

Joel Lesson 8

Joel 1:13, Continued

Joel 1:13 - Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.

The commentaries almost all agree that the central theme of Joel is the Day of the Lord, but last week we looked at another candidate for the central theme of Joel.

And what is that theme? It is the very first word in verse 5 - "Awake!" It is the very first thing that Joel says after he describes the locust invasion in verse 4. "Awake!"

So which is it? Which one of those two possibilities is the central theme of Joel? I think the answer is that we don't have to make that choice. Why not? Because those two themes are closely related. The Day of the Lord is a wake up call from God! God sent such days and warned the people about such days so that they would wake up.

But what does it mean to wake up? I think verse 13 answers that question.

What happens when we **physically** wake up?

We quit seeing things in the dream world, but we instead start seeing things in the physical world. When we see something in a dream we are not seeing it as it really is, but when we wake up and see that same thing in the physical world we are seeing it as it really is - not in a dream, but in real life.

What happens when we **spiritually** wake up?

The same thing! When we awaken spiritually and open our spiritual eyes we see things as they really are - we see things as God sees them. That is what it means to wake up! I think that is what Paul tells us.

Ephesians 5:13-14 - But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

But how does verse 13 tell us that?

It tells us that by showing us how God saw this locust invasion. It tells us that by showing us what God viewed as the worst thing about that locust invasion. It tells us that by showing us how the people should have been seeing that locust invasion.

"Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God."

If the people did not see the locust invasion that way, then they needed to wake up! They needed to start seeing things as God saw them.

And we all need to be doing that. Otherwise, we are spiritually asleep, and we are not seeing things as they really are.

Joel 1:14

Joel 1:14 - Consecrate 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.

It is surprising how many commentaries tell us that these elders in verse 14 were the leaders of the people at this time. They tell us that there was no king, and so the people were being led by these elders. And they say all of that so that they can date the book of Joel *after* the exile when there was no longer any Jewish king.

And why is that view surprising? It is surprising because we have read the text of Joel!

We have now seen these elders twice in this first chapter. In verse 5, these elders were commanded to hear something, and now in verse 14, the priests are commanded to gather these elders.

Let me ask a question: do these elders look like leaders to you? Do we see them leading? Or do we see them being led? "Listen up! And stand over there!" Does that sound like something directed to the leaders?

But, with that said, we do have a question about these elders: why are they mentioned again in verse 14 if they aren't the leaders?

I think the answer to that question comes quickly when we compare verse 14 with verse 2. In both of those verses we see the same two groups - the elders and the inhabitants of the land.

In verse 2, the elders listened to a question, and the inhabitants of the land listened to their answer.

Here in verse 14, we find the same two groups - the elders and the inhabitants of the land - gathered into the temple so that they can cry out to God.

In verse 2, the elders and the inhabitants of the land are listening. In verse 14, the elders and the inhabitants of the land are crying out. Those events are what? They are parallel. We are seeing parallelism, the defining characteristic of Hebrew poetry.

I think we should see verses 2 and 14 as bookends for the messages that we find between those verses. Verse 14 parallels and closes verse 2.

That answer also makes sense with what we said earlier about these elders - whatever they are doing, they do not seem to be leading. There is no indication either here or back in verse 2 that these elders are the leaders of the people. In fact, the indication is that they are not - these elders are being told what to do: to listen and to gather together in the temple.

In fact, if anyone is leading here, it is the priests. In verse 14, we see the priests consecrating a fast, calling an assembly, and gathering everyone into the temple.

So are the priests the leaders in place of the king?

There is no need to jump to that conclusion based on what we see in verse 14. It would be perfectly natural for priests to do these things whether or not there was a king - and particularly so when, as here, the priests had been commanded by God through the prophet Joel to do these things!

In short, what we read here about the elders and the priests tells us nothing about whether a king was reigning over the people at this time.

Let's look next at what the priests are told to do in verse 14: "Consecrate 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."

That looks like three things, but I think it is really just two things: consecrate a fast and call a solemn assembly. The call to gather the people seems to be just a more specific and parallel way of calling the solemn assembly.

So what can we say about the consecrated fast and the solemn assembly? Why are the people called to do those things after this locust invasion?

One thing we should note right from the start is that one of those commands (fasting) is a private or individual response to the disaster, while the other command (assembling) is a public or corporate response to the disaster.

What does that tell us? Let's save that question until after we have looked more closely at each command, but let's keep that distinction in mind.

The first command in verse 14 is to **"consecrate a fast."**

And that command at first seems very odd given the context. Why does God command a *fast* after the food supply has been destroyed?

I think the first word in the command answers that question - consecrate. This fast involves more than just not eating - the people would have been doing that anyway. This fast is consecrated - it is a fast with a spiritual purpose.

But why did God call for such a fast after the food supply had been destroyed? I think God did it for the same reason that he sent Joel after the locust invasion.

God wanted the people to learn a lesson from that locust invasion.

God did not call this sacred fast so that the people could think about the locusts - they would have been doing that anyway.

God called this sacred fast so that the people would think about how they had been living prior to the day the locusts arrived and on how they should live differently after that day.

And, as we will soon see, God also wanted them to reflect on the great theme of this book: The day

of the Lord!

The second command is to **"call a solemn assembly."**

Yes, the people were suffering, but they were not suffering alone. God wanted them to gather together in a solemn assembly. They were not in this alone.

I think this command for the people to gather together in their suffering provides a very important lesson for us today.

Yes, we each have an individual responsibility to God, but that does not mean we are in this alone. Each of us is a part of a body - the body of Christ, the church of Christ.

■ **1 Corinthians 12:27** - Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

■ **Romans 14:7** - For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

The people listening to Joel had experienced a terrible devastating event. When the locusts came, I suspect they did what we did during the pandemic - they likely retreated to their homes to keep the danger outside.

But now that the locusts were gone would they continue to struggle alone or would they struggle together? In verse 14, God is calling on them to struggle together.

■ "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."

Earlier we noted that fasting is a private or individual response to the disaster, while assembling is a public or corporate response to the disaster. And we saved for later the question of what that tells us.

I think we have now answered that question. The private response reflects private suffering, and the corporate response reflects common suffering as a body.

If the proper response to either is neglected, then the body is not functioning as it should.

■ **1 Corinthians 12:26** - If one member suffers, all suffer together...

I think we all understand the truth of that statement when it comes to the members of our **physical** body. But do we understand the truth of that statement when it comes to the members of our **spiritual** body?

One final question about verse 14: What was the population of Jerusalem at this time?

And perhaps you have a question about that final question: why do I ask?

I ask that question because some commentaries claim that the population was very small when Joel was written, which, they say, means that Joel was written not long after the people returned from the Babylonian exile.

And why do they say the population was small? Because of the command in verse 14 to "gather the elders and **all** the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God."

So, now back to our question. What was the population of Jerusalem at this time? Can we infer from verse 14 that the population was very small?

Let's start by figuring out how many people we are talking about here.

We find the dimensions of the first temple in 1 Kings 6:2, and it was about 2700 square feet. If the command was to gather everyone inside the temple, then it would have held likely only a few hundred people. If instead the command was to gather everyone in the temple complex, then it would likely have held only several thousand people at most.

Those estimates create a problem no matter how we date this book.

Even if we were to look at the post-exile date we would still have trouble locating a period during which the population was that small. Why? Because the first return under King Cyrus included more than 40,000 people (Ezra 2:64), and the population seems to have increased from there.

So what is the solution? The solution is to remember that we are reading Hebrew poetry, and one common characteristic of Hebrew poetry is hyperbole.

I think we have already seen some hyperbole in the first chapter of Joel.

- **Joel 1:6** - For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and **beyond number**; its teeth

are **lions' teeth**, and it has **the fangs of a lioness**.

Yes, the locusts were numerous and fierce, but they were not literally beyond number and they did not literally have teeth and fangs like a lion.

Do you mean to say that there is hyperbole in the Bible? Yes, absolutely there is.

The Bible sometimes uses figures of speech, just as we do today. And such figures of speech in the Bible are more common in the poetry of the Bible, just as they are today. We often see hyperbole in the Psalms.

Psalm 6:6 - I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping.

But if we are bothered by the idea that the command in verse 14 uses hyperbole, we do have some other options.

Verse 14 is just a command for all to gather; it does not tell us that everyone obeyed that command. And neither does verse 14 tell us when they were to gather; perhaps they came in smaller groups as they traveled to the city over some period of time.

And, again, if we infer from verse 14 that everyone came to the temple or the temple complex at the same time, then it is not clear at all when we could locate such a small population on the timeline prior to the destruction of the first temple or after the construction of the second temple.

Joel 1:15

Joel 1:15 - Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Most English translations do not do a very good job in conveying the emotional impact of the opening phrase of verse 15: "Alas for the day!"

The Hebrew word translated "alas" occurs 15 times in the Old Testament and is always used as an exclamation from someone who has experienced shock, dismay, or despair. The Hebrew word is stronger than the English word "alas," but it is difficult to find a better English counterpart.

One commentary says that the Hebrew word is best described as the sound a person makes when punched in the stomach! Another commentary suggests that it is the first thing that flies out of a person's mouth in a moment of surprise or pain, perhaps like, "oh no!" That commentary says that the English word "ah!" sounds much like the Hebrew word and might be the best choice.

Why is that word important? Because that little word is the link between what we have been seeing so far in Joel and what we are about to see in verse 15. Joel is not changing the subject here. Instead, Joel is about to tell us something that comes straight out of the extreme shock and dismay that he and the people have just experienced.

"Alas for **the day**!" What day? That question is answered by the next phrase in verse 15: "For **the day of the LORD** is near!" That day is the day of the Lord.

And so, finally, in verse 15 we find the all-important phrase "the day of the Lord" in the book of Joel!

This is the first time the phrase occurs in Joel, but it is certainly not the last time we will see that phrase. And we will have many questions about that phrase as we proceed in our study of Joel.

And our first question is immediate! There is something very puzzling about the first occurrence of this phrase in Joel that we see here in verse 15: "For the day of the LORD **is near**."

Near? Why **near**?

If this day of the Lord is the locust invasion, and if the locust invasion has already happened, then why does Joel say that the day of the Lord is **near**?

We might be tempted to interpret "near" to mean "near in the past," but that will not work grammatically.

In the Hebrew, the only verb in verse 15 is the word translated "comes," and it is in the imperfect tense, which means that it is describing an action that is either future or in the process of happening. It is not describing a completed action in the past.

But perhaps that is still the answer - the day that is near is a day that is in the process of coming. And that could certainly be true of this disaster when we combine the destruction of the crops from that locust invasion with the drought that we are also seeing here.

If this day of the Lord in verse 15 is or includes the locust invasion in verse 4, then that is the most likely answer to why we see the word "near" in verse 15. The disaster was not over; it will still in the process of happening.

But there is another possible answer for why the word "near" might have been used to describe that locust invasion - Joel may be quoting someone in verse 15. We find some very similar phrases elsewhere in the Bible.

Ezekiel 30:2-3 - "Son of man, prophesy, and say, Thus says the Lord GOD: "Wail, **'Alas for the day!'** **For the day is near, the day of the LORD is near;** it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations.

Isaiah 13:6 - Wail, **for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!**

Those verses do sound a lot like Joel 1:15 - but what can we conclude from that similarity? The answer is not much! One commentary accuses Joel of ransacking the prophetic literature - which is certainly a ridiculous and baseless charge.

Perhaps Joel is quoting Isaiah or Ezekiel, but the opposite may be true - perhaps Isaiah and Ezekiel are quoting Joel. Or, more likely in my view, no one is quoting anybody here.

And why do I favor that latter view? Because the context is different in each case.

Joel is talking about his own people, Isaiah is talking about Babylon, and Ezekiel is talking about Egypt. Yes, the language they each use is very similar, but we already know that their language all comes from a common source - the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21) - so why shouldn't it be similar?

But there is another possible person that Joel could by inspiration be quoting here in verse 15 - Joel could be quoting himself!

Perhaps Joel had been telling the people before the locust invasion that the day of the Lord was near - and so perhaps Joel quotes himself in verse 15 so that the people would remember that they had been warned. Joel might be saying: "See! I told you! The day of the Lord is near!"

Those two possibilities are the most likely explanations for the word "near" in verse 15 if this day of

the Lord is or includes the locust invasion.

But what if the day of the Lord in verse 15 is **not** the locust invasion?

This view that the day of the Lord in verse 15 is not the locust invasion has two immediate advantages over the view that the day of the Lord in verse 15 is or includes the locust invasion. What are those two advantages?

First, the second view is the most natural view from the grammar that is used in verse 15. The verbs in verse 4 were perfect (completed past action), but the verb in verse 15 is imperfect (continued or future action).

And second, we have already seen a hint that some other day may be in view here, and we will see much stronger hints later in the book.

What is the hint that we have already seen? We saw the word "nation" in verse 6, which, along with the locusts, caused us to think back to the curses of Deuteronomy 28. In that chapter, there is clearly something more to come after the locusts.


But what? What is this day of the Lord in verse 15 if it is not the locust invasion? And why would Joel bring up some other day here in the middle of his discussion of the locust invasion?

Let's look first at that last question - why would Joel mention a later day of the Lord in this context of the locust invasion?

To answer that question, let's put ourselves in the shoes of the people who were listening to Joel. What can we say about those people?

The first thing we can say about them is that most likely they were looking forward to the day of the Lord (at least before they heard Joel)! Why? Because they were certain that day would be the day when God delivered them and vindicated them by judging their enemies.

In their mind, destruction on the day of the Lord was something that happened to other people but that would never happen to them. We see that attitude in Amos.

 **Amos 5:18** - Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!

I suspect the people in Joel had that same attitude. I suspect they too desired the day of the Lord - at least before they heard what Joel had to say about it.

But before they heard Joel - what were they thinking then? Most likely, they thought they were completely right with God. They were doing all the right things and saying all the right things. What could be wrong?

And, yes, the locusts had invaded, and yes, that invasion was worse than anything anyone could remember, but, you know, those things happen.

There was no reason to see those locusts as a punishment or a warning from God, right? After all, these people were God's special chosen people. God had promised to bless them, and God was on their side, right?

But then Joel shows up. And Joel tells them that there was, in fact, something wrong about their relationship with God - that they needed to be ashamed and that they needed to weep and wear sackcloth. And Joel tells them that these locusts were, in fact, a judgment from God and a warning from God intended to wake them up.

But a warning of what?

Perhaps that is why we have verse 15 - to answer that question - a warning of what? A warning of the day of the Lord - which is near!

So, Joel, you mean to say that God sent these locusts? And you mean to say that God is going to show up soon - not to deliver us - but to destroy us? Yes and yes. "For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes."

God did not send Joel to tell them that things would get better. God sent Joel to tell them that things would get worse! God was not coming to deliver the people but rather to destroy the people!

That is not at all what the people would have expected to hear - but that is what they heard from this prophet of God.

So which is it? Is the day of the Lord in verse 15 the locust invasion or is the day of the Lord in verse 15 something else that was yet to come?

I favor the second view. I think this day of the Lord in verse 15 is not the locust invasion but in instead something else that was yet in the future for Joel's listeners.

Why do I favor that second view?

As we saw in the introduction, Joel uses the phrase "the day of the Lord" five times, and almost everyone agrees that it is the central theme of the book. Let's quickly look at all five occurrences and see if that helps us with this first occurrence.

Joel 1:15 - Alas for the day! **For the day of the LORD is near**, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Joel 2:1 - Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, **for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near.**

Joel 2:11, 14 - The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. **For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?** ... (14) Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

Joel 2:31 - The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, **before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.**

Joel 3:14 - Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! **For the day of the LORD is near** in the valley of decision.

Of those five occurrences, four of them (including the one here in verse 15) are most naturally viewed as future events - the day is near; the day is coming; something else will happen before the day comes.

The fifth occurrence in Joel 2:11 is ambiguous (at least in English) - the day is great and very awesome - but a few verses later we are told that God might yet relent about the day, which means that the day in verse 11 must also have been a yet future day. And the verb "endure" in Joel 2:11 has the same imperfect tense that we see here in verse 15.

So where does that leave us? As one commentary explains it: "the day of the Lord is always future oriented in Joel." And having now looked at all of them, that conclusion does seem to be correct. The

day of the Lord is always future oriented in Joel.

And does that surprise us? Are we surprised to find a prophet from God talking about future events? Perhaps the surprise would be if the prophet from God talked only about past events! Perhaps the surprise would be if Joel was sent to proclaim just a textbook about locusts!

I think Joel has another day in mind here in verse 15 - a day that had not yet come, but a day that was near.

#JOEL