

Joel 1:15-20

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/joel/joel-1/joel-115-20/>

The prophet uses the recent locust/army invasion to predict the day of the LORD, a time in which God will intervene in the world to judge His adversaries.

The image of the locust plague foreshadowed God's imminent judgment on His covenant people. Having witnessed the devastating effects of the locust plague, the prophet Joel cried out, *Alas for the day!*

The word *Alas* is “‘ahāh” in Hebrew, a term that often introduces a lament. It is an interjection or an abrupt remark describing someone's cry in the face of fear (2 Kings 3:10; Judges 11:35). The prophet used the term in conjunction with the word *day* to describe the terror that the *day* would bring. But what exactly did Joel have in view? What kind of *day* would that be?

The word *day* [“yôm” in Hebrew] is used both literally and figuratively in the Bible. In its literal sense, it refers to a period of twenty-four hours, reckoned from one midnight to the next (Gen. 1:5; Josh. 10:13). In its figurative sense, it refers to a time or era when an event would take place (Amos 5:18–20).

The prophet, wanting to clarify what he meant by the term “day,” went further to describe it as *the day of the LORD*. The phrase *day of the LORD* often refers to a time when the LORD reveals His supreme power and authority over human power and human existence. The phrase *day of the LORD* can refer to any time of God's intervention in human affairs. In Joel 1:15, the phrase refers to God's further imminent judgment on the people of Judah.

There will be a Day of the Lord when God will judge all the nations who have rebelled against Him. He will bring all things into their proper order and avenge all wickedness committed throughout history (Isaiah 2:12; Obadiah 15). This day of the LORD could be considered a foreshadowing of the Great Day of the LORD, at the end of the age.

As Joel foreshadowed God's judgment upon Judah, he lamented it because it was *near and would come as destruction from the Almighty* (Isaiah 13:6). The word for *destruction* [“shod” in Hebrew] somewhat sounds like the word for *almighty* [“Shaddai” in Hebrew]. Through this wordplay, the prophet drew attention to the seriousness of God's imminent judgment upon his contemporaries. God had given the people of Judah opportunity to repent, but they refused. Therefore the judgement was set, and would happen. This is why Joel speaks of a future event as though it is or has already occurred. Joel is indicating that the window of time for repentance has closed, and now judgement is certain.

This is a biblical pattern: God allows windows of repentance, but the window eventually closes. God gave the earth 120 years to repent before judging it with a flood (Genesis 6:3). God gave the Amalekites four generations to repent, but their window closed, and they were judged by God

through Israel (Genesis 15:16). God was patient with the first generation that came out of Egypt, forgiving them “ten times” (Numbers 14:22). However, eventually their window of repentance closed, and God judged them by requiring them to wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all those of fighting age from the rebellious generation had died (Numbers 14:20-25). Esau was denied restoration of the birthright he had squandered, even though he desired to repent; his window to repent had closed (Hebrews 12:15-17). This principle that our window of repentance can close is stated in Hebrews 6:4-8, which is why Hebrews emphasizes the importance of repenting “today” (Hebrews 4:7).

God was about to bring judgment on Judah, and that judgment would be more terrible than anything they had seen before.

To explain the reasons for his lament, Joel gave a detailed description of the aftermath of the locust plague. He began with a rhetorical question and said, *Has not food been cut off before our eyes, gladness, and joy from the house of our God?* The implied answer to the question is “Yes.” The locust plague has caused a severe famine in the land of Judah because it destroyed “the grain offering and the drink offering” (vv. 9–10). All this happened *before our eyes*. The people of Judah helplessly witnessed the locusts devouring their grains, destroying “the harvest of the field” (v. 11). And because the food was gone, *gladness and joy* were also *cut off* from the house of God. Simply put, the people of Judah could no longer offer any products to the LORD at the place where He chose “to establish His name” (Deuteronomy 26:1–2). Rejoicing was thus replaced by grief and sorrow (v. 9). This is due to the devastation brought on by the invading peoples.

The invasion of Judah will cause famine in the land. But apparently God will add drought to the invasion, leading to financial ruin. Joel describes this in three statements. (1) *the seeds shrivel under their clouds*, meaning that the seeds are dried up due to a lack of moisture. (2) *The storehouses are desolate* because there is no wine, no oil, and no grain to store in them (1 Chronicles 27:27). (3) *The barns used for storing grain are torn down for the grain is dried up*.

The invasion and drought destroyed the land’s vegetation, which also affected the livestock. As the prophet lamented this crisis, he cried out, *How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle wander aimlessly*. The *herds of cattle* were in distress *because there is no pasture for them*. The situation was so bad that *even the flocks of sheep suffer*. That means, as part of creation, *the cattle and sheep* suffered the consequences of human sin (Jeremiah 12:4). As the people of Judah suffered the loss caused by the locusts/invasers and the drought, the animals shared the distress because they were starving.

This chaotic situation prompted the prophet to offer a prayer to God: *To You, O LORD, I cry*. Then he gave the motive for his petition using the imagery of fire: *For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness and the flame has burned up all the trees of the field*.

The term *fire* denotes the physical manifestation of burning and the term *flame* refers to the gaseous part of the *fire* that is visible to human eyes. In ancient times, *fire* served many purposes. It was used to cook food (Exodus 12:8; Isaiah 44:15–16), to serve as light for people (Isaiah 50:11), to refine metals (Isa. 1:25), and to burn refuse (Leviticus 8:17). It also served as an

instrument of warfare with which conquerors burned down the cities of the losers (Joshua 6:24; Judges 1:8; 1 Kings 9:16). In our passage, *fire* and *flame* seem to be used figuratively. The point is that just as *fire* and *flame* could consume a place, the drought that accompanied the locusts/invasers had devastated the pastures.

Joel continued to picture the severity of the suffering and said, *Even the beasts of the field pant for You; For the water brooks are dried up and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.* Without grass and water, both the domesticated animals and the wild animals suffer. God's judgement on Judah would come through invasion and drought, and would be horrific.

Biblical Text

¹⁵ Alas for the day!

For the day of the Lord is near,

And it will come as destruction from the Almighty.

¹⁶ Has not food been cut off before our eyes,

Gladness and joy from the house of our God?

¹⁷ The seeds shrivel under their clods;

The storehouses are desolate,

The barns are torn down,

For the grain is dried up.

¹⁸ How the beasts groan!

The herds of cattle wander aimlessly

Because there is no pasture for them;

Even the flocks of sheep suffer.

¹⁹ To You, O Lord, I cry;

For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness

And the flame has burned up all the trees of the field.

²⁰ Even the beasts of the field pant for You;

For the water brooks are dried up

And fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.