

Lesson 9

Joel 1:15, Continued

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

Our big question last week was whether the day of the Lord in verse 15 is the locust invasion or something else that was coming after the locust invasion, and we looked at the best arguments for each option.

And which option is the **better** option? Last week, I gave the edge to the second possibility – that the day of the Lord in verse 15 was not the locust invasion but was instead a future event that had not yet come but that was near. “For the day of the LORD is near!”

So does that mean that this locust invasion was **not** a day of the Lord? No. All it means is that Joel does not *explicitly* call this locust invasion a day of the Lord (at least not here in verse 15).

So am I suggesting that Joel somehow *implicitly* calls the locust invasion a day of the Lord? Yes, I am. I think that is what Joel is doing in verse 15.

This whole chapter so far has been about the locust invasion, and we will see that same topic continue in the remainder of the chapter as well. Verse 4 set the stage for the locusts, and we have been seeing the destruction they caused ever since.

But why? Why has Joel been so concerned about these locusts? I think verse 15 answers that question. Joel is focused on the locust invasion because that terrible event was pointing toward and foreshadowing a later, even more terrible event.

One thing we have said so far about the day of the Lord is that it is a wake up call. It wakes people up from their drunken stupor. And, in fact, that is the very first word we hear from Joel after he tells us about the locusts in verse 4 when he commands the drunkards to “awake” in verse 5. Those locusts were a wake up call.

And what does that fact tell us about this locust invasion? It tells us that it was not just a natural accidental occurrence. Alarm clocks don’t work that way. Alarm clocks go off at a predetermined time and for a predetermined purpose. And likewise with these locusts – they arrived at a time predetermined by God and for a purpose predetermined by God.

Back in verse 9, we found a hint from a Hebrew verb stem that this locust invasion was caused by God. I think we find an even stronger hint of that here in verse 15. This locust invasion arrived at a set time and for a set purpose.

Was the locust invasion itself a day of the Lord? Well, it certainly seems to fit our working definition of that phrase: 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.

We again need to remember the first thing Joel said after he described this locust invasion: Awake!

And how better for God to foreshadow a coming day of the Lord than with another day of the Lord? How better to wake people up to the reality of a coming day of the Lord than by sending them another day of the Lord to sound the alarm? How better to convince the Jews that the day of the Lord was not just for other people than by sending them their own day of the Lord?

But is that the only possibility for this locust invasion? No, it is not.

Perhaps this locust invasion did happen just by accident, and perhaps Joel then saw these locusts as an opportunity to teach the people a lesson about what was coming. Maybe Joel was looking for the perfect illustration, and then he found that perfect illustration in the world of nature with the ever fascinating life-cycle of the locust.

Maybe – but I don't think so. Why not?

First, we had that hint back in verse 9 with the very unusual Hebrew verb stem describing the cutting off of the daily offerings. Those offerings were not just cut

off, but they were **caused** to be cut off. Who caused it?

And second, we don't see many things happening by accident in the Bible.

Yes, I know that today we view natural disasters as just that – events that happen randomly in a world subject to natural laws. We experience earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, famines, and plagues, and while God could stop them, God does not intervene because those events are just a part of the natural world that God has created for us to live in.

Under that view, God is a passive observer who wound up the natural world and now just watches along with the rest of us as natural events in that natural world come and go. God created the watch; God wound the watch; and now God watches the watch.

Is that how our world operates today? That is an interesting question that we can save for another day – but one thing we can say now about that view of the world is that it is most certainly **not** the view of the world that we find during the time of the Bible.

God is certainly not presented to us as a passive observer in the book of Joel or, I think we can say, anywhere else in the Old Testament.

Amos 3:6 – Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?

Exodus 4:11 – Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?

Does that sound like something a passive observer would say?

We don't see God as a passive observer in the New Testament, either. And when we are listing the things for which we are thankful, that one should be very near the top of our list. We should very thankful that God is not a passive observer! John 3:16 is not describing a passive observer!

For now, what we need to note is that there is no indication in Joel that this locust invasion was just one of those things that happens, but instead there is every indication that it was not. These locusts arrived at a specific time prior to some other event and for the specific purpose of warning the people about that other event.

What is that other event? Is it the end of the world?

Many commentaries on Joel have a lot to say about the *eschatology* of Joel. Eschatology is the study of end times, and many commentaries think Joel has a lot to say on the subject of the end times.

Does he? We will see, but for now let's ask that same question about verse 15. Is the day of the Lord in verse 15 the end of the world?

After all, we know that Peter describes the end of the world as the day of the Lord in 2 Peter 3:10. Is that day of the Lord in 2 Peter 3:10 and this day of the Lord in Joel 1:15 the same day of the Lord?

Some say yes, but don't we immediately see a big problem with that view? This day of the Lord is said to be **near**?

And this locust invasion is a warning to these people about this other event that is near.

Was the end of the world **near** during the time of Joel? I think the answer is no, no matter how we date the book and no matter how we *reasonably* define “near.”

But what if we *unreasonably* define “near”? What if we say that “near” means “far”? What if we say that an event that is at least 2500 years and counting after the days of Joel could still have been considered “near” to the people who first heard Joel 1:15?

Well, yes, if we were to do that, then this day in verse 15 could be the end of the world. But then we would have another problem – we would have the problem that language would have lost all meaning! If “near” means “far,” then what other words in the Bible mean the opposite of what they say? I don’t think any of us want to go down that road!

But, some may object, maybe I should have read a few verses earlier in 2 Peter.

2 Peter 3:8 – But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Doesn’t that verse mean that the word “near” in Joel 1:15 could be thousands of years? No. It does not.

2 Peter 3:8 tells us something we likely already knew – that God does not experience time the way that we do. But God is not talking to himself in Joel 1:15. God is talking to people. And so which time frame do we think God would use when talking to people? I think God would

use our time frame. And for man, one day is definitely not the same as a thousand years.

No one listening to Joel, having just experienced a terrible locust invasion, and then hearing that something worse was “near,” would have thought to himself: “Wonderful! That means I don’t have to worry about that other terrible event! It won’t happen for thousands of years!” I don’t think anyone would think that way.

And there is another problem if we say that “near” means “far.” If Joel had told the people that the day of the Lord was a long way off, I doubt anybody would be arguing otherwise (then or now). But when Joel tells them that the day of the Lord is near, many argue today that he really meant a long way off.

And they say that even though elsewhere God does tell us that something was a long way off. In Daniel 8:26, Daniel was told to seal up his vision. Why? Because “it refers to many days from now.” And how long was “many days” in Daniel 8:26? It was about 400 years.

What does Daniel 8:26 confirm for us? It confirms something we already know – it confirms that when God wants to tell us that something is a long way off, God says that. And what about when God wants to tell us that something is a short way off? Again, I think God says that.

And do you want to the know most amazing thing about this issue? Those who need the most convincing that “near” means “near” are the same people who like to brag to us that they take every word of the Bible literally! What about the word “near”? Is that literal?

But what if “far” means “far” and “near” also means “far”? Where would that leave us?

If that view is correct, then how could God have ever told us that the event really was near? If God said it was near, we would take that to mean far. And if God told us that it was far, we would also take that to mean far!

I know that God can do the impossible, but that really creates a conundrum! I guess God could have said, “the day is near, and when I say near I don’t mean far, I really mean near, as in not far.”

Here’s a suggestion: let’s not twist verse 15 to make it fit some theory we have about the end of the world by arguing that “near” really means “far”! I think the better approach is to simply understand “near” to mean “near.”

But maybe saying that the day is near just means that we should all live our lives as if it was near – that we need to be ready for it.

An immediate problem with that view is that the verse doesn’t say that. Saying an event is near is different from saying that we should live our lives as if it could come at any time. The former statement says that we know something about when the day will come, but the latter statement says that we don’t know when that day will come but we should assume it will be soon to make sure that we are ready whenever that day comes.

Can we think of a good illustration showing that difference? How about a thief coming to rob your house

during the night? What if I said, "A thief will rob your house tonight." How is that different from this statement – "a thief could rob your house tonight – so you should be ready in case that happens"?

With the first statement, you are likely seeing me as the thief or an accomplice of the thief based on my inexplicable knowledge about when you will be robbed. But with the second statement, you are likely seeing me as an alarm system salesman!

And isn't that the same illustration the Bible uses for the final day of the Lord?

1 Thessalonians 5:2 – For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like **a thief in the night**.

2 Peter 3:10 – But the day of the Lord will come **like a thief**, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

Those statements are very different from saying that the day is near.

We sometimes read or hear that the apostles mistakenly thought that Jesus would return in their life times and that those mistaken beliefs are sometimes evident in the New Testament. That is completely wrong!

We cannot teach that the Bible is inspired and inerrant while simultaneously teaching that the New Testament writers mistakenly wrote that Jesus would return in their life times.

While the apostles may have lived as if Jesus could return at any moment, the apostles did not mistakenly write or teach that he would do so. In fact, Paul taught the opposite.

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 – Let no one deceive you in any way. **For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first**, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

That is Paul telling the Thessalonians that Jesus could not come again until something else happened first. Why not? Because that other event had been prophesied, and that prophesy had to be fulfilled before Jesus could return.

But what was the prophesied event? We talked about it in our study of Daniel, and we won't take the time to discuss it in detail now – but one fact about that event is important for our purposes here: that other event was fulfilled in the first century.

So, let's review. True or false – when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, Jesus could return at any moment? False. We just read the opposite from the pen of Paul: "For that day will **not come**, unless the rebellion comes first."

True or false – now, after the first century, and after the fulfillment of that other event, Jesus could return at any moment? True. We cannot say that Jesus is coming soon (despite the fact that we often sing it!), but we

can say that we should all live as if Jesus is coming soon – and we can pray that Jesus will come soon if that is our desire.

So, back to verse 15 – does that verse tell us that this day of the Lord was near or just that the people should live as if it was near? Verse 15 says the day was near. “For the day of the LORD **is near.**”

And if that event in verse 15 was *near* during the time of Joel, then that event has certainly by now already happened. So rather than asking what it *is*, we should be asking what it *was*.

So, what *was* that other event? And does the fact that it was *near* in Joel’s day help us date his book?

As we recall, we are keeping three different dating possibilities in mind as we study the book of Joel – the early view, the pre-exile view, and the post-exile view.

So far, those three views have been running neck and neck, but I think one of those horses has just edged ahead of the other two with verse 15. That is not to say that the others might not catch up, but for now I think one of those views has an edge over the other two.

Which view has an edge now that we have seen verse 15? The pre-exile view, which is the view that Joel was written in the 7th century, after the fall of Israel in 722 BC but before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

If that is when this book was written, then this day of the Lord that is near in verse 15 is almost certainly

the fall of Jerusalem to King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC.

But why doesn't Joel mention Babylon? Why doesn't Joel mention the specific sins that we know led to that exile? Why doesn't Joel ever point to the northern kingdom as an example of what coming for Judah? Why does Joel mention Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia?

Well, I never said that the pre-exile view was the winning horse – but only that it had edged ahead in the race! We need to keep all three options on the table for now.

But if the other two dating options are to remain on the table, we must be able to answer a question about each of them: what is the day of the Lord that was near in verse 15 if that view is correct about when the book of Joel was written? If we can't answer that question about a particular option for the date of Joel, then we need to scratch that option off our list.

What about the early view for when Joel was written?

Recall that, under the early view, Joel was written during the reign of King Joash toward the end of the 9th century BC.

If that was when the book was written, what was the day of the Lord that was near in verse 15?

It could be the **Assyrian** invasion of Judah that occurred about a century later.

But I thought the Assyrian invasion of Judah was thwarted by God when he sent an angel to kill 185,000

Assyrian soldiers in Isaiah 37:36? Yes, that is true – but that happened after God heard Hezekiah's prayer in Isaiah 37:14–21. Absent that prayer of repentance, the prophesy of Isaiah 8 would have come to pass.

Isaiah 8:6–8 – “Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, **the king of Assyria** and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, **and it will sweep on into Judah**, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.”

So do you mean to say that God changed his mind about that day of the Lord? Yes, that is what we see in the Bible. Isaiah said it would happen, Hezekiah repented and prayed that it would not happen, and so God prevented it from happening.

Like Deuteronomy 28, Isaiah's prophecy was also conditional – if the people persisted in their rebellion, then the Assyrian invasion would happen. But the people turned back to God, and so the invasion did not happen.

We will soon see something very similar in Joel.

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?** “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.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. **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?

So, yes, the Assyrian invasion of Judah could have been the day of the Lord that was near in Joel 1:15 even though God spared Judah.

What about the post-exile view for when Joel was written?

Recall that, under the post-exile view, Joel was written after the return from exile in 539 BC, after the temple was rebuilt in 515 BC, and after the wall was rebuilt following Nehemiah’s return in 445 BC.

If that was when the book was written, what was the day of the Lord that was near in verse 15?

It could be the **Greek** persecution of Judah in the second century BC under Antiochus Epiphanes. We talked about that persecution at great length in our study of Daniel.

A potential problem with that view is that it might be stretching the meaning of the word “near” in verse 15 a bit too far. In fact, in Daniel 8:26, as we saw earlier, Daniel was told that the Greek persecution was **not** near when it was about 400 years away.

Daniel received that vision about 100 years before Nehemiah rebuilt the wall. And so, either 300 years is

near while 400 years is not near, or perhaps Joel was written much later than in the days of Nehemiah.

Neither option is particularly compelling, and so perhaps we should reject the post-exile view – but let's keep it in the list for now.

So where are we?

- If the **early view** for the date of Joel is correct, then the most likely event for the day of the Lord that was near in verse 15 is the **Assyrian** invasion of Judah.
- If the **pre-exile view** for the date of Joel is correct, then the most likely event for the day of the Lord that was near in verse 15 is the **Babylonian** invasion of Judah.
- If the **post-exile view** for the date of Joel is correct, then the most likely event for the day of the Lord that was near in verse 15 is the **Greek** persecution of Judah.

Each of those events threatened the very existence of Judah. The Assyrians threatened to scatter them as they did with Israel. The Babylonians threatened to assimilate them as they tried to do with Daniel and his friends. And the Greeks likewise threatened to assimilate them as they did with the Hellenistic Jews who turned away from God.

If that was all we had to go on, we would likely choose the second option – the pre-exile view. But

that is not all we have to go on, so let's continue to look at all three options for now.

Besides, this entire issue is premised on the day of the Lord in verse 15 being something other than the locust invasion. I still think that is correct, but if that day in verse 15 is the locust invasion, then all three of the dating options go back to being equally likely. So, I think it is much too early to start crossing any dating options off our list.

One more point about verse 15: We have seen some wordplay so far in our study of Joel, but perhaps the best example of wordplay in Joel may be the wordplay that we find here in verse 15.

"As destruction from the Almighty it comes!"

The Hebrew word used here for "destruction" is the Hebrew word "shod," and the Hebrew word used here for "the Almighty" is the Hebrew word "Shaddai." This "shod" is from "Shaddai!"

Here is how one Hebrew scholar describes verse 15:

"One perk for those who can read the Old Testament in Hebrew is the enjoyment of all the special sound effects that abound in the text, especially in the Hebrew prophets."

Why is that wordplay used here? Most likely to emphasize the surprising message that this destruction would come from God. These people may have thought they were right with God, but they were not right with God – and the alarm bells were ringing! God was warning them – first with the locusts and later with something else.

But although the locusts were the first warning in the book of Joel, they were not the first warning in the Bible. We also find a warning back in Deuteronomy 28 where God lists the blessings that these people in Joel had once enjoyed and lists the curses that they were now experiencing and would soon experience if they did not return to God. The people had received many warnings prior to Joel.

Now, before we move on to verse 16, let's pause and look more closely at the day of the Lord – a phrase that is the central theme of Joel and that we find for the first time in Joel here in verse 15.

What can we say about the day of the Lord in the Bible?

First, let's remember the working definition that we have been using so far in our study of Joel: **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.**

And, second, with that possible definition in mind, let's look at how that phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible.

The Handout for Lesson 9 shows every verse where the phrase "day of the Lord" is found in the ESV translation of the Bible.

For an exhaustive study, we would need to also consider verses where the concept is described without the use of the exact phrase "day of the Lord." For example:

Isaiah 2:12 – For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against

all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low.

Lamentations 2:22 – You summoned as if to a festival day my terrors on every side, and on **the day of the anger of the LORD** no one escaped or survived; those whom I held and raised my enemy destroyed.

Zechariah 14:1 – Behold, **a day is coming for the LORD**, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst.

And we could give other such examples, but for now let's just look at the verses that include the exact phrase "day of the Lord" – and there are 23 such verses, all of which are shown on the handout – 18 from the Old Testament and 5 from the New Testament.

What facts about the day of the Lord can we glean from those 23 verses?

First, as we saw with the examples from Joel, these other examples are also future-oriented. The day is near; the day comes; the day is hastening fast.

Second, the day of the Lord is used to describe different Old Testament judgments.

Referring to the 23 verses on the handout, we see **Babylon** in verses #1 and #2 (light green); we see **Egypt** in verses #4 and #6 (blue); we see **Judah** in verses #5, #16, and #17 (red); we see **Israel** in verses #12 and #13 (yellow); and we see **Edom** in verse #14 (dark green).

Third, the "day" of the Lord is not always a 24-hour day.

Sometimes the day of the Lord refers to an event that lasted longer than a literal 24-hour day. In fact, that may be true of all of these judgments.

Although some key events may have occurred on a single day, the invasions and sieges themselves typically took much longer. In fact, as we have seen from the articles on the previous handouts, the locust invasion itself almost certainly lasted more than a single 24-hour day.

Fourth, sometimes the day of the Lord is described using figurative, cosmic, universal language even though the literal judgment was localized.

The judgment of Babylon in Isaiah 13 is a good example. We know from Isaiah 13:17 that Isaiah is describing the defeat of Babylon by the Medes, and we know from Daniel 5 that Babylon fell very quickly to the Medes. But listen to the language used in Isaiah 13 to describe how God saw that event.

Isaiah 13:10 – For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.

Isaiah 13:13 – Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

We sometimes see such vivid, cosmic, apocalyptic language used to describe the day of the Lord.

Fifth, we know from the earlier examples that the phrase does not always describe the end of the world, but sometimes the day of the Lord is used to describe the

end of the world. We see that, for example, in verses #20, #21, #22, and #23 from the handout.

And, while we see many different days of the Lord in the Bible, I think we can say that this final day of the Lord is unique. That is why Paul can write what he does about it to the Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 2:2 – Not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.