

# Joel 2:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/joel/joel-2/joel-21-3/>

*The prophet Joel issues a call to blow the trumpet to announce God's imminent judgment on Judah which will come in the form of a large, invading army.*

This chapter describes the looming invasion in military terms. The first chapter described this looming invasion as a locust plague. This plague pictured a devastating judgment that would come upon the people of Judah. The prophetic voice in chapter one spoke as though the invasion had already occurred, likely to emphasize the certainty of the prophecy's fulfillment. In view of the imminent approach of this great judgment, Joel issued an order to *blow a trumpet in Zion and sound an alarm on My holy mountain.*

The term translated as *trumpet* is "shofar" in Hebrew. It refers to a wind instrument made from a ram's horn. In ancient Israel, *trumpets* were blown over burnt offerings and peace offerings to celebrate the New Moon feast (Numbers 10:10). They were also blown by watchmen to signal impending danger, as when an enemy nation was approaching Israel (Numbers 10:9). The sound of the *trumpet* would serve as a warning concerning God's imminent judgment on His disobedient people.

The specific location where the sound of the *trumpet* would be heard was in *Zion*, God's *holy mountain*. Mount *Zion* is in the southeastern part of the city of Jerusalem. It was the high hill on which King David built a citadel, so it is often referred to as "the city of David" (2 Samuel 5:7). This explains why "Zion" is used as a symbol for the nation of Israel as well as Jerusalem, its capital. The blowing of the trumpet in Zion was intended to warn the entire land and all its leaders that the invasion was coming soon.

Having commanded the people to *blow the trumpet* to announce God's judgment, Joel stated, *Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble.* The verb *tremble* means to quake or to shake. People *tremble* with emotion from anxiety (1 Chronicles 17:9), joy (Jeremiah 33:9), sadness (2 Samuel 18:33) or terror, as in this passage (Exodus 15:14). The *sound* of the *trumpet* would signal imminent danger and could cause fear and panic among all those living in Judah (Amos 3:6; Jeremiah 4:5-6). The reason to sound the alarm was because *the day of the LORD is coming; Surely it is near.* This would mean that the first invasion is on Judah's doorstep. This will be the first of four invasions (Joel 1:4).

The phrase *day of the LORD* generally refers to any specific time in which the LORD openly intervenes in human affairs to judge the wicked and deliver the righteous. The specific time may be near or far (2 Peter 3:8). This reference refers to a near time in which God would judge Judah's wicked deeds through a military invasion of a foreign people. This likely refers to the Babylonian invasion of Judah, which first began in 586 BC. It could also refer to the additional three invasions that will take place in Judah's future.

The prophet then used four different terms for *darkness* to describe the distress that will accompany God's judgment. It would be *a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness*. The term *darkness* literally refers to an absence of light or brightness. But it is used here in connection with *gloom*, so is used metaphorically to portray the day of God's judgment, which would be a day of distress and trouble (Amos 5:18-20; Zephaniah 1:15). In chapter 1, the locust plague that represented the impending invasion was accompanied by severe drought, so the reference to a *day of clouds* here might not refer to rain. It could refer to God's presence in judging Judah, as God's presence is often pictured by the presence of a cloud (Exodus 16:10; 19:9; 19:16; 24:15-18; 33:9). The root word translated *thick darkness* is the same word used to describe the plague of darkness God smote upon Egypt (Exodus 10:22).

In the book of Exodus, we learn about a locust plague that God sent to the Egyptians when they refused to release the Israelites. The locusts were so numerous that they "covered the surface of the whole land so that the land was darkened" (Exodus 10:14-15). This would indicate that the land was darkened by the swarm of locusts. The *gloom* in Judah could stem from the swarm of invaders covering the land, darkening it like a swarm of locusts. Unlike Exodus, in this passage the judgment is not on God's enemies, but on His chosen people. Such a judgment would bring intense grief and pain to the people of Judah, causing them to *tremble*.

Joel also spoke of the innumerable size of the invading army by likening it to *the dawn spread over the mountains*. The term *dawn* means the approaching of the morning light, which signals the breaking of the day. When the morning light comes, the rays of the sun cover the entire tops of the mountains as the sun peeks over the horizon. This comparison indicates that the army would *spread over* the entire land of Judah as the invasion approached. Indeed, the army would be strong and irresistible.

The army that would invade Judah's land is *a great and mighty people*. Additionally, the army would be unique. *There has never been anything like it, nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations*. This is another way of saying that the disaster that was about to take place in Judah was unprecedented, and will remain so for a long time. This statement echoes the statement in chapter 1:

"Has anything like this happened in your days  
Or in your fathers' days?" (Joel 1:2)

The voice used in chapter 1 is a narration describing a recent locust invasion, which is also said to be an unprecedented event. If these were separate events, a literal locust invasion followed by an invasion of a human army, it would not fit well to call the second event unprecedented. This likely indicates that both chapters refer to the same event. In chapter 1, the prophet is speaking about the future as though it had just occurred, in order to emphasize the certainty of the prediction's fulfillment. In chapter 2, the voice changes from describing a recent locust invasion to the current moment, where the prophet predicts an immediate invasion by a foreign army. This provides an interpretation of the locusts from chapter 1, making clear that the locusts are a picture of an invading army. The anticipation is of an invasion of Judah by a foreign nation. This nation is a *great and mighty people*, so numerous that they are like unto a swarm of locusts.

The invasion would be unexpected and incomparable for many years to come. Chapter 1 described a sequence of four types of locusts, likely indicating four different nations who would invade Judah. The first invader was also pictured by a lion, representing Babylon. It is arguable that the final nation to invade, Rome, would be just as devastating as Babylon, but that would not be for *many generations*, roughly 700 years.

The prophet likened the power of the coming army to a raging fire and said, *A fire consumes before them and behind them a flame burns*. The term *fire* denotes the physical manifestation of burning, whereas the term *flame* refers to the part of the *fire* that is visible to human eyes (Joel 1:19). When fire attacks a field, it usually leaves it barren and desolate. We might think of an image of a prairie fire or forest fire, consuming everything in its wake. In the same way, the coming army would have a devastating effect on the land of Judah. It would devour all in its path, leaving the land desolate and barren.

Before the arrival of the invading army, Judah's land was fruitful and beautiful. It was *like the garden of Eden* in which "the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). Indeed, it was a well-kept and fertile land. But after the army passes through, the land will become *a desolate wilderness*. The army is so powerful that *nothing at all escapes them*. Nobody will be able to withstand the invaders; the army will be the instrument of judgement by the Suzerain God, the Almighty (v. 11).

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>1</sup>Blow a trumpet in Zion,  
And sound an alarm on My holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
For the day of the Lord is coming;  
Surely it is near,  
<sup>2</sup>A day of darkness and gloom,  
A day of clouds and thick darkness.  
As the dawn is spread over the mountains,  
So there is a great and mighty people;  
There has never been *anything* like it,  
Nor will there be again after it  
To the years of many generations.  
<sup>3</sup>A fire consumes before them  
And behind them a flame burns.  
The land is like the garden of Eden before them  
But a desolate wilderness behind them,  
And nothing at all escapes them.**