



## Joel - Chapter One

### Summary of Chapter One

The first unit (vv.1-12) describes the devastation that has come upon Judah, providing the reason for the call to lament in the second unit (vv.13-20).

A plague of locusts comes upon Judah: what the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.

All has withered, and Judah must lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth. There can be no grain or drink offering now. Repent with wailing, sackcloth and a fast. The brooks have dried up, and the animals suffer in the drought.

### I Joel 1:1-2:17 - The Judgement against Judah and the Day of the Lord

This first part of Joel introduces the Lord's judgement in the form of a locust infestation, drought, and the coming of a great army. These events on 'the day of the Lord' are followed by a call to seek the Lord.

#### I.a Joel 1:1-12 - Lament over the Ruin of the Country

Using the memory of swarms of locusts devastating the land, Joel warns the elders and the rest of the community to instruct their children that the armies that have invaded their land have done so because of their iniquity.

<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel:

#### Joel 1:1

The word of the Lord that came to Joel. This is a common phrase among the prophets; refer also to Hosea 1:1, Jonah 1:1, Micah 1:1, Zephaniah 1:1, and

Zechariah 1:1. This message has a divine source, and the prophet is given the privilege and responsibility of bearing that message to his hearers.

The prophet Joel spoke to the southern kingdom of Judah, and makes no reference to the northern kingdom of Israel. It is hard to pin down his exact time, because he does not mention any other kings or prophets. Many scholars date the book of Joel to 835 BC. This makes Joel a pre-exilic prophet, who ministered before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BC, or the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC. Other pre-exilic prophets include Obadiah, Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Micah.

If this date is correct then Joel is one of the earliest prophets, with only Obadiah prophesying before his time (845 BC). It was a time of turmoil and transition in Judah, at the end of the reign of the Queen Mother Athaliah and the beginning of the reign of King Joash. Athaliah seized power at the sudden death in battle of her son Ahaziah, who only reigned one year (2 Kings 8:26 and 2 Kings 11:1). Athaliah killed all her son's heirs, except for one who was hidden in the temple and escaped, one-year-old Josiah (2 Kings 11:3). Her six-year reign of terror ended in 835 BC when the High Priest Jehoiada overthrew Athaliah and set the seven-year-old Josiah on the throne (2 Kings 11:4-21).

During her six years as queen over Judah, Athaliah reigned wickedly. She was the granddaughter of the wicked King Omri of Israel, making her either a daughter or niece to Ahab, one of Israel's worst kings (2 Kings 8:26). Athaliah raised her son Ahaziah to reign in the wicked pattern of Ahab, and even brought in Ahab's counsellors to advise him (2 Chronicles 22:2-4). When Ahaziah was killed in battle and she seized power, she set her other sons to evil, even desecrating the temple and its sacred things (2 Chronicles 24:7).

If scholars are accurate in thinking that Joel prophesied in 835 BC then the judgement he described came toward the end of the six-year reign of ungodliness under Queen Athaliah. No wonder God brought a heavy hand on Judah!

<sup>2</sup> Hear this, O elders,  
give ear, all inhabitants of the land!  
Has such a thing happened in your days,  
or in the days of your ancestors?

### Joel 1:2

Elders likely refers to older members of the community rather than a formal office. The elders of Israel appear throughout the history of Israel. They were a group of senior tribal leaders entrusted with important decisions. They are

mentioned from the time of the sojourn in Egypt: <<Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, “The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt”>> (Exodus 3:16), through to the NT: <<When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him>> (John 8:9), and: <<I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you>> (Titus 1:5). Commands are imparted to a wide range of groups, i.e. elders, drunkards, priests, and farmers, within the community. Verses 2 and 14 of Joel Chapter 1 set limits for the first subsection (vv.2-14) as each mentions elders and all inhabitants.

Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? The disasters that Joel will go on to describe have no historic precedent and will come as a shock to the current generation.

- <sup>3</sup> Tell your children of it,  
and let your children tell their children,  
and their children another generation.

### Joel 1:3

Tell your children. The people of Judah should recount this to four generations. The telling of the Lord’s great deeds and words occurs in the context of the covenant community: <<You shall tell your child on that day, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt”>> (Exodus 13:8), <<But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children>> (Deuteronomy 4:9), and: <<We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done>> (Psalm 78:4-6).

- <sup>4</sup> 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.

## Joel 1:4

The locust is a kind of grasshopper: <<*There the fire will devour you, the sword will cut you off. It will devour you like the locust. Multiply yourselves like the locust, multiply like the grasshopper!*>> (Nahum 3:15); under the right conditions they travel in large swarms and devastate all plant life in their path.

Cutting, swarming, hopping, destroying locust. Joel is not announcing a coming judgement of the Lord. He describes their present state, devastated by successive swarms of locusts, first cutting or chewing, then swarming, then hopping and crawling, and finally consuming and destroying. Judah will experience a time of famine and financial ruin because of these locusts. This plague was so unusual that Joel says, <<*tell your children of it*>> (v.3). The times were so remarkably difficult that parents would tell their children, "I lived through the plagues of locusts." Joel likely uses these terms as names for one kind of locust, perhaps in successive swarms, rather than four different types, in order to emphasise the totality of destruction; note the different sequence in Joel 2:25. The Bible often uses four agents of destruction to stress utter devastation: <<*And when they say to you, 'Where shall we go?' you shall say to them: Thus says the Lord: Those destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those destined for the sword, to the sword; those destined for famine, to famine, and those destined for captivity, to captivity. And I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, says the Lord: the sword to kill, the dogs to drag away, and the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth to devour and destroy*>> (Jeremiah 15:2-3), <<*For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four deadly acts of judgement, sword, famine, wild animals, and pestilence, to cut off humans and animals from it!*>> (Ezekiel 14:21), and: <<*So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of humankind*>> (Revelation 9:15).

In 1915 a devastating plague of locusts covered what is modern-day Israel and Syria. The first swarms came in March, in clouds so thick they blocked out the sun. The female locusts immediately began to lay eggs, one hundred at a time. Witnesses say that in one square yard, there were as many as 65,000 to 75,000 eggs. In a few weeks they hatched, and the young locusts resembled large ants. They could not fly yet, and got along by hopping. They marched along 400 to 600 feet a day, devouring every speck of vegetation along the way. After two more stages of moulting they became adults who could fly, and the devastation continued and accelerated.

- <sup>5</sup> Wake up, you drunkards, and weep;  
and wail, all you wine-drinkers,  
over the sweet wine,

for it is cut off from your mouth.

### Joel 1:5

Wake up, you drunkards, wine-drinkers. Both groups, unaware of the coming chaos, must be aroused from their ignorance. They will have no sweet wine to drink when the locusts lay waste to the vines.

Sweet wine was intoxicating, although its shorter fermentation time made it less so than wine fermented for a longer period.

For it is cut off from your mouth. When the grape crop fails due to the devastation by the locusts there will be no wine to drink: <<*The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh*>> (Isaiah 24:7).

<sup>6</sup> For a nation has invaded my land,  
powerful and innumerable;  
its teeth are lions' teeth,  
and it has the fangs of a lioness.

### Joel 1:6

Locusts are compared to a nation, equivalent to a great army: <<*the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank*>> (Proverbs 30:27), <<*I am going to bring upon you a nation from far away, O house of Israel, says the Lord. It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb; all of them are mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food; they shall eat up your sons and your daughters; they shall eat up your flocks and your herds; they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees; they shall destroy with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust*>> (Jeremiah 5:15-17), <<*I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you*>> (Joel 2:25), and: <<*In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle*>> (Revelation 9:7-9). Armies are compared to locusts elsewhere in the OT; refer to Judges 6:5 and 7:12; Isaiah 33:4; and Jeremiah 46:23, 51:14, and 51:27; and are referenced as such in other ancient Near Eastern texts.

<sup>7</sup> It has laid waste my vines,  
and splintered my fig trees;

it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;  
their branches have turned white.

### Joel 1:7

The vine and fig tree are symbols of a prosperous and peaceful life for Israel: <<*Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: “Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree, and drink water from your own cistern”>> (2 Kings 18:31), <<*but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken>> (Micah 4:4), which the Lord sees as his property. With the destruction of vine and fig tree, the validity of the lions’ teeth metaphor (v.6) becomes clear.**

<sup>8</sup> Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth  
for the husband of her youth.

### Joel 1:8

Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth. Joel tells Judah that they should look at their condition and mourn, with all the emotion and passion of a young widow. They should not receive this plague of locusts stoically, with false bravado. In this, Joel does not minimise the suffering at all. He is not like the dentist who says, ‘This may cause a bit of discomfort’ when he really means ‘This is going to hurt and I am going to make you suffer.’ He deals with the suffering in a real way and says, ‘Let us turn back to the Lord.’

Sackcloth is a garment of goat or camel hair worn during times of mourning, repentance, or fasting: <<*When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry>> (Esther 4:1), <<*The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground>> (Lamentations 2:10), <<*Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes>> (Daniel 9:3), <<*When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes>> (Jonah 3:6), and: <<*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes>> (Matthew 11:21).*****

The husband of her youth or bridegroom of her youth. The people are called to a grief as deep as that of a betrothed virgin whose promised husband dies before the marriage is consummated.

- <sup>9</sup> The grain-offering and the drink-offering are cut off  
from the house of the Lord.  
The priests mourn,  
the ministers of the Lord.

### Joel 1:9

The grain-offering and the drink-offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. Nothing is left for the offerings that accompany the daily burnt-offering in the temple as required by Exodus 29:38-42 and Leviticus 23:13.

The priests mourn. Their loss is personal since they ate a portion of the offering. It is remarkable to see that these sacrifices to the Lord at the temple only stopped when there was no more grain or wine to give to God. Queen Athaliah's reign was wicked, but she allowed the temple ceremonies to continue. This shows that the devil does not mind ceremonies in themselves, and that the devil is more interested in corrupting true religion than eliminating it.

- <sup>10</sup> The fields are devastated,  
the ground mourns;  
for the grain is destroyed,  
the wine dries up,  
the oil fails.

### Joel 1:10

The ground mourns, the oil fails. Joel poetically personifies these things as experiencing grief. The presence of grain, wine, and oil is evidence of God's covenant blessing: *<<he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you>>* (Deuteronomy 7:13), and: *<<In response to his people the Lord said: I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations>>* (Joel 2:19), and their absence is evidence of God's judgement: *<<The Lord will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favour to*

*the young. It shall consume the fruit of your livestock and the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed, leaving you neither grain, wine, and oil, nor the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, until it has made you perish>> (Deuteronomy 28:49-51), and: <<She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for Baal. Therefore I will take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season; and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness>> (Hosea 2:8-9).*

<sup>11</sup> Be dismayed, you farmers,  
wail, you vine-dressers,  
over the wheat and the barley;  
for the crops of the field are ruined.

<sup>12</sup> The vine withers,  
the fig tree droops.  
Pomegranate, palm, and apple —  
all the trees of the field are dried up;  
surely, joy withers away  
among the people.

### Joel 1:11-12

Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vine-dressers. In vivid and poetic images, Joel shows how the whole nation mourns this great destruction brought by locusts. They would normally have been confident of an abundant crop for God had blessed the land and therefore this would be a severe blow: <<*They are disappointed because they were confident; they come there and are confounded*>> (Job 6:20), and: <<*Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, 'Alas! alas!' They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing*>> (Amos 5:16).

Be dismayed or ashamed, Hebrew *Hobishu*, sounds like dries up, Hebrew *hobish*, used to say that <<*the wine dries up*>> in v.10 and joy withers away; also Hebrew *hobishah*, used to say the vine withers. The loss of harvest means a loss of joy. Yet, the situation can be restored with God's blessing: <<*Is there any seed left in the barn? Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing? From this day on I will bless you*>> (Haggai 2:19).

## I.b Joel 1:13-2:17 - A Call to Repentance and Prayer

The response of the people to this devastation is to come together to fast, repent and call on God to save them for the Day of the Lord, a time of judgement, is upon them. This judgement comes in the shape of a strong army, the likes of which they have never faced before and one that will bring total destruction upon them. Their only hope of salvation is to return to the Lord.

- <sup>13</sup> Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests;  
wail, you ministers of the altar.  
Come, pass the night in sackcloth,  
you ministers of my God!  
Grain-offering and drink-offering  
are withheld from the house of your God.

### Joel 1:13

This is the climax of this section, filled with specific commands to priests. The commands to put on sackcloth and lament mimic the actions of the virgin (v.8). The reason for the priests' lament is that the various offerings are withheld: <<*They shall not pour drink-offerings of wine to the Lord, and their sacrifices shall not please him*>> (Hosea 9:4a). Joel calls the religious leaders to lead the nation in repentance. He tells the priests to 'prepare to do the work of repentance.'

When there was grain and wine to bring the people of Judah still brought offerings to the temple, either out of tradition or godly obedience. Now that there is no produce, there is no offering for the house of God.

- <sup>14</sup> Sanctify 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.

### Joel 1:14

Sanctify and gather are further tasks for the priests.

A fast, cry out. OT fasts were undertaken as a sign of mourning, repentance, humility, and as a means of seeking God's help, guidance, or forgiveness; refer to Judges 20:26, 1 Samuel 7:6, 2 Samuel 1:12, Ezra 8:21-23, Nehemiah 1:4 and 9:1, and Daniel 9:3. The object of fasting here is to make the relationship with God so important that even eating is not that important.

Call a solemn assembly. The call is for God's people to come together and repent for all are guilty and must repent of their own sins.

Gather the elders. The leaders of the people, those deemed to be wise and of influence, should make a special point to be part of the work of repentance.

To the house of the Lord your God is a reference to the temple in Jerusalem. The whole nation had to come to the place where they should meet together with God. After all, it was the place where he put his name: *<<But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>>* (Romans 3:21-23).

And cry out to the Lord. Finally, the people were to simply cry out to God and trust that he will respond to them in mercy: *<<Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands>>* (Jonah 3:8).

<sup>15</sup> Alas for the day!

For the day of the Lord is near,  
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

### Joel 1:15

The day of the Lord is a major theme in Joel; it can refer both to the particular devastation of the locusts (v.15) and to a final vindication of God and his people (Joel 3:18-21). It can refer to a day of destruction and threat for Israel (2:1 and 2:11), or for the nations (3:14). However, for God's people, it is also associated with his presence (2:27), blessing (3:18), and salvation (2:31-32 and 3:16).

The idea behind the phrase the day of the Lord is that this is Gods' time. Man has his day, and the Lord has his. In the ultimate sense, the day of the Lord is fulfilled when Jesus judges the earth and returns in glory. In a lesser sense, an example of the day of the Lord is a time of judgement such as experienced by Judah with the locusts and drought.

Amos provides the earliest known use of the prophets' expression, the day of the Lord. It also occurs in Isaiah 13:6 and 13:9, Jeremiah 46:10, Ezekiel 13:5

and 30:3, Joel 2:1, 2:11, 2:31 and 3:14, Amos 5:18-20, Obadiah 15, Zephaniah 1:7 and 1:14, and Malachi 4:5. Perhaps in Amos' day the term was in popular use for the time when the Lord would intervene and put Israel at the head of the nations, possibly based on Deuteronomy 32:35-37; but Amos, and all prophets after him, clarify what it would mean for the Lord to visit his people: it means judgement upon them if they are unfaithful. In Amos, the term points forward to the coming judgement on the northern kingdom at the hands of the Assyrians (Amos 5:27); in Zephaniah, it points to the coming judgement on Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. Other prophets use the term to signal God's forthcoming punishment of other nations for their brutalities, e.g. Babylon (Isaiah), Egypt (Jeremiah), Edom (Obadiah), and many nations (Joel and Obadiah). In some cases the prophet uses the term to denote something farther off in the future (Malachi and probably in Joel 2:31). All of this indicates that the 'day' is not unique, but may be repeated as circumstances call for it. The NT authors apply the term as well to the return of Christ; for example: <<He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ>> (1 Corinthians 1:8), <<For we write to you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand until the end – as you have already understood us in part – that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast>> (2 Corinthians 1:13-14), <<For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night>> (1 Thessalonians 5:2), <<As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction>> (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3), <<But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed>> (2 Peter 3:10).

As destruction from the Almighty it comes. Joel uses an alliteration with the Hebrew words *shod* and *Shaddai*, the traditional Hebrew name for God Almighty, which suggests that the wordplay implies something like 'as destruction of the Destroyer.'

<sup>16</sup> 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 ruined  
because the grain has failed.

#### Joel 1:16-17

The seed shrivels under the clods. These three words occur only here in the Masoretic text, and thus their precise meaning is uncertain. Nevertheless, it is clear from what follows that a drought has also come upon the land (v.20). It affects everything in Judah, and wildfires ravage the dry land.

18 How the animals groan!  
The herds of cattle wander about  
because there is no pasture for them;  
even the flocks of sheep are dazed.

#### Joel 1:18

The flocks of sheep are dazed. The Hebrew for dazed or suffer is *'asham*, and here it means 'to suffer punishment' or 'to bear guilt.' The idea would be that creation suffers for Israel's guilt. It is also possible to read this as a form of *shamem*, meaning 'to be desolate'.

19 To you, O Lord, I cry.  
For fire has devoured  
the pastures of the wilderness,  
and flames have burned  
all the trees of the field.  
20 Even the wild animals cry to you  
because the watercourses are dried up,  
and fire has devoured  
the pastures of the wilderness.

#### Joel 1:19-20

To you, O Lord, I cry. In this time of drought, all Judah could do was cry out to God. They were powerless to 'fix' the drought problem. God sent them to a place

where only heaven could help them, so they would look to no other place. The devastation brought by the Lord can be relieved only by him: *<<To you, O Lord, I call; my rock, do not refuse to hear me, for if you are silent to me, I shall be like those who go down to the Pit>>* (Psalm 28:1), *<<To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication>>* (Psalm 30:8), and: *<<Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls>>* (Joel 2:32).

Fire is sometimes an expression of divine judgement; refer to Genesis 19:24, Numbers 11:1, Deuteronomy 32:22, Jeremiah 4:4, Hosea 8:14, Amos Chapter 1, and Zephaniah 1:18 and 3:8.

In Luke 13:1-5 Jesus was confronted with the problem of a disaster that killed eighteen people. Instead of acting as if it were just an accident of blind fate, Jesus used it as a wake-up call for repentance. Jesus showed that ‘Why did this disaster happen to them?’ is the wrong question. The right question is ‘Am I ready to face such a disaster in this fallen world?’