

Joel

Chapter 1

The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

1:1 *The word of the LORD... came to Joel.* Joel's claim of prophetic authority is similar to that of several other prophets (see Jer 1:2; Eze 1:3; Hos 1:1; Jnh 1:1, 3; 3:1; Mic 1:1; Zep 1:1; Hag1:1; Zec 1:1; Mal 1:1). (CSB)

Throughout the ages, God has used various means to inspire His prophets to write (Heb 1:1). On some occasions, such divine inspiration came through dreams or visions (Dn 7:1–2; 8:1). At others, it came through an audible voice (Ezk 2:1–2; 3:1–3). Joel, however, does not specify how the Lord revealed His Word to him. At the same time, this verse unequivocally affirms that what follows is God's Word, not merely the prophet's impression or best approximation. God's wisdom and power are such that even though He uses imperfect men to reveal His will, each finished book of Scripture is a perfectly reliable revelation of the Lord's will. (TLSB)

Joel. Means "The LORD is God"; cf. Elijah's name, which means "(My) God is the LORD." (CSB)

Lit, "Yahweh is God." (TLSB)

Pethuel. Nothing more is known of him. (TLSB)

An Invasion of Locusts

2 Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? 3 Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. 4 What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. 5 Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. 6 For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. 7 It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white. 8 Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth. 9 The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. 10 The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes. 11 Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. 12 The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.

1:2 *elders.* Either the older men of the community or the recognized officials (see v. 14; 2:16, 28). (CSB)

Joel begins by directing a rhetorical question to the "old timers," since they were best able to affirm the unprecedented nature of the agricultural disaster Joel predicted. (TLSB)

all inhabitants. The entire nation of Judah. (TLSB)

such a thing. Unprecedented invasion of locusts (v 4), followed by wildfires and drought (vv 19–20). No one familiar with Judah’s past could recall a comparable disaster. (TLSB)

1:3 *Tell your children.* So that future generations learn from the impending disaster and avoid similar punishments. (TLSB)

1:4 *locust.* Not to be confused with grasshoppers or cicadas, locusts are terribly destructive insects 2–3 inches long. In the adult stage, they are capable of full flight. Joel predicts the invasion of four distinct kinds of locusts. (TLSB)

cutting locust. From Hbr *gazaz*, “to cut off.” (TLSB)

swarming locust. Name resembles word for “multitude.” (TLSB)

hopping locust. Immature locusts. (TLSB)

destroying locust. Notorious for obliterating crops (cf Dt 28:38). After these four successive invasions of locusts, no edible leaf, twig, or bark would remain in Judah. (TLSB)

An important feature of the book of Joel is a plague of locusts, insects which still periodically threaten the crops in large areas of Asia and Africa. The female desert locust lays eggs under the sand in “pods” of about 100. There may be as many as 100 of such egg pods per square foot. When the insects hatch, usually after rains, “they cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen” (Exodus 10:5). Hatching may continue for several days, with young hoppers numbering up to 1000 per square foot at any one time. The young insects, each about one-half inch long, immediately get on the move, looking for green plants to eat. (PBC)

1:5 *drunkards.* Although Joel calls for repentance, drunkenness is the only specific sin mentioned in the book. It suggests a self-indulgent life-style (cf. Isa 28:7–8; Am 4:1) pursued by those who value material things more than spiritual. (CSB)

By destroying Judah’s wine production, the invading locusts would force those addicted to drink to undergo the dreaded pains of withdrawal. (TLSB)

weep. Various segments of the community (drunkards, here; general population, v. 8; farmers, v. 11; priests, v. 13) are called to mourn. The destruction of the vines by the locusts leaves the drunkards without a source of wine. (CSB)

sweet wine. New wine that has not yet gone into storage. Once the sweet wine was exhausted, there would be no more stores of wine in Judah. (TLSB)

1:6 The locusts are compared here to a nation; cf. the ants and coney in Pr 30:25–26, where the Hebrew word for “creatures” means lit. “(a) people.” Elsewhere they are called the Lord’s “army” (2:11, 25). The reverse comparison—that of armies to locusts in regard to numbers—is as old as Ugaritic literature (15th century B.C.) and is common in the OT (see Jdg 6:5; 7:12; Jer 46:23; 51:14, 27; Na 3:15). (CSB)

nation. Personification of locusts. Underscores the dreadful fact that, though they are small individually, huge swarms of these insects are as devastating as an invading army. (TLSB)

beyond number. A phrase used to describe the locusts in the plague in Egypt (see Ps 105:34; see also Ex 10:4–6, 12–15). (CSB)

teeth. Joel’s comparison of the locusts’ teeth to lions’ teeth is reflected in Rev 9:8. (CSB)

Owing to their immense numbers, these locusts’ teeth are far more destructive than the fangs of a lion. (TLSB)

1:7 *my.* The personal pronouns here and elsewhere in Joel (vv. 6, 13–14; 2:13–14, 17–18, 23, 26–27; 3:2–5, 17) offer a hint of hope, since they indicate that the people belong to the Lord (cf. Jos 22:19). (CSB)

Locust hordes will leave no vegetation. Trees will be stripped of their bark. (TLSB)

1:8 *virgin.* The community is addressed. In Israel, when a woman was pledged to be married to a man, he was called her husband and she his wife, though she was still a virgin (see Dt 22:23–24). This verse refers to such a husband who died before the marriage was consummated. (CSB)

Judah’s reaction to the upcoming devastation will be like that of a bride whose fiancé is killed just before the marriage ceremony. (TLSB)

1:9 *offerings.* The locusts have left nothing that can be offered as sacrifice. The grain offering (Lev 2:1–2) and the drink offering, which was a libation of wine (Lev 23:13), were part of the daily offering (Ex 29:40; Nu 28:5–8). (CSB)

These were regularly used in thanksgiving for God’s provision (Lv 2; 6:14–23), and with daily sacrifices (Ex 29:40–41), with the first fruit offering (Lv 23:13), and with other sacrifices (Nu 15:5–7, 10). The famine produced by the locust invasion would threaten to put an end to these sacrifices and the blessings they provided. (TLSB)

priests mourn – These were the priests serving in God’s house would mourn the cessation of the grain and drink offerings because of the loss of their own substance and also because the people’s fellowship with the Lord would be broken. (TLSB)

1:10 *dries up.* The destruction caused by the locusts was intensified by drought. (CSB)

As with Adam and Eve’s sin (Gen 3:17), and again in the days of Noah (Gen 6:13), so also here the earth is depicted as suffering the consequences of human wickedness (cf Rm 8:20–23). (TLSB)

grain ...wine ... oil. An important OT triad, related to the agriculture of that day (see 2:19) (CSB)

According to the law, grain offerings in the form of fine flour mixed with oil and incense, or bread baked without yeast, or crushed and roasted heads of new grain were to be salted and offered on the altar. A grain offering and a quart or more of wine as a drink offering were to accompany all burnt offerings (Nu 15:1–12). (PBC)

1:11 *Be ashamed, O tillers.* As those responsible for the agricultural production of the land, farmers will be esp grieved by the impending locust plague and resultant famine. (TLSB)

1:12 *apple.* Or, apricot, as some botanists maintain. (TLSB)

all the trees of the field. Even larger, tougher plants, such as vines and trees, will not be spared. They, too, will be stripped bare by locusts, then consumed by fire (v 19). (TLSB)

1:2–12 Joel summons the people of Judah to assemble and hear the Lord’s judgment for their sin: successive waves of locust swarms will come and devastate their land. When we replicate the failures of Joel’s generation, God warns us to live in godly fear. In repentance, we are heartened by the promise that God’s mercy is greater than any disaster. His grace, received through the Word and Sacraments, restores us and gives life. • Heavenly Father, even when every earthly blessing is cut off from us, there remains an eternal gift that atones for our unrighteousness—the spotless Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. For His sake, forgive and restore us to holiness. Amen. (TLSB)

A Call to Repentance

13 Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. 14 Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. 15 Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. 16 Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? 17 The seed shrivels under the clods; the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are torn down because the grain has dried up. 18 How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep suffer. 19 To you, O LORD, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field. 20 Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.

1:13 *sackcloth.* Rough fabric, worn as sign of repentance. (TLSB)

lament, O priests. Impending crop failure threatened to end grain and drink sacrifices they offered, which was the basis of their livelihood. (TLSB)

Go in. Priests are urged to enter the temple (“the house of your God”). (TLSB)

my God. The phrase occurs eight times in Joel (here; v. 14; 2:13; 2:14; 2:23; 2:26; 2:27; 3:17). (CSB)

1:14 *fast ... assembly.* See 2:15. Fasting, required on the Day of Atonement practiced in times of calamity (see Jdg 20:26; 2Sa 12:16; Jer 14:12; Jnh 3:4–5; Zec 7:3), was a sign of penitence and humility. The Bible speaks against outward signs that do not reflect a corresponding inward belief or attitude (see Mt 6:1–8; 23:1–36). (CSB)

The priests are to assemble the people and lead them in making a public confession of sin. Fasting was part of penitential observance. All the people suspended their activities for the national observance. Sincerely begging for forgiveness was the central part of such national days of repentance and prayer. (TLSB)

1:15 *day of the LORD.* This phrase occurs five times in Joel and is the dominant theme (here; 2:1; 2:11; 2:31; 3:14). Six other prophets also use it: Isaiah (13:6, 9), Ezekiel (13:5; 30:3), Amos (5:18, 20), Obadiah (15), Zephaniah (1:7, 14) and Malachi (4:5); and an equivalent expression occurs in Zec 14:1. Sometimes abbreviated as “that day,” the term often refers to the decisive intervention of God in history, such as through the invasion of locusts in Joel or at the battle of Carchemish, 605 B.C. (see Jer 46:2, 10).

It can also refer to Christ's coming to consummate history (see Mal 4:5; Mt 11:24; 1Co 5:5; 2Co 1:14; 1Th 5:2; 2Pe 3:10). When the term is not used for divine judgments in the midst of history, it refers to the final day of the Lord, which generally has two aspects: (1) God's triumph over and punishment of his enemies and (2) his granting of rest (security) and blessing to his people. (CSB)

Here, the expression refers simply to the day when God will punish Judah by sending the locusts. (TLSB)

destruction ... Almighty. The Hebrew for each of these two words is a pun on the other (as in Isa 13:6). (CSB)

1:17 *sees shrivels* – With no moisture, planted seeds dry up instead of germinating. (TLSB)

storehouses...granaries – These were useless in a famine. Grain reserves for lean times and for planting will run out, guaranteeing long term starvation. (TLSB)

1:18 *groan.* The Hebrew for this word is used for the groaning of Israel in Egypt (Ex 2:23) and of others in distress (Pr 29:2; Isa 24:7; La 1:4, 8, 11, 21; Eze 9:4; 21:12). (CSB)

Lowling and bleating for their owners to feed them. Sheep feed closer to the ground and can scrounge grass too short to be grazed by cattle. Because the locusts will leave virtually no grass, however, the sheep will suffer along with cattle. (TLSB)

even ... sheep. Sheep are the last to suffer, because they can even grub the grass roots out of the soil. (CSB)

1:19–20 *fire.* Although the destruction caused by the locusts is elsewhere compared to that of a fire (see 2:3), here the prophet likely is describing the effects of a drought. In both cases he evokes the fire of God's judgment (see, e.g., Jer 4:4; 15:14; 17:27; Eze 5:4; 15:6–7; 20:47; 21:32; Hos 8:14; Am 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5). (CSB)

1:20 *beasts of the field* – This depicts the depth of the coming misery. Even hardy wild animals desperately search for any sign of water. (TLSB)

pant for you – The animals' desperation mimics the prayers of the people. (TLSB)

1:13–20 Joel predicts that hordes of locusts will devour the vegetation, and then wildfires and drought will dispose of what remains. Desperation and starvation will result from the people's refusal to repent. In our own lives, unchecked sins bring about disastrous consequences. In such times of sorrow and despair, however, never forget that God often uses bad things to bring us to repentance and to accomplish His good and gracious will. The ultimate example of this is Christ's mournful death, which atoned for the sin of the world. • Whenever our hearts are tempted to turn away from You, O Lord, bring us back. Turn us away from evil toward good, and restore us to the right relationship with You and with one another; for the sake of Your Son, Israel's Redeemer. Amen. (TLSB)