

# Joel 1:2-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/joel/joel-1/joel-12-4/>

*The prophet Joel calls the nation of Judah to give undivided attention to his message because a locust plague will certainly devastate the land.*

The prophet Joel, having received a message from God, called for attention from the people of Judah. He began with a command to prepare his audience, *Hear this, O elders, and listen, all inhabitants of the land.*

The verb translated as *hear* is “Shema” in the Hebrew language. It describes both the mental activity of hearing as well as its effects (Deuteronomy 6:4; Hosea 5:1; Amos 5:1). In other words, the expectation for the person who hears is to then obey. The verb translated as *listen* can be rendered as “to give ear,” that is, to give due consideration to someone or something (Deuteronomy 32:1). The verbs are used here synonymously to call the people of Judah to attention.

Those who were called to heed the prophetic message were (1) *the elders* and (2) *all the inhabitants of the land*. The *elders* were those who were held in high esteem and served in a position of leadership in the Israelite community. They were well respected and often served as ruling authorities in their cities (Deuteronomy 1:13; 21:20). The *inhabitants of the land* refer to all those who dwelt in Judah.

The call to attention is followed by a rhetorical question: *Has anything like this happened in your days or your father’s days?* At this point Joel could be referring to a past event, or he could be referring to a future event that is certain to take place. It seems the context best fits the latter, that Joel is announcing a future event that will be like nothing seen in Judah, or perhaps neither in Judah nor Israel.

The expected answer to Joel’s rhetorical question is “no.” The anticipated event which Joel will describe is going to be something they have not seen before in their days. This could indicate that Joel’s prophesy precedes the Assyrian invasion of Israel, which took place in 722 BC. Or it could be that this statement was made to a generation in Judah that was far enough removed from the captivity of Israel that the impending invasion was something unlike anything they had experienced. The first wave of the Babylonian invasion of Judah took place in 586 BC, about 136 years after the Assyrian invasion of Israel. That would place the invasion of Israel after *your days* (those hearing Joel’s prophesy) *or your father’s days*, making it feasible for this message to be given to the people of Judah.

The position this commentary will assume from this point is that the statement refers to the people inhabiting Judah, who had not experienced an invasion of Judah by foreign powers during any of Judah’s history as a kingdom.

The predicted disaster will be unlike anything in the memory of the people and the nation. Nothing like this had occurred in their days. Neither they nor their fathers had seen something like this terrible event before. The coming event will have no precedent.

Because of the magnitude of the disaster, Joel also urges his audience to share the story with their loved ones. He states, *Tell your sons about it, and let your sons tell their sons, and their sons the next generation.* This prophetic statement is so certain that it can be proclaimed as a certain event. Then after the event has occurred, it needs to be remembered. Much of the Old Testament is dedicated to recounting the events of the Babylonian captivity of Judah, and the subsequent return. By studying these events, the lessons can be understood and remembered.

The exile in Babylon is recorded in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, which tell the history of Judah's downfall. The two Chronicles explain that the exile occurred due to Judah's unfaithfulness (1 Chronicles 9:1). The prophetic books of Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, and Habakkuk also pertain to the exile. Finally, the exile period includes the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which chronicle the return to the land and the rebuilding of the temple and wall of Jerusalem.

The exile of Judah to Babylon and its return to the Promised Land can be viewed as a metaphor for the story arc of the human race. Due to sin, humans were exiled from Eden and the Tree of Life, that would give humans immortality (Genesis 3:22-24). Judah will be instructed to live faithfully in Babylon, buy houses, build businesses, bless Babylon while raising families, all the while awaiting the time of return to their true country, the Promised Land (Jeremiah 29:4-11). Similarly, God's people are asked to do something similar in the spiritual dimension. We are asked to live on this fallen earth that is not our true home, blessing the earth by raising families and building businesses, living faithfully awaiting the time where we will again have access to the Tree of Life (Hebrews 11:13-16). In each case, the exile was caused by sin; in each case redemption comes through God's grace (Romans 8:22).

The account of the events was to be taught, and passed on to subsequent generations for preservation. Joel challenged the parents to teach their children so that everyone might learn from it (Deuteronomy 4:9). Actions have consequences. Belonging to God's family is given by grace, and does not require further action (Deuteronomy 7:7; Ephesians 2:8-9). However, possessing the blessings God grants to us requires walking in obedience to His commands, following His ways (Deuteronomy 7:9-11; Ephesians 2:10).

Up to this point, the prophet Joel has not told his audience about the nature of this unique phenomenon. He referred to it earlier as *this* (v. 2) and *it* (v. 3) but had not revealed specific details about it. This suspense served to capture the attention of his hearers. The fact that Joel has to tell the listeners what he is speaking of is a good indicator that he is not speaking of an actual event that had already occurred, but rather a future event that may be spoken of as having occurred because of the certainty of the prophetic utterance.

Now that Joel's audience was ready, he named the disaster he had in view, describing it as a locust plague: *What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; And what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten; And what the creeping locust has left,*

*the stripping locust has eaten*. This likely refers to four successive kingdoms that will invade and ravage Judah. The *gnawing locust* would represent the Babylonian invasion. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and deported much of the population of Israel to Babylon (1 Chronicles 9:1). The *swarming locust* would represent the kingdom of the Medes and Persians, who would succeed the Babylonians (Daniel 9:30). The Persian king Cyrus allowed some people to return to Israel, and to rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra and Nehemiah). But the kingdom of Judah remained under its rule. The *creeping locust* would represent the Greek empire, who succeeded the Persian empire. The Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanies outlawed Jewish religious practice. The *stripping locust* would represent the Roman empire. Rome eventually took over from the Greeks, after a brief time of self-rule by the Maccabees. Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD.

What the four types of locust have in common is that they are all domineering. The *gnawing* and *stripping locusts*, representing the Babylonian and Roman empires, aptly describe the physical destruction of Jerusalem and the temple destroyed by each. The *swarming* locust would represent the Persian dominance of Israel, even though King Cyrus allowed Jerusalem to be rebuilt and some Jews to return to Israel from captivity. The *creeping locust* might aptly represent the effort of the Greeks to gradually erode away Jewish customs and identity.

Locusts were common in the ancient Near East. Although individual locusts are insignificant and crushable (Psalm 109:23), in a swarm they act like armies on the march (Proverbs 30:27) and are known for the devastation and damage they bring. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses cited *locusts* as God's way of judging His covenant people: "You shall bring out much seed to the field but you will gather in little, for the *locust* will consume it" (Deuteronomy 28:38). The impending invasion by foreign nations will be like a consecutive series of swarming locust infestations that ravage the entire nation.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>2</sup>Hear this, O elders,  
And listen, all inhabitants of the land.  
Has *anything like this* happened in your days  
Or in your fathers' days?**

**<sup>3</sup>Tell your sons about it,  
And *let* your sons *tell* their sons,  
And their sons the next generation.**

**<sup>4</sup>What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten;  
And what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten;  
And what the creeping locust has left, the stripping locust has eaten.**