

Lesson 12

Introduction to Joel 2, Continued

Last week, we saw that Joel 2 is one of the great church “Chapter 2’s” of the Bible, and we looked at what all of those chapter two’s tell us about God’s view of the church and about what our view of the church must be if we are going to be the people that God wants us to be.

Before we launch into our verse-by-verse and word-by-word study of Joel 2, let’s list some of the questions that we will need to address in our study of this wonderful chapter.

These questions are also listed on the Handout for Lesson 12 so that we can all think about them during the week as we read the book of Joel in our own personal study.

- (1) Is the first half of Joel 2 about something more than locusts or about nothing more than locusts?
- (2) If the first half of Joel 2 is about something more than locusts, then who or what is that something more?

- (3) What is the day of the Lord in verses 1, 11, and 31? Are they the same day or different days?
- (4) Is Joel 2 about the end of the world?
- (5) What is the Lord's army in verses 11, 25?
- (6) Why is there a call to repent in verse 12? What had the people done?
- (7) What does the word "relent" mean in verse 13? Does God ever change his mind? And if he does, what does that tell us about God and about our own free will?
- (8) Who is the northerner in verse 20?
- (9) Who or what are Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation 20? Is there a relation between Gog and Magog and Joel 2?
- (10) Why did Peter quote Joel 2 in Acts 2? Why did Peter end his quote of Joel 2 where he did?
- (11) Why does the book of Acts translate "afterward" as "the last days" when Peter quotes Joel 2:28? What period of time is "the last days"?
- (12) If all we had was the Old Testament, what would we know about the Holy Spirit? What new things do we learn about the Holy Spirit in the New Testament? Does the Holy Spirit operate or manifest himself differently in the New Testament than in the Old Testament?

- (13) Which Greek and Hebrew words are translated "Spirit" in the Bible? Are those words used for any other purpose in the Bible? If so, how can we tell when they are being used for the Holy Spirit?
- (14) How and when was God's promise in verses 28-29 to pour out his Spirit on all flesh fulfilled?
- (15) Who is included or excluded in the phrase "all flesh"?
- (16) What is the time frame of the prophecy? Is it a promise to "all flesh" for all time, or is it a promise to "all flesh" for a limited time?
- (17) Why is that promise described using the word "pour"?
- (18) Do we find that same promise anywhere else in the Old Testament?
- (19) Which activities or manifestations of the Holy Spirit are included or excluded in that promised "pouring out" of the Spirit?
- (20) How is the promised "pouring out" in the New Testament different from how God provided his Spirit in the Old Testament?
- (21) What is the relation between this promised "pouring out" and the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Mark 1:8?
- (22) What is the relation between this promised "pouring out" and the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38?
- (23) What is the relation between this promised "pouring out" and miraculous gifts given through the laying on of the Apostles' hands in Acts 8?

- (24) What is the relation between this promised “pouring out” and the conversion of the Gentiles in Acts 10-11?
- (25) What is the relation between this promised “pouring out” and the gospel?
- (26) What are the boundaries between matters of the faith and matters of opinion when it comes to the Holy Spirit?
- (27) Why was the church established on the day of Pentecost? Did a judgment of some sort occur on that day?
- (28) Verse 31 says that “the sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” What is that great and awesome day? And what is meant by the darkening of the sun and moon that would occur before that day?
- (29) In the final two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi says that God will send Elijah the prophet “before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes,” and that “he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” How is that day of the Lord in Malachi 4:5 related to the day of the Lord in Joel 2:31 and Acts 2:20? And what is the threatened “decree of utter destruction” in Malachi 4:6?

(30) Who escapes in verse 32, and when? Who survives in verse 32, and when? Who is called by God in verse 32, and when?

That's a lot of tough questions! We have our hands full! And I'm sure we will come up with even more tough questions as we work through the second chapter.

Do you have a question that is not on that list? It may come up in our study, but if you want to make sure it comes up – please, send it to me!

And so, with all of those teasers, let's start with verse 1!

Joel 2:1

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,

One of the questions we just asked is whether Joel 2 is about the end of the world. What we said earlier about the word “near” also applies to verse 1, and so I think we can say that at least the first verse of Joel 2 is not about the end of the world. It is instead about something that was *near* when Joel was written.

I think verse 1 of Joel 2 confirms what we said about verse 15 of Joel 1.

For verse 15, we looked at two possibilities for the coming day of the Lord that was near. Either it was the ongoing locust invasion and drought, or it was something

else that had not yet begun but that was about to happen soon.

Here in verse 1, we again see a coming day of the Lord that is near, but we also see something else in verse 1 – something that we did not see in verse 15. Or perhaps I should say we are *hearing* something that we did not *hear* in verse 15 – we are hearing a blowing trumpet and a sounding alarm!

If this day of the Lord is describing something in the past – or even something that the people were currently suffering in the present – then why blow a **warning** trumpet? Why sound a **warning** alarm?

But if there is something else that is coming – and if that something else is near – then it makes perfect sense to blow a warning trumpet and sound a warning alarm.

Tornado sirens are most useful **before** the tornado hits – not after it hits or while it is hitting.

This trumpet in verse 1 was the *shofar* – a ram's horn. As one commentary explains:

"The wall-towers of an ancient city were manned by guards alert for enemy attack. Upon their keen eyes the security of the community within the walls depended. Should they spy a hostile force appearing, it was their duty to sound the alarm on a curved horn of ram or cow. ... The horn blast was thus the ancient equivalent of the modern air raid siren blaring its alert."

We see an example of such a warning in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 33:2-4 – Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and **blows the trumpet** and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

But who is the watchman here in verse 1? The watchman in verse 1 is God speaking through the prophet Joel. It is God who sees what is coming and who has ordered this warning trumpet blast.

And, again, that sort of warning makes sense only for an enemy that is approaching from outside the walls. I do not think that we are seeing the locusts from chapter 1 here in chapter 2.

And that view is also supported by the grammar.

As we saw from the handout for Lesson 10, chapter 2 (unlike chapter 1) has many imperfect verb tenses, which are used for events that are ongoing or future. And I think the context here of this trumpet blast suggests that this event is future rather than ongoing. This enemy is near in the future, but this enemy has not yet arrived.

And we do see an imperfect verb here in verse 1, but it is not the verb “coming.” That verb in verse 1 is a participle, which means that it is functioning as an adjective – like “running” water.

The imperfect verb in verse 1 is the verb “tremble” (again as highlighted in blue on the handout for Lesson 10). That verb tense tells us that we are not looking here at a trembling that occurred in the past when the people saw the sky filled with locusts. Instead, I think we are looking here at a future trembling that is due to another enemy that has been spotted by the watchman on the walls (or perhaps to an ongoing trembling in anticipation of that future enemy).

We said earlier that Joel 2 is one of the great church “chapter 2’s” in the Bible. And the main reason for that, of course, is that Peter quotes the end of Joel 2 in Acts 2. But that is not the only reason.

I think we can see another reason here in verse 1 for why we might expect Joel 2 to be a church chapter. And what is that reason? It is because we see two common Old Testament descriptions of the church here in verse 1: Zion and my holy mountain.

Is verse 1 **directly** describing the church? No, it is not. Verse 1 is directly describing a coming assault against the **physical** city of Jerusalem, and we know that Zion and my holy mountain are used that way to describe physical Jerusalem elsewhere in the Bible.

1 Kings 8:1 – Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers’ houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, **which is Zion**.

Daniel 9:16 – O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath

turn away from your city Jerusalem, **your holy hill...**

But we also see something else in the Old Testament – we see the promise of a coming **spiritual** Jerusalem.

Zechariah 8:3 – Thus says the LORD: I have returned to **Zion** and will dwell in the midst of **Jerusalem**, and **Jerusalem** shall be called the faithful city, and **the mountain of the LORD of hosts, the holy mountain.**

Yes, verse 1 is talking about physical Jerusalem, but, by using these specific words and phrases I think verse 1 is also calling upon us to think about spiritual Jerusalem. The church is Zion. The church is the holy mountain of God.

Hebrews 12:22 – But you have come to **Mount Zion** and to the city of the living God, **the heavenly Jerusalem**, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven...

I think that the **beginning** of Joel 2 is already anticipating what we will see at the **end** of Joel 2.

So, where are we with verse 1? I think where we are is that verse 1 is telling the people that something terrible is coming – something that is different from the locusts that invaded back in Joel 1:4.

But what is it? What is it that is coming and that is near?

Is it more locusts? Many commentaries say yes.

Those commentaries agree that Joel 1 and Joel 2 are describing different events, but they say that those

different events are just different locust invasions – one locust attack in the past, and another locust attack in the future.

And why do they say that? They say that (at least in part) because of the language we will see in Joel 2, which (as we will see) admittedly does at times sound a lot like a locust invasion.

For example, let's think again about those locust articles we looked at earlier on some of the handouts.

The article from Lesson 5 described a locust invasion in 1915, and it did so by quoting Joel 2.

“That Joel depicts [in Joel 2:20] faithfully, if not even mildly, the bad smell of the dead locusts, no one who has got even a whiff of their putrid masses can ever doubt.”

And, the article from Lesson 8 described a locust invasion in 1874, and it also did so by quoting Joel 2.

“The second chapter of Joel contains a very fine poetical description of an invasion of locusts.”

So, I don't think we can deny that some of the descriptions in Joel 2 sound a lot like a locust invasion.

But are they? Are they descriptions of a locust invasion?

Is Joel 2 describing a locust invasion using descriptions of a locust invasion, or is Joel 2 instead describing something else using descriptions of a locust invasion? That is our question, and, either way, we

won't be surprised when we see things in Joel 2 that sound like a locust invasion.

So which is it? Locusts described as locusts, or something else described as locusts?

I think it is the latter. I think we are seeing something else in Joel 2 – something other than locusts. I think we are seeing a human army in Joel 2 that is described at times using descriptions of a locust invasion.

But, even before we look at the reasons why I think that is true, we need to address perhaps the biggest potential objection to that view.

And what is that objection? Let's read it:

Joel 2:5 – As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, **like a powerful army drawn up for battle.**

Joel 2:7 – **Like warriors they charge; like soldiers they scale the wall.** They march each on his way; they do not swerve from their paths.

Are those verses describing an army that is like a locust invasion? Or are those verses describing a locust invasion that is like an army?

It seems to be the latter, at least in the ESV translation – **like** a powerful army, **like** warriors, and **like** soldiers.

Doesn't that mean that whatever we are seeing in Joel 2 is not actually a powerful army, not actually warriors,

and not actually soldiers – but it is just **like** those things?

How can we explain that? Simple. The Hebrew preposition translated “like” in Joel 2 can mean either “like” or “as.” In fact, we saw that same Hebrew preposition back in Joel 1:15 translated not with the word “like” but rather with the word “as.”

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

I don’t think verse 15 was telling us that the coming day of the Lord would just be **like** destruction from God. Instead, I think verse 15 was telling us that the coming day of the Lord would be **as** destruction from God. That was what it would be – not just like what it would be.

In short, the Hebrew preposition translated “like” in these verses can either mean “like” (as it would for an close comparison) or it can mean “as” or “as especially” (as it would for an exact comparison).

Elsewhere we see examples of a close comparison.

Psalms 1:3 – He is **like** a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

But elsewhere we also see examples of an exact comparison.

Isaiah 1:7 – Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, **as** overthrown by foreigners.

In Psalm 1, the man is like a tree but he is not a tree, but in Isaiah 1 the comparison is exact – the desolation is the desolation caused by a foreign invasion.

If we translate Joel 2 that same way, we see something very different from what we see in the ESV.

Joel 2:5 – As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, **as a powerful army drawn up for battle.**

Joel 2:7 – **As warriors they charge; as soldiers they scale the wall.** They march each on his way; they do not swerve from their paths.

All we did there was translate that same Hebrew preposition in the same way that it was translated in Joel 1:15.

With that translation, what we see in those verses is a human army that looks something like a locust invasion rather than a locust invasion that looks something like a human invasion.

We will look more closely at those questions about verses 5 and 7 when we get to those verses, but for now let's just note that (despite how it might seem at first) this issue is not enough to derail us even before we get out of the gate!

That argument is likely the greatest objection to the idea that Joel 2 is describing a human army – but I

think we have seen why that objection may not be a problem at all.

And now let's now look at things from the opposite perspective: What is the greatest evidence in support of the idea that Joel 2 is describing a human army?

I think **Joel 3** is the greatest evidence in support of the idea that Joel 2 is describing a human army.

Why? Because when we get to Joel 3 we will find God judging nations because of what they had done to his people.

If Joel 1 and Joel 2 are just about locusts, then why are those nations being judged in Joel 3? Are they being judged by God because of a locust invasion? Does that make any sense?

I do not think Joel 2 is still focused on locusts. Instead, I think the better view of Joel is this:

- Joel 1 describes a terrible locust invasion and says that another calamity is near.
- Joel 2 describes that other calamity that is near and tells us that it will be a human invasion that is something like that earlier locust invasion, but much worse. Joel 2 also promises a restoration and explains God's purpose behind that human invasion.
- In Joel 3, God judges the nations because of that human invasion and promises to defend his people against all future threats.

That outline of Joel has a logical flow, but that logical flow completely falls apart if Joel 2 is just about another locust invasion. Something is missing!

And I think we can also point to some reasons outside of Joel for why Joel's listeners might have expected to hear about a human invasion in Joel 2.

For example, we have Deuteronomy 28. In that chapter, God tells the people what will happen to them if they disobey him. And, as we have seen, one of those things is a locust invasion.

Deuteronomy 28:38 – You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for the **locust** shall consume it.

But that locust invasion in Deuteronomy 28 is followed by a human invasion.

Deuteronomy 28:49–50 – The LORD will **bring a nation against you** from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young.

We also see those same events in King Solomon's dedication of the temple.

1 Kings 8:37 – If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or **locust** or caterpillar, if their **enemy besieges** them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is...

Likewise, in Joel, I think we also see a locust invasion followed by a human invasion. And I think these other verses suggest that, after hearing about the locusts

in Joel 1, the people would not have been surprised at all to then hear about a human invasion in Joel 2.

This much is certain: somehow we have to draw a line between the locusts in chapter 1 and the church at the end of chapter 2. That line is very hard to draw if all we have prior to the church is a bunch of locusts.

And that issue of the church may be why some of those commentaries are so anxious to see nothing but locusts in Joel 2. They don't think Joel 2 is about the church. They think Peter misapplied Joel 2 in Acts 2, and so, in their commentaries, they try to explain Joel 2 without ever looking at Acts 2.

In short, those commentaries try their best to trivialize Joel. And if Joel is just about locusts, then maybe they would have a point. But Joel is not just about locusts. Yes, we see locusts in Joel 1, but Joel 2 then moves on to other subjects – including the church at the end of Joel 2.

Joel 2:2

Joel 2:2 – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.

If we look at the Handout for Lesson 2, we see that Joel 2:1-2 is possibly a quotation from Zephaniah 1:14-15 (or vice versa).

Joel 2:1a-2b – 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, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!** Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.

Zephaniah 1:14-16 – The great day of the LORD is **near**, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, **a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness**, a day of **trumpet** blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

And we do see some strong similarities between those two passages. We hear trumpets; the day is near; and it is day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

But the message is not the only thing that is similar; the audience for the message is also similar – in fact, the audience is the same: Zephaniah is also talking to Judah and Jerusalem (Zephaniah 1:4).

But there is a difference between Joel and Zephaniah – unlike with the book of Joel, we know when the book of Zephaniah was written.

Zephaniah 1:1 – The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, **in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.**

Josiah reigned in the 7th century from 640 to 609 BC – which is within the same time period as our pre-exile view for when Joel was written.

We know that Zephaniah was describing the coming destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. That event was very near when Zephaniah was written, but it had not yet happened.

Joel uses very similar language and sometimes the exact same language. Was Joel also describing the coming destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC? Possibly, but not necessarily.

We know from the handout for Lesson 9 that the various days of the Lord in the Bible are often described using similar language. And so we know that seeing similar language for two such events is, alone, not enough to conclude that two events are the same event.

But if our goal is just to choose among our three options to decide the date of Joel, then I think we have to admit that this similarity gives yet another edge to the **pre-exile** view.

The pre-exile view would say that Joel and Zephaniah were using the same or similar language to describe the same event – the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

Before we looked at these verses, the pre-exile view was already leading the horse race over the early and post-exile views – and I think we can say that the post-exile horse was already trailing far behind.

But now, after looking at Joel 2:1-2, I think we can say that the horses are even further apart. I think the pre-exile view has become more likely, and I think the post-exile view has become even less likely.

How about the early view? I think all we can say at this point is that the early view is still somewhere in the middle. Let's continue to keep all our options open for now. We won't see the best dating evidence until we get to chapter 3.

Let's now look at the text of verse 2: **"a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!"**

I think that, prior to the locust invasion, the people would have been very happy to hear that a day of the Lord was coming.

Why? Because that day would be the day when all of those **other** people would get what's coming to them! For the people of God, the day of the Lord would be a day of vindication! A day of triumph!

But that is not Joel's message here. We do not see a day of brightness and joy, a day of sunlight and clear skies. Instead, we see a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

The people might have expected Joel to show up and say:

"Sorry about those locusts, but, you know, those things happen. But don't worry – that was not a punishment from God. Instead, God will show up very soon to deliver you and judge all of your enemies."

But that is not what Joel says. Instead, Joel says:

“God sent those locusts to wake you up! And if you think that army of locusts was bad, you haven’t seen anything yet! Something else is coming and is near, and that something else is an army of warriors who will bring destruction from God! Things are not going to get better, but instead will get much worse!”

“Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people.”

Is Joel talking about locusts here or about people? The text says **people**. “A great and powerful **people**.”

The Hebrew word translated “people” in verse 2 is used 12 times in Joel, with this occurrence in verse 2 being the first. How else do we see that same word being used in Joel?

- 2:5 – Like a powerful **army** drawn up for battle.
- 2:6 – Before them **peoples** are in anguish...
- 2:16 – Gather the **people**.
- 2:17 – Spare your **people**, O LORD.
- 2:18 – Then the LORD ... had pity on his **people**.
- 2:19 – The LORD answered and said to his **people**.
- 2:26 – And my **people** shall never again be put to shame.
- 2:27 – And my **people** shall never again be put to shame.
- 3:2 – On behalf of my **people** and my heritage Israel.

- 3:3 – And have cast lots for my **people**.
- 3:16 – But the LORD is a refuge to his **people**.

Every other time that word “people” is used in Joel, it means people rather than locusts. I think the same is true right here in verse 2. I think “people” means “people.” “There is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful **people**.”

Yes, Joel 2 has some language that sounds like an invasion of locusts, but Joel 2 opens by talking about an invasion of **people**. And so, I think the natural way to see the remainder of Joel 2 is as a description of that same invasion of people.