by landing on a sword, and trying to kill millions of them with ordinary hand weapons would be a futile endeavor indeed.

The following verse shows them in firm control of every part of the city, running wherever they please. They climb into houses through the windows and any other opening, covering the walls and roofs, part of the living quarters at the time. No soldier with actual weapons at the ready would try to climb through a window if a doorway were readily available! Going in through a window would be an awkward and dangerous way of entering a building. But for locusts, such an entry would be natural.

Finally, in Joel 2:11, God takes responsibility for this “nation” of insect soldiers on the march: “The Lord gives voice before His army, for His camp is very great; for strong is the One who executes His word. For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it?” He repeats His ownership of this army in verse 25, calling it once again “My great army which I sent among you.” He sent it as punishment for sin and breaking the covenant, and the locusts did their jobs with brutal efficiency.

What happened to God’s vast army of locusts? Joel 2:20 speaks primarily of the future human fulfillment of this, describing a “northern army” removed into a barren, uninhabited area between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, where its soldiers will die and rot with a great stench. Perhaps a similar thing happened to the horde of locusts.

### ***A Period of Restoration***

Joel does not record how many died as a result of this catastrophe, but it must have been significant. Because there are no crops with which to feed those left alive, God must send them “grain and new wine and oil” (verse 19). Unless He sent a miracle that caused the crops to rise up and mature overnight, as He did to the gourd that provided shade for Jonah (Jonah 4:6), it would have to be in the form of humanitarian aid from other nations. Without such an extraordinary miracle, several years must pass before the agricultural cycle returns to normal productivity.

In verse 22, the pastures are restored, as are the fruit and fig trees and grape vines. We could expect that the wheat and barley harvests would soon resume. Again, without an absolutely stunning miracle, the restoration of these crops takes time. When fruit trees have had their bark removed and eaten by locusts, those trees are dead and need to be replaced.

After fruit trees are replanted, its fruit cannot be eaten until the fifth year, as Leviticus 19:23-25 commands:

When you come into the land, and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised. Three years it shall be as uncircumcised to you. It shall not be eaten. But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to the Lord. And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, that it may yield to you its increase: I am the Lord your God.

So the fruit trees could not be counted on to help relieve the famine.

Nevertheless, eventually, the productivity of the land returns to normal. The former and the latter rains water the earth on schedule (Joel 2:23), a sign of God’s faithfulness to His people and the covenant. Wheat fills the threshing floors (meaning that a bumper crop was harvested), and vats of new wine and oil overflow (verse 24). Actually, it appears as if conditions were improved to better than normal, with peace ample food and the resulting joy and gladness!

### ***A Future Fulfillment***

As one reads Joel, it is important to catch the changes in verb tense and in chronology. The first chapter describes a historical locust plague, one of such magnitude that the prophet sees it as a punishment from God and urges the people to fast and repent before God. Chapter 2 moves on to

God's army of locusts, speaking of them in the present tense. It is easy to see the depictions of the locust plague as the testimony of a person who actually witnessed the calamity. The description is immediately followed by another call to repent from God Himself (Joel 2:12-17).

Then, in verse 18, the tense of the verb changes from present to future tense. This is significant because it signals that the locust plague of chapters 1 and 2 is a type of something similar in the end time. The language changes slightly to describe the future fulfillment, and the reader has to understand that it applies only in type to the historical fulfillment. By the time we read the end of Joel 2, the focus is primarily on the future event. In fact, the locust plague of ancient Judah is almost entirely forgotten.

We can see this in verses 26-29. In the first two of those verses, Joel writes about the post-restoration people of God: "My people shall never be put to shame." This cannot be true of the ancient Jews, who have repeatedly been put to shame down through the centuries. The history of the Jews has been a litany of distrust, accusation, oppression, exile, exclusion, and even holocaust. Clearly, Joel is looking far into the future. Verses 28-29 confirm this:

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, your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

God will pour out His Spirit upon the people to such an extent that seemingly everyone will be prophesying, dreaming, or seeing visions. This did not happen anciently to Judah, though it did occur in a more limited way on Pentecost after Jesus Christ died (Acts 2). This is speaking about the conversion of many people, and by their conversion through the receipt of God's Spirit, they become "His people."

As a matter of speculation, there is a way of looking at the timing of the end-time fulfillment as a literal locust plague before the Great Tribulation. For instance, the several years it takes for grape vines and fruit and olive trees to mature and produce in abundance could indicate that the Tribulation is at least several years off when the locust invasion strikes. Then come the "wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord" (Joel 2:30-31). These signs (the sixth seal; Revelation 6:12-17; Luke 21:11) are the precursors to the great day of God's wrath.

The last verse, Joel 2:32, is most interesting, as it points out that those who call upon the Lord shall be delivered and saved. Here is how James Moffatt translates it: "But every worshipper of the Eternal shall be saved, for Sion hill shall hold those who escape, as the Eternal has declared, and the fugitives whom the Eternal calls shall be inside Jerusalem." *The Amplified Bible* renders it: "And whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered and saved, for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the remnant [of survivors] shall be those whom the Lord calls."

Who are those fugitives who escape and from what are they running? Who are those whom the Eternal calls? Revelation 12:15-17 prophesies of a remnant of commandment keepers, presumably the church, fleeing from a flood of Satan's persecution. In fleeing, where did they go? In this speculative scenario, they go to Jerusalem before the army of locusts attacks and perhaps before the

drought takes hold. They are in Jerusalem during that catastrophe where, apparently, there is food and water.

These church members could be the fugitives and those whom God calls. However, at this point their refuge is not what we call the Place of Safety, as the Tribulation has not yet begun. Those who are at the time in Judea, which includes Jerusalem, are later warned to run for the protection to be found in the mountains just as the Tribulation commences (Matthew 24:16-20).

Keeping in mind that Scripture was not written to the world at large, but to the few who have been called, it is not a great leap of faith to realize that these people delivered at Jerusalem are true Christians who flee from Satan's "flood." The same group is warned to flee Judea to a safe place in the nearby mountains.

### ***No Repentance***

If this speculative scenario is correct, it brings up an interesting question. One would think that, with all that the Lord will restore to Judah after the devastation visited upon them by the drought and locusts, every one of them would return to the worship of God. Do the Jews repent? Unfortunately, that is not what transpires.

In the prophecy, the flow of events continues straight into Joel 3. Consider Moffatt's translation of verses 1-2: "For in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, then I will gather all nations and bring them down into the Judgment Valley. . . ." The prophet Zechariah foretells of something similar: "For I will gather all nations to battle against Jerusalem. . . . Half of the city shall go into captivity . . ." (Zechariah 14:2). It does not make sense that God would have allowed Jerusalem to be attacked and taken if the nation had repented and returned to worshipping Him.

So, the modern Jews who are delivered from famine and destruction from the mighty locust army, who have their fortunes restored by God's perhaps miraculous blessing, fail to turn back to God in any meaningful way. God, then, is forced to act in judgment again, this time, with even greater devastation and death.

This prophecy of Joel 3:2 and Zechariah 14:2—gathering the nations to war against Jerusalem—could not have taken place before the 1967 Six Day War, as it was not a "whole city" of which a half could be taken. A portion of Jerusalem had been captured 19 years earlier by Jordan, and no Jew was allowed in that part of the occupied city. There was no freedom of religion; only Islam was allowed. After 1967, it was reunited and administered wholly by the State of Israel. It is now an entire city of which half can be sent into captivity.

Jesus, in Matthew 24:15-16, 21, reveals what will spur the flight of God's people from Jerusalem:

"Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. . . . For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be."

This is when the church is taken from Jerusalem to a Place of Safety. There, it is promised, she will be protected and “nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent” (Revelation 12:14).

If we surmised time was short a few years ago, we must be on the very cusp of turbulent events soon to assail God’s church and His saints. *We must* be diligent in stepping up our efforts at securing our salvation, at being counted worthy of divine help during these uncertain times of peril and upheaval to come. The words of Jesus in Luke 21:36 should remain constantly in mind: “From hour to hour keep awake, praying that you may succeed in escaping all these dangers to come and in standing before the Son of man” (Moffatt).