

Lesson 5

Joel 1:4, Continued

Joel 1:4 – 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.

When we ended last week we were looking at six theories about why we see four different words for insects in verse 4.

- Different species of insects?
- Different subspecies of locusts?
- Different colors of locusts?
- Different stages of development of locusts?
- Different regional words for locusts?
- Different locust swarms?
- Synonyms used for rhetorical effect?

Perhaps we can rule out different species of insects given the focus here on locusts.

And perhaps we can rule out different swarms of locusts given the severity of the swarm described here – although the language of verse 4 could be describing waves of a single swarm.

And perhaps we can rule out different regional words for “locust” given the focus on the single area of Jerusalem.

But, with that said, any of these theories could be correct given what little we know about the Hebrew words used in verse 4. As one commentary explains, “we simply do not know what these four words denote.”

So how do we decide which option is best?

I think that what we have here is our first example of how recognizing the use of Hebrew poetry in a verse can help us understand the meaning of that verse.

Verse 4 is not a textbook on locusts. I don’t think that verse 4 is intended to teach us anything about the life cycle of the locust, as fascinating as that subject may be to many commentators.

I think the final option is the best option – the different words are used for rhetorical effect. The parallel phrases work together to paint a vivid word picture of this terrible swarm of invading insects.

So why do we see so many words for locust? **Because we see so many locusts!** God wants us to picture the

invasion in our minds! And so God drew us a vivid picture with words.

But why was this particular locust invasion so bad?

We know that locusts invasions were not always so horrible. In fact, Nahum uses a locust invasion to describe something that just quickly comes and goes without much effect.

Nahum 3:17 – Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold – when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they are.

But that was not always the case with locusts, and it was certainly not the case with these locusts.

This invasion in verse 4 was so bad that no one could remember anything like it. This invasion in verse 4 was so bad that the people would be talking about it for generations to come. That is what we saw earlier in verses 2-3.

What was this locust invasion like? Why was it so bad? What would it have been like to experience such a thing?

One way we can know what it was like is to read about it in the book of Joel, as we are doing. But another way to know what it was like is to read about it in the *National Geographic* – or at least read about a later locust invasion that was most likely very similar to what happened in Joel.

In March of 1915, a terrible locust plague occurred in the area of modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. The result was a devastating agricultural disaster. Swarms of locusts consumed crops, trees, and vegetation, leading to widespread famine. And to make matters worse, it happened at the worst possible time – during the on-going first World War when the region was already suffering.

Much of what happened in 1915 reminds us of how Joel describes the locust invasion that occurred in his own day. An article describing the event in the December 1915 issue of *National Geographic Magazine* makes that same point – so much so that the article begins by quoting Joel 1:2–6. (The photos on the Handout for Lesson 5 are from this article, and a copy of the article is available at StudyJoel.com. Note that the article has quite a bit to say about Joel, but we may not end up agreeing with all that it has to say about the Biblical account.)

The Bible frequently mentions locusts, often as a symbol of destruction and judgment.

Locusts were one of the plagues God sent upon Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery.

Exodus 10:13–15 – So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the LORD brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind had brought the locusts. The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such

a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

Those were the locusts that God sent against the Egyptians, but here in Joel the locusts are coming against the people of God. The target has changed, but the locusts have not. What can we say about these locusts?

Perhaps the first thing we should say is that they are not what we often call a locust today. These locusts are not cicadas. Locusts are a type of grasshopper, while cicadas are cousins of crickets. Cicadas are called locusts only because, like actual locusts, they also show up suddenly in large numbers, but cicadas are not locusts.

But what is the difference between a locust and a grasshopper? The surprising answer is that there is no difference. They are the same insect.

When conditions are right, the usual solitary grasshoppers can change their character and together become an aggressive swarm of locusts. When that happens, those grasshoppers are called locusts.

What causes that change to occur?

What is needed for the change to occur is rainfall in a place where a large number of grasshopper eggs are buried. When that happens, the grasshoppers hatch all

at once, and that event triggers a physiological change in the insects.

The young grasshoppers change in color from green to yellow, black, and red. They also change in behavior, from solitary creatures to what scientists call “gregarious” creatures. The grasshoppers become voracious and migratory.

What causes that to happen? Scientists have concluded that it is caused by the contact the insects have with each other after they all hatch at the same time.

Researchers have simulated that contact by putting a grasshopper in a jar with threads constantly brushing against its body – and they have watched as that grasshopper changes its color to become a locust. That transformation is why they have been called “The Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of Insects.”

There are numerous stages in the lifespan of a locust, which is usually four months but can be as long as a year. The stages go from the wingless larva and pupa stage to the winged adult locust stage. In that process, the locusts molt their exoskeleton five times. Toward the end of their lives, the adult female locusts lay hundreds of eggs in the ground.

These desert locusts have a phenomenal sense of smell. In a test, a single blade of grass was put at a distance from some locusts, and the locusts immediately started to move toward it.

The locusts also move together in an organized social group. The Bible tells us that elsewhere.

Proverbs 30:27 – The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank.

The locusts can travel as far as 3000 miles in their lifetime, staying aloft for as long as 12 hours at a stretch. Their insatiable need for food usually keeps them on the move.

In all stages, locusts are voracious and destructive, even sometimes eating each other. The adults consume the equivalent of their weight every day. They first eat the leaves that are green and succulent, but, when necessary, they will chew on bark and branches. We will see that fact later in this chapter.

Joel 1:7 – It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white.

Our own country experienced a great locust invasion in the 1870's stretching from Colorado and Montana to Missouri and Minnesota. Laura Ingalls Wilder described that event in her book *On the Banks of Plum Creek*.

A cloud was over the sun. It was not like any cloud they had ever seen before. It was a cloud of something like snowflakes, but they were larger than snowflakes, and thin and glittering. Light shone through each flickering particle.

There was no wind. The grasses were still and the hot air did not stir, but the edge of the cloud came on across the sky faster than wind. The hair stood up on Jack's neck. All at once he made a frightful sound up at that cloud, a growl and a whine.

Plunk! Something hit Laura's head and fell to the ground. She looked down and saw the largest grasshopper she had ever seen. Then huge brown grasshoppers were hitting the ground all around her, hitting her head and her face and her arms. They came thudding down like hail.

The cloud was hailing grasshoppers. The cloud was grasshoppers. Their bodies hid the sun and made darkness. Their thin, large wings gleamed and glittered. The rasping whirring of their wings filled the whole air and they hit the ground and the house with the noise of a hailstorm.

And later she wrote:

All across the dooryard the grasshoppers were walking shoulder to shoulder and end to end, so crowded that the ground seemed to be moving. Not a single one hopped. Not one turned its head. As fast as they could go, they were all walking west.

That final excerpt from her book reminds us of what we just read from Proverbs.

Proverbs 30:27 – The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank.

Even today, a locust invasion can be catastrophic and life-threatening. We use satellites to watch for emerging swarms, but once a locust swarm is on the move, it is nearly impossible to stop.

One more interesting fact about locusts is that, apparently, they are delicious!

Leviticus 11:20-22 – All winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you. Yet among the winged insects that go on all fours

you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to hop on the ground. Of them you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind.

Or perhaps they are delicious only with honey.

Mark 1:6 – Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

That is what we know about these locusts, but we still have some open questions about them in the book of Joel.

Let's list those questions now, but let's not try to answer them yet. Instead, let's keep these questions in mind as we work through the text of Joel.

- Are the locusts in Joel literal locusts or are they being used here as a metaphor for something else?
- If there are literal locusts in Joel, is that true of all the locusts in Joel? Or does Joel show us both literal locusts and metaphoric locusts?
- If there is a dual meaning for the locusts in Joel, where does that change in meaning occur? Or is there perhaps a dual meaning all throughout the book?
- And, if the locusts are a metaphor, what are they being used to describe?

Those are all good questions, and those are all controversial questions. Let's try to answer them as we work through the text.

But, with that said, let's look at one theory right now. Why now? Because this theory is based on verse 4, and, in fact, it is based on the number 4 that we see in verse 4.

In verse 4, we find four words for these insects. Why four? Is the count of four just a coincidence or is there some deeper meaning?

Some commentators, and especially some much earlier commentators, saw a special meaning in the count of four that we see in verse 4.

- Theodore (AD 428) thought the four locusts in verse 4 represented three Assyrian kings followed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.
- Jerome (AD 420) thought the four locusts represented the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans.
- Cyril of Alexandria (AD 444) thought the four locusts represented Shalmaneser V, Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes, and the Romans.
- Julian (AD 455) thought the four locusts represented the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Romans.

The basis for these views came from the four beasts in Daniel and in Revelation, which (in our study of Daniel) we identified with Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

But is any of that history really in view in Joel 1:4?

My initial thought is that, no, that is not in view here. I think the appearance of four in verse 4 is more likely just intended to leave the visual image of a huge, devastating, seemingly unending swarm of locusts.

We know that the number four is used elsewhere as a figure for the earth (four directions, four seasons, etc.), so perhaps, at most, the number depicts these locusts coming up out of the earth.

But, rather than shut the door now on those other views, let's keep them in mind as we proceed through the text.

One final point about verse 4 before we move on: let's notice the **tense** of the verbs.

“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**.”

Not “will leave” or “will eat,” but “left” and “has eaten.” I think we must conclude that Joel has shown up **after** the locusts have already done their damage.

Joel (at least in chapter 1) is not warning the people about a coming invasion of locusts, but has instead shown up to explain an invasion that has already occurred. The Hebrew verbs in chapter 1 are describing a completed action.

Will that also be true of chapter 2? No, it will not.

Joel 2:3-5 – Fire **devours** before them, and behind them a flame **burns**. ... like war horses they **run**. ...they **leap** on the tops of the mountains...

To be technical, we primarily see **perfect** verb forms in chapter 1 and **imperfect** verb forms in chapter 2. The perfect form is used for completed action, while the imperfect form is used for incomplete action or future action.

Let's wait until we get to chapter 2 to say more about that difference, but for now let's just keep a close eye on the verb tenses.

Joel 1:5

Joel 1:5 – Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.

Having completed his message to the elders, Joel now moves on to the second of the four groups we see in chapter 1 – the drunkards!

Remember that we have an on-going question – why these four groups? What do elders, drunkards, farmers, and priests have in common? Let's keep that question in mind as we proceed.

There is some controversy about the type of wine that is being described in verse 5. Two Hebrew words are used and are translated "wine" and "new wine." The latter term ("new wine") refers to grape juice that has not fermented, but the other word can refer to either grape juice or alcoholic wine depending on the context.

I think we have several choices.

- Verse 5 is talking to those who drink grape juice (which would have included everybody).
- Verse 5 is talking both to all drinkers of alcoholic wine and to all drinkers of grape juice.
- Verse 5 is talking to heavy drinkers of alcoholic wine (drunkards) and to heavy drinkers of new wine (gluttons).

So which is it?

It would help if we could figure out why these four groups have been called out by Joel. Is it because of their sin?

That seems unlikely given the first group that we saw – the elders. They seem to have been addressed only because of their advanced age. If they could not remember such a thing ever having happened, then certainly it had been a long time since such an event had occurred.

Looking forward in chapter 1, we see farmers in verse 11 and priests in verse 13. The farmers are told to be ashamed, and the priests are told to put on sackcloth. Why? What had they done? That we are not told.

Let's keep this question open as we proceed, but for now I lean toward the third view – that verse 5 is addressing drunkards and gluttons. While the elders were not addressed because of their sin, we do see some hints of sin with the final two groups – farmers and priests.

Plus, we will soon see a call to repent.

Joel 2:12-13 – “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.”

What had they done? For what are they repenting? From where are they returning? Those will be our questions when we get to Joel 2. Perhaps we are seeing the answers to those questions here in Joel 1.

If so, then what can we say about these drunkards? We can say several things, and none of it complimentary!

- Drunkards use the fruit of the land in excess. In fact, the mere presence of drunkards and their close cousins, the gluttons, is evidence of agricultural bounty. If the harvest fails, the drunkard and the glutton will quickly cease out of the land.
- Drunkards were more common during times of celebration. Even for those who were not normally drunkards, a good harvest might lead them to drink heavily. Rather than thanking God for the harvest, they would use the harvest just as an excuse to drink.
- Drunkards have a well-deserved reputation for being self-indulgent, self-absorbed, and unconcerned about the things of God. Over and over again in the New Testament we are called upon to be sober-minded and watchful. Drunkards are neither of those things.

I think all of that together explains the message that Joel has for these drunkards in verse 5: **“Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail!”**

Awake! These locusts were a wake-up call!

The drunkards had been self-indulgent, self-absorbed, and unconcerned about God – but now their alarm clock was ringing, and they could not turn it off.

Their decadence had caught up with them, as it always does. They had ignored God for a long time, but that time of ignorance had ended, as it always does. They had used alcohol to dull and stupefy their senses, but now they had been jolted wide awake.

And after waking up, what are they told to do? Weep and wail! Why? Because, as the poet tells us, “they are not long, the days of wine and roses.” Or as verse 5 tells us, “for it is cut off from your mouth.”

The phrase “cut off” or “snatched away” in the Hebrew refers to an act that is sudden and violent. These grapes did not wither on the vine, but rather these grapes were there one day and not there the next day – just as one would see with a locust invasion.

Drunkards and gluttons are focused on themselves. They are not concerned about God or about others. But that attitude cannot continue forever. There is a day coming for every person when he or she will bend the knee and confess to God (Romans 14:11).

I may live my life as if every day was a **Day of Me!** But I cannot do that forever. Why not? Because the **Day of the Lord** is coming! (2 Peter 3:10)

I think what we are already seeing here is the major theme of the book of Joel – **the Day of the Lord!**

We may think we are in charge. We may think we have everything planned out. We may think we have all of our bases covered. We may think that the world will just continue on for us day after day as it always has. But, if so, we are wrong!

God has very often inserted himself into the affairs of men, often very suddenly and violently. We may make plans apart from God, but God is not restricted by our plans. Instead, God interrupts our plans. And what might we call such a divine interruption? The Bible calls it the Day of the Lord!

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

And so why do we see drunkards and gluttons in verse 5? I think Jesus answers that question.

Luke 17:27–30 – They were **eating and drinking** and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot – **they were eating and drinking**, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all – so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

Eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting and building. But then, in one day, it all changes. Perhaps because of locusts, or perhaps because of a great flood, or perhaps because of fire and sulfur raining down from heaven, or perhaps because the great last day is finally

arrived when time will be no more. It all changes when the Day of the Lord arrives.

As with the Day of the Lord here in Joel, those who are unprepared on that last great day will also awaken, will also weep, and will also wail. That is what Jesus tells us.

Matthew 24:46–51 – Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants and **eats and drinks with drunkards**, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be **weeping** and gnashing of teeth.

But what about those who are prepared? Paul answers that question.

1 Thessalonians 5:6–10 – So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us **keep awake and be sober**. For **those who sleep, sleep at night**, and **those who get drunk, are drunk at night**. But since we belong to the day, let us be **sober**, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

There is a theme in the Bible that I think we are seeing here in verse 5. And what is that theme?

It is the theme of people eating and drinking with no concern for God. It is the theme of people thinking that everything will continue to be as it always has been. It is the theme of a people fast asleep who need to wake up. Again and again in the Bible, we find God interrupting the complacent lives of such people and suddenly changing everything. I think that is exactly what we are seeing here.

And, although we have not yet defined what is meant by a Day of the Lord, we should not be surprised if that definition involves these same key components – **a sudden intervention by God into the affairs of a self-satisfied complacent people that leaves those people with a world that is completely changed from what they knew before.**

Is that the definition of the Day of the Lord? Perhaps, but for now, let's just call that our working definition for a Day of the Lord.

Joel 1:6

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.

We know that we are looking at a locust invasion in this chapter. Verse 4 used four different words for "locust" to describe it.

But after reading verse 6, we are immediately confronted with a vexing question – is this locust invasion the

only thing we are looking at in this chapter? Or does the text also have something else in mind?

Who or what is this “powerful” “nation” that we see in verse 6?

On one hand, it may just be the locusts. As we saw, the Bible describes locusts elsewhere as an organized army.

Proverbs 30:27 – The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank.

And the two previous verses in Proverbs 30 describe the ants and the rock badgers as each being a “people.”

So maybe the locusts are this powerful nation in verse 6. And, I think that is correct. I don’t think the subject has changed. We saw locusts in verse 4, and we will see locusts later in this chapter. I think we are also seeing locusts here in verse 6.

But we still have a question – are these locusts the **only** thing we are seeing here in verse 6 and the surrounding verses? Or does the text intend to broaden our view a bit by its use of the word “nation”?

We find the Hebrew word translated “nation” used elsewhere in the Bible to describe foreign powers.

Leviticus 26:33 – And I will scatter you among the **nations**, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.

And we find that same word in one of the great prophecies about the church.

Isaiah 2:4 – He shall judge between the **nations**, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; **nation** shall not lift up sword against **nation**, neither shall they learn war anymore.

And we also find the Hebrew word translated “powerful” used elsewhere in the Bible to describe foreign nations. In fact, we find both of the words used together for that purpose in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 7:1 – When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many **nations** before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and **mightier** than you.

Let’s not make a final decision yet, but if later we determine that the text is intentionally blurring the lines between an invasion of locusts and an invasion of something else, then verse 6 is most likely where that intentional blurring begins.

What else do we find in verse 6? We find another phrase that is very significant – “my land.” “For a nation has come up against **my land**.”

Where else in the Bible do we find that same phrase? One place where we find it is with the mysterious Gog and Magog of Ezekiel and Revelation.

Ezekiel 38:15-16 – You will come from your place out of the uttermost parts of the **north**, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, **a great host, a mighty army**. You

will come up against my people Israel, **like a cloud covering the land**. In the latter days I will bring you against **my land**, that the **nations** may know me, when through you, O Gog, I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

That description sounds a bit like this locust invasion in Joel. Or is it perhaps that this locust invasion sounds a bit like Gog and Magog?

Who or what are Gog and Magog? Let's save that question for later, but if you want to read ahead you should look at Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation 20.

So where are we so far with verse 6? After reading verse 4, we were certain that we are seeing a locust invasion. But after reading verse 6 we are beginning to wonder whether a locust invasion is all that we are seeing.

And I think that is exactly where the text wants us to be – looking at these locusts but also looking for something else that might also be described as “a nation” that “has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number.”

The final thing we see in verse 6 about this powerful nation is that “its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.”

Earlier we looked at some scientific facts about locusts, but one fact we didn't mention then is a fact that we should mention now: locusts don't have teeth. So what then can we say about the end of verse 6?

Perhaps the first thing we should say is that we would likely have a hard time convincing these people that

locusts don't have teeth! They certainly have something that allowed them to eat virtually everything in their path! If they don't have teeth and fangs, then they must have something very close to teeth and fangs!

But second, if in our study of Joel we ever start looking inside a locust's mouth for teeth or start comparing a photo of a locust with a photo of a lion, then I think that is a sure sign that we have badly missed the point!

Again, we are reading Hebrew poetry. We should not be surprised at all to find metaphors, and that is what we see here. These locusts are fierce and destructive just like a lion.

When we reach the end of verse 6, our question should not be whether locusts have teeth. Our question should be whether anything else has teeth!

Were these locusts the only problem here, or was there something or someone else out there who also had the teeth of a lion and the fangs of a lioness? Something worse than these locusts that was perhaps just around the corner?