

CHAPTER 1

This chapter is the description of a lamentable devastation made of the country of Judah by locusts and caterpillars. Some think that the prophet speaks of it as a thing to come and gives warning of it beforehand, as usually the prophets did of judgments coming. Others think that it was now present, and that his business was to affect the people with it and awaken them by it to repentance.

- I.** It is spoken of as a judgment which there was no precedent of in former ages (v. 1-7).
- II.** All sorts of people sharing in the calamity are called upon to lament it (v. 8-13).
- III.** They are directed to look up to God in their lamentations, and to humble themselves before him (v. 14-20).

JOEL 1:1-7

THREATENINGS OF JUDGMENT

It is a foolish fancy which some of the Jews have, that this Joel the prophet was the same with that Joel who was the son of Samuel (~~OR~~ 1 Samuel 8:2); yet one of their rabbin very gravely undertakes to show why Samuel is here called *Pethuel*. This Joel was long after that. He here speaks of a sad and sore judgment which was now brought, or to be brought, upon Judah, for their sins. Observe,

I. The greatness of the judgment, expressed here in two things: —

1. It was such as could not be paralleled in the ages that were past, in history, or in the memory of any living, v. 2. The *old men* are appealed to, who could remember what had happened long ago; nay, and *all the inhabitants of the land* are called on to testify, if they could any of them remember the like. Let them go further than any man's memory, and *prepare themselves for the search of their fathers* (~~OR~~ Job 8:8), and they would not find an account of the like in any record. Note, Those that outdo

their predecessors in sin may justly expect to fall under greater and sorer judgments than any of their predecessors knew.

2. It was such as would not be forgotten in the ages to come (v. 3): “*Tell you your children of it*; let them know what dismal tokens of the wrath of God you have been under, that they may take warning, and may learn obedience by the things which you have suffered, for it is designed for warning to them also. Yea, let *your children tell their children, and their children another generation*; let them tell it not only as a strange thing, which may serve for matter of talk” (as such uncommon accidents are records in our almanacs — It is so long since the plague, and fire — so long since the great frost, and the great wind), “but let them tell it to *teach their children* to stand in awe of God and of his judgments, and to tremble before him.” Note, We ought to transmit to posterity the memorial of God’s judgments as well as of his mercies.

II. The judgment itself; it is an invasion of the country of Judea by a great army. Many interpreters both ancient and modern understand it of armies of men, the forces of the Assyrians, which, under Sennacherib, *took all the defenced cities of Judah*, and then, no doubt, made havoc of the country and destroyed the products of it: nay, some make the four sorts of animals here names (v. 4) to signify the four monarchies which, in their turns, were oppressive to the people of the Jews, one destroying what had escaped the fury of the other. Many of the Jewish expositors think it is a parabolic expression of the coming of enemies, and their multitude, to lay all waste. So the Chaldee paraphrast mentions these animals (v. 4); but afterwards (²⁰²⁵Joel 2:25) puts instead of them, *Nations, peoples, tongues, languages, potentates, and revenging kingdoms*. But it seems much rather to be understood literally of armies of insects coming upon the land and eating up the fruits of it. Locusts were one of the plagues of Egypt. Of them it is said, There never were any like them, nor should be (²⁰¹⁴Exodus 10:14), none such as those in Egypt, none such as these in Judah — none like those locusts for bigness, none like these for multitude and the mischief they did. The plague of locusts in Egypt lasted but for a few days; this seems to have continued for four years successively (as some think), because here are four sorts of insects mentioned (v. 4), one destroying what the other left; but others think they came all in one year. We are not told, in the history of the Old Testament, when this happened, but we are sure that no word of God fell to the ground; and, though a devastation by these insects is primarily intended here, yet it is expressed in such a

language as is very applicable to the destruction of the country by a foreign enemy invading it, because, if the people were not humbled and reformed by that less judgment which devoured the land, God would send this greater upon them, which would devour the inhabitants; and by the description of that they are bidden to take it for a warning. If this nation of worms do not subdue them, another nation shall come to ruin them. Observe,

1. What these animals are that are sent against them — *locusts* and *caterpillars*, *palmer-worms* and *canker-worms*, v. 4. We cannot now describe how these differed one from another; they were all little insects, any one of them despicable, and which a man might easily crush with his foot or with his finger; but when they came in vast swarms, or shoals, they were very formidable and ate up all before them. Note, God is Lord of hosts, has all creatures at his command, and, when he pleases, can humble and mortify a proud and rebellious people by the weakest and most contemptible creatures. Man is said to be a worm; and by this it appears that he is *less than a worm*, for, when God pleases, worms are too hard for him, plunder his country, eat up that for which he laboured, destroy the forage, and cut off the subsistence of a potent nation. The weaker the instrument is that God employs the more is his power magnified.

2. What fury and force they came with. They are here called a *nation* (v. 6), because they are embodied, and act by consent, and as it were with a common design; for, though *the locusts have no king, yet they go forth all of them by bands* (^{ABW}Proverbs 30:27), and it is there mentioned as an instance of their *wisdom*. It is prudence for those that are weak severally to unite and act jointly. They are *strong*, for they are *without number*. The *small dust of the balance* is light, and easily blown away, but a heap of dust is weighty; so a worm can do little (yet one worm served to destroy Jonah's gourd), but numbers of them can do wonders. They are said to have *teeth of a lion*, of a *great lion*, because of the great and terrible execution they do. Note, Locusts become as lions when they come armed with a divine commission. We read of the locusts out of the bottomless pit, that *their teeth were as the teeth of lions*, (^{ABW}Revelation 9:8).

3. What mischief they do. They *eat up* all before them (v. 4); what one leaves the other devours; they destroy not only the grass and corn, but the trees (v. 7): *The vine is laid waste*. There vermin eat the leaves which should be a shelter to the fruit while it ripens, and so that also perishes and

comes to nothing. They eat the very bark of the fig-tree, and so kill it. Thus the *fig-tree does not blossom*, nor is there *fruit in the vine*.

III. A call to the drunkards to lament this judgment (v. 5): *Awake and weep, all you drinkers of wine*. This intimates,

1. That they should suffer very sensibly by this calamity. It should touch them in a tender part; the *new wine* which they loved so well should be *cut off from their mouth*. Note, It is just with God to take away those comforts which are abused to luxury and excess, to *recover the corn and wine* which are *prepared* for Baal, which are made the food and fuel of a base lust. And to them judgments of that kind are most grievous. The more men place their happiness in the gratification of sense the more pressing temporal afflictions are upon them. The drinkers of water need not to care when the vine was laid waste; they could live as well without it as they had done; it was no trouble to the Nazarites. But the *drinkers of wine* will *weep and howl*. The more delights we make necessary to our satisfaction the more we expose ourselves to trouble and disappointment.

2. It intimates that they had been very senseless and stupid under the former tokens of God's displeasure; and therefore they are here called to *awake and weep*. Those that will not be roused out of their security by the word of God shall be roused by his rod; those that will not be startled by judgments at a distance shall be themselves arrested by them; and when they are going to partake of the forbidden fruit a prohibition of another nature shall come *between the cup and the lip*, and *cut off the wine from their mouth*.

JOEL 1:8-13

THREATENINGS OF JUDGMENT

The judgment is here described as very lamentable, and such as all sorts of people should share in; it shall not only rob the drunkards of their pleasure (if that were the worst of it, it might be the better borne), but it shall deprive others of their necessary subsistence, who are therefore called to lament (v. 8), as a virgin laments the death of her lover to whom she was espoused, but not completely married, yet so that he was in effect her husband, or as a young woman lately married, from whom the *husband of*

her youth, her young husband, or the husband to whom she was married when she was young, is suddenly taken away by death. Between a new-married couple that are young, that married for love, and that are every way amiable and agreeable to each other, there is great fondness, and consequently great grief if either be taken away. Such lamentation shall there be for the loss of their corn and wine. Note, The more we are wedded to our creature-comforts that harder it is to part with them. See that parallel place, ²³⁰⁰Isaiah 32:10-12. Two sorts of people are here brought in, as concerned to lament this devastation, countrymen and clergymen.

I. Let the husbandmen and vine-dressers lament, v. 11. Let them be ashamed of the care and pains they have taken about their vineyards, for it will be all labour lost, and they shall gain no advantage by it; they shall see the fruit of their labour eaten up before their eyes, and shall not be able to save any of it. Note, Those who labour only *for the meat that perishes* will, sooner or later, be ashamed of their labour. The *vine-dressers* will then express their extreme grief by *howling*, when they see their vineyards stripped of leaves and fruit, and the vines withered, so that nothing is to be had or hoped for from them, wherewith they might pay their rent and maintain their families. The destruction is particularly described here: *The field is laid waste* (v. 10); all is consumed that is produced; *the land mourns*; the ground has a melancholy aspect, and looks ruefully; all the inhabitants of the land are in tears for what they have lost, are in fear of perishing for want, ²³⁰⁴Isaiah 24:4; ²⁴⁰³Jeremiah 4:28. “The *corn*, the bread-corn, which is the staff of life, is *wasted*; the *new wine*, which should be brought into the cellars for a supply when the old is drunk, is *dried up*, is *ashamed* of having promised so fair what it is not now able to perform; the oil *languishes*, or is *diminished*, because (as the Chaldee renders it) *the olives have fallen off*.” The people were not thankful to God as they should have been for the *bread that strengthens man's heart*, the *wine that makes glad the heart*, and the *oil that makes the face to shine* (²³⁴⁴Psalms 104:14, 15); and therefore they are justly brought to lament the loss and want of them, of all the products of the earth, which God had given either for necessity or for delight (this is repeated, v. 11, 12) — the *wheat and barley*, the two principal grains bread was then made of, wheat for the rich and barley for the poor, so that the rich and poor meet together in the calamity. The trees are destroyed, not only the *vine and the fig-tree* (as before, v. 7), which were more useful and necessary, but other trees also that were for delight — the *pomegranate*, *palm-tree*, and *apple-tree*, yea,

all the *trees of the field*, as well as those of the orchard, timber-trees as well as fruit-trees. In short, all *the harvest of the field has perished*, v. 11. And by this means *joy has withered away from the children of men* (v. 11); the *joy of harvest*, which is used to express great and general joy, has come to nothing, is turned into shame, is turned into lamentation. Note, The perishing of the harvest is the withering of the joy of the children of men. Those that place their happiness in the delights of the sense, when they are deprived of them, or in any way disturbed in the enjoyment of them, lose all their joy; whereas the children of God, who look upon the pleasures of sense with holy indifference and contempt, and know what it is to make God their hearts' delight, can rejoice in him as the *God of their salvation* even when the *fig-tree does not blossom*; spiritual joy is so far from withering then, that it flourishes more than ever, ~~387~~ Habakkuk 3:17, 18. Let us see here,

1. What perishing uncertain things all our creature-comforts are. We can never be sure of the continuance of them. Here the heavens had given their rains in due season, the earth had yielded her strength, and, when the appointed weeks of harvest were at hand, they saw no reason to doubt but that they should have a very plentiful crop; yet then they are invaded by these unthought-of enemies, that lay all waste, and not by fire and sword. It is our wisdom not to lay up our treasure in those things which are liable to so many untoward accidents.

2. See what need we have to live in continual dependence upon God and his providence, for our own hands are not sufficient for us. When we see the *full corn in the ear*, and think we are sure of it — nay, when we have *brought it home*, if *he blow upon it*, nay, if he do not bless it, we are not likely to have any good of it.

3. See what ruinous work sin makes. A paradise is turned into a wilderness, a fruitful land, the most fruitful land upon earth, *into barrenness*, for the *iniquity of those that dwelt therein*.

II. Let the priests, the Lord's ministers, lament, for they share deeply in the calamity: *Gird yourselves* with sackcloth (v. 13); nay, they *do mourn*, v. 9. Observe, The priests are called the *ministers of the altar*, for on that they attended, and the *ministers of the Lord* (of *my God*, says the prophet), for in attending on the altar they served him, did his work, and did him honour. Note, Those that are employed in holy things are therein God's

ministers, and on him they attend. The ministers of the altar used to rejoice before the Lord, and to spend their time very much in singing; but now they must *lament and howl*, for the *meat-offering* and *drink-offering* were *cut off from the house of the Lord* (v. 9), and the same again (v. 13), *from the house of your God*. “He is your God in a particular manner; you are in a nearer relation to him than other Israelites are; and therefore it is expected that you should be more concerned than others for that which is a hindrance to the service of his sanctuary.” It is intimated,

1. That the people, as long as they had the fruits of the earth brought in in their season, presented to the Lord his dues out of them, and brought the offerings to the altar and tithes to those that served at the altar. Note, A people may be filling up the measure of their iniquity apace, and yet may keep up a course of external performances in religion.

2. That, when the meat and drink failed, the meat-offering and drink-offering failed of course; and this was the sorest instance of the calamity. Note, As far as any public trouble is an obstruction to the course of religion it is to be upon that account, more than any other, sadly lamented, especially by the priests, the Lord's ministers. As far as poverty occasions the decay of piety and the neglect of divine offices, and starves the cause of religion among a people, it is indeed a sore judgment. When the famine prevailed God could not have his sacrifices, nor could the priests have their maintenance; and therefore let *the Lord's ministers mourn*.

➤ JOEL 1:14-20

A PROCLAMATION FOR A FAST

We have observed abundance of tears shed for the destruction of the fruits of the earth by the locusts; now here we have those tears turned into the right channel, that of repentance and humiliation before God. The judgment was very heavy, and here they are directed to own the hand of God in it, his *mighty hand*, and to *humble themselves* under it. Here is,

I. A proclamation issued out for a general fast. The priests are ordered to appoint one; they must not only mourn themselves, but they must call upon others to mourn too: “*Sanctify a fast*; let some time be set apart from all worldly business to be spent in the exercises of religion, in the

expressions of repentance and other extraordinary instances of devotion.” Note, Under public judgments there ought to be public humiliations; for by them the *Lord God calls to weeping and mourning*. With all the marks of sorrow and shame sin must be confessed and bewailed, the righteous of God must be acknowledged, and his favour implored. Observe what is to be done by a nation at such a time.

1. A day is to be appointed for this purpose, a *day of restraint* (so the margin reads it), a day in which people must be restrained from their other ordinary business (that they may more closely attend God's service), and from all bodily refreshments; for,

2. It must be a *fast*, a religious abstaining from meat and drink, further than is of absolute necessity. The king of Nineveh appointed a fast, in which they were to *taste nothing*, ~~1007~~ Jonah 3:7. Hereby we own ourselves unworthy of our necessary food, and that we have forfeited it and deserve to be wholly deprived of it, we punish ourselves and mortify the body, which has been the occasion of sin, we keep it in a frame fit to serve the soul in serving God, and, by the appetite's craving food, the desires of the soul towards that which is better than life, and all the supports of it, are excited. This was in a special manner seasonable now that God was depriving them of their *meat and drink*; for hereby they accommodated themselves to the affliction they were under. When God says, *You shall fast*, it is time to say, *We will fast*.

3. There must be a solemn assembly. The *elders* and the *people*, magistrates and subjects, must be *gathered together*, even *all the inhabitants of the land*, that God might be honoured by their public humiliations, that they might thereby take the more shame to themselves, and that they might excite and stir up one another to the religious duties of the day. All had contributed to the national guilt, all shared in the national calamity, and therefore they must all join in the professions of repentance.

4. They must come together in the temple, *the house of the Lord their God*, because that was the house of prayer, and there they might be hope to meet with God because it was the place which he had *chosen to put his name there*, there they might hope to speed because it was a type of Christ and his mediation. Thus they interested themselves in Solomon's prayer for the acceptance of all the requests that should be put up in or towards this house, in which their present case was particularly mentioned. ~~1008~~ 1 Kings 7:37, *If there be locust, if there be caterpillar.*

5. They must *sanctify* this fast, must observe it in a religious manner, with sincere devotion. What is a fast worth if it be not sanctified? 6. They must *cry unto the Lord*. To him they must make their complaint and offer up their supplication. When we cry in our affliction we must *cry to the Lord*; this is *fasting to him*, ^{<3075>}Zechariah 7:5.

II. Some considerations suggested to induce them to proclaim this fast and to observe it strictly.

1. God was beginning a controversy with them. It is time to *cry unto the Lord*, for *the day of the Lord is at hand*, v. 15. Either they mean the continuance and consequences of this present judgment which they now saw but breaking in upon them, or some greater judgments which this was but a preface to. However it be, this they are taught to make the matter of their lamentation: *Alas, for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand*. Therefore *cry to God*. For,

(1.) “The day of his judgment is very near, it is *at hand*; it *will not slumber*, and therefore you should not. It is time to fast and pray, for you have but a little time to turn yourselves in.”

(2.) It will be very terrible; there is no escaping it, no resisting it: *As a destruction from the Almighty shall it come*. See ^{<2316>}Isaiah 13:6. It is not a correction, but a destruction; and it comes from the hand, not of a weak creature, but *of the Almighty*; and *who knows* (nay, who does not know) *the power of his anger*? Whither should we go with our cries but to him from whom the judgment we dread comes? There is no fleeing from him but by fleeing to him, no escaping destruction from the Almighty but by making our submission and supplication to the Almighty; this is *taking hold on his strength, that we may make peace*, ^{<2975>}Isaiah 27:5.

2. They saw themselves already under the tokens of his displeasure. It is time to fast and pray, for their distress is very great, v. 16.

(1.) Let them look into their own houses, and was no plenty there, as used to be. Those who kept a good table were now obliged to retrench: *Is not the meat cut off before our eyes*? If, when God's hand is lifted up, men *will not see*, when his hand is laid on *they shall see*. Is not the meat many a time cut off before our eyes? Let us then labour for that spiritual meat which is not before our eyes, and which cannot be cut off.

(2.) Let them look into God's house, and see the effects of the judgment there; joy and gladness were *cut off from the house of God*. Note, The house of our God is the proper place of joy and gladness; when David goes to the *altar of God*, it is to God *my exceeding joy*; but when *joy and gladness* are *cut off from God's house*, either by corruption of holy things or the persecution of holy persons, when serious godly decays and love waxes cold, then it time to cry to the Lord, time to cry, *Alas!*

3. The prophet returns to describe the grievousness of the calamity, in some particulars of it. Corn and cattle are the husbandman's staple commodities; now here he is deprived of both.

(1.) The caterpillars have devoured the corn, v. 17. The *garners*, which they used to fill with corn, *are laid desolate*, and *the barns broken down*, because *the corn has withered*, and the owners think it not worth while to be at the charge of repairing them when they have nothing to put in them, nor are likely to have any thing; for *the seed it rotten under the clods*, either through too much rain or (which was the more common case in Canaan) for want of rain, or perhaps some insects under ground ate it up. When one crop fails the husbandman hopes the next may make it up; but here they despair of that, the seedness being as bad as the harvest.

(2.) The cattle perish too for want of grass (v. 18): *How do the beasts groan!* This the prophet takes notice of, that the people might be affected with it and lay to heart the judgment. The groans of the cattle should soften their hard and impenitent hearts. *The herds of cattle*, the large cattle (black cattle we call them), *are perplexed*; nay, even *the flocks of sheep*, which will live upon a common and be content with very short grass, *are made desolate*. See here the inferior creatures suffering for our transgression, and groaning under the double burden of being serviceable to the sin of man and subject to the curse of God for it. *Cursed is the ground for thy sake*.

III. The prophet stirs them up to cry to God, with the consideration of the examples given them for it.

1. His own example (v. 19): *O Lord! to thee will I cry*. He would not put them upon doing that which he would not resolve to do himself; nay, whether they would do it or no, he would. Note, If God's ministers cannot prevail to affect others with the discoveries of divine wrath, yet they ought to be themselves affected with them; if they cannot bring others to cry to

God, yet they themselves be much in prayer. In time of trouble we must not only pray, but cry, must be fervent and importunate in prayer; and to God, from whom both the destruction is and the salvation must be, ought our cry to be always directed. That which engaged him *to cry to God* was, not so much any personal affliction, as the national calamity: *The fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness*, which seems to be meant of some parching scorching heat of the sun, which was as fire to the fruits of the earth; it consumed them all. Note, When God *calls to contend by fire* it concerns those that have any interest in heaven to cry mightily to him for relief. See ~~Q11E~~ Numbers 11:2; ~~30704~~ Amos 7:4, 5.

2. The example of the inferior creatures: “*The beasts of the field do not only groan, but cry unto thee*, v. 20. They appeal to thy pity, according to their capacity, and as if, though they are not capable of a rational and revealed religion, yet they had something of dependence upon God by natural instinct.” At least, when they groan by reason of their calamity, he is pleased to interpret it as if they cried to him; much more will he put a favourable construction upon the groanings of his own children, though sometimes so feeble that they *cannot be uttered*, ~~4885~~ Romans 8:26. The beasts are here said to *cry unto God*, as from him the *lions seek their meat* (~~3942~~ Psalm 104:21) and the young *ravens*, ~~4381~~ Job 38:41. The complaints of the brute-creatures here are for want of water (*The rivers are dried up*, through the excessive heat), and for want of grass, for the *fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness*. And what better are those than beasts who never cry to God but for corn and wine, and complain of nothing but the want of delight of sense? Yet their crying to God in those cases shames the stupidity of those who cry not to God in any case.