

Lesson 6

Joel 1:7

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.

The issue last week with verse 6 was not whether we were seeing locusts. The issue was whether we were also seeing something else. We knew that we were at least seeing locusts in verse 6, and now with verse 7, we know that we are still at least seeing locusts.

In fact, verse 7 reads like a summary of that 1915 *National Geographic* article. On the Handout for Lesson 5, we saw photos of wasted vines and splintered fig trees, and we saw photos of stripped bark and branches made white.

Whether it is the locust invasion of Joel's day or the locust invasion of 1915, the devastating results of the locust invasion are the same – and those results are described perfectly by verse 7.

But we do have a question to consider about verse 7. Whose vine is it? And whose fig tree is it? And I

suppose we could back up and ask that same question about verse 6 – whose land is it?

“My land.” “My vine.” “My fig tree.” Who is talking here?

Some commentaries suggest that Joel is talking about himself, and that he is telling us that his own tree and his own vine were destroyed by these locusts. But I don't think that is right.

Joel is a prophet. Joel is a spokesman for God. Joel is proclaiming the word of God. We saw that in the very first verse of the book – “the word of the LORD that came to Joel.”

So when we see the word “my” in this message from Joel, we should see that pronoun as a reference to God unless we have some really good reason to see it otherwise.

Here we have no such reason, and, in fact, we have every reason to view these words as words spoken by God through the prophet Joel. This land is God's land. These trees are God's trees. These vines are God's vines.

But is God just talking here about his greenery? Or is God also talking about something else when he talks about his vine and his fig tree?

We know that God often used such language to refer metaphorically to Judah.

Isaiah 5:7 – For the **vineyard** of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his **pleasant planting**; and he looked

for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

Ezekiel 15:6 – Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Like **the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest**, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

And we know that Jesus described Judah as a fruitless fig tree.

Luke 13:6–9 – And he told this parable: “A man had a **fig tree** planted in his **vineyard**, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this **fig tree**, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, **you can cut it down.**’”

What do those metaphors of a vine and a tree all have in common? In each case, the metaphor anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of a northern invader. In Isaiah and Ezekiel, that northern invader was Babylon. In Luke, that northern invader was Rome.

And here in Joel? We know that locusts were an invading force, but is there also some other invading force in view here?

When we get to Joel 2:20, here is what we will read: “I will remove the **northerner** far from you.” Will we still be looking at locusts then? Or is there perhaps something else that comes from the north?

Back to Joel 1, is verse 7 just about locusts and plants, or is verse 7 also talking about something else?

Let's keep that question in mind as we proceed, but for now let's add another question to it.

When we get to Joel 3:2, we will find God judging all the nations because of what they have done to his people. And here is what our question will be about that verse: does that charge by God against all the nations just suddenly appear without warning in chapter 3 – or is the basis for that charge against all the nations somehow laid out for us in chapters 1 and 2? Does chapter 3 change the subject or not?

When we get to chapter 3 our question will be, "Why?" What had these nations done? Why are they being judged? We know that the nations didn't send these locusts. Did they do something else?

If that question has not been answered by the time we get to Joel 3, then perhaps we have missed something in Joel 1 and Joel 2! Let's keep our eyes open for an answer!

"It has laid waste my vine." That phrase "laid waste" in Hebrew means "made into **desolation**." We can see that word in the *Legacy Standard* translation of verse 7.

Joel 1:7 – It has made my vine a **desolation** And my fig tree splinters. It has stripped them bare and cast them away; Their branches have become white.

Any time we see that word "desolation" in either Hebrew or Greek we need to pay extra close attention. That word runs like a thread through many key events in the

Bible from Genesis 47:19 all the way through Revelation 17:16.

For example, we see that same Hebrew word in the warnings in Deuteronomy 28 for those who would break their covenant with God (where it is translated "horror").

Deuteronomy 28:37 – And you shall become a **horror**, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the LORD will lead you away.

And we see that also same Hebrew word in Isaiah 13 regarding the day of the Lord that came upon ancient Babylon.

Isaiah 13:9 – Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a **desolation** and to destroy its sinners from it.

And we see that same Hebrew word in God's great judgment of all the nations in Isaiah 24.

Isaiah 24:12 – **Desolation** is left in the city; the gates are battered into ruins.

And we see the corresponding Greek word in Jesus' statements to Jerusalem at the end of Matthew 23.

Matthew 23:37–38 – O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you **desolate**.

And we see the same word later used with regard to Rome.

Revelation 17:16-17 – And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her **desolate** and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.

What do those events all have in common? They each describe a judgment of God – against his own people when they became faithless or against those who harm his faithful people.

They each describe a situation in which God intervened into the affairs of this world so that everything changed in something like a cosmic upheaval for whatever group was involved.

They each describe a situation in which a self-satisfied complacency was suddenly replaced by desolation.

In short, they each involve a Day of the Lord!

And that is what these locusts do here – they come against a self-satisfied complacent people, and they leave nothing but desolation.

And when we look at the specific word used in this verse to describe that desolation we are reminded of many other such events in the Bible.

And, of course, we know that there is such a day coming for the entire world – a day in which God will intervene into the affairs of self-satisfied complacent mankind and change everything in the twinkling of an eye.

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.

If we are starting to see more in this first chapter of Joel than just a bunch of locusts, then I think we are on the right track! I think there is much more for us to find here.

Joel 1:8

Joel 1:8 – Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.

In verse 8, the sorrow of the lost harvest in verse 7 is compared to the sorrow of an unconsummated marriage. What should have been a day of great joy and great celebration (as with a wedding or a harvest) has instead become a day of terrible sorrow and lamentation.

The “sackcloth” in verse 8 would have been a coarsely woven piece of black material usually made of goat’s hair. We often see sackcloth used in the Bible by those who are mourning.

2 Samuel 3:31 – Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, “Tear your clothes and put on **sackcloth** and mourn before Abner.” And King David followed the bier.

1 Kings 21:27 – And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put **sackcloth** on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly.

Isaiah 32:11 – Tremble, you women who are at ease, shudder, you **complacent** ones; strip, and make yourselves bare, and tie **sackcloth** around your waist.

In each case, the sackcloth was as a visible representation of distress and humiliation. And, as one Rabbi described the use of goat's hair for that cloth, "one wants to say with it: Behold, we are accounted like cattle!"

Verse 8 seems straightforward, but we do have some remaining questions about it.

First, what does verse 8 mean when it says that a "virgin" is mourning for her "husband?"

Some commentaries complain that it doesn't make sense for a virgin to mourn for her husband, but it makes perfect sense in the context of the Jewish marriage law.

Under that law, a woman became bound to a man as his "wife" as soon as that man had paid the agreed bride-price. That, in fact, was the situation of Mary in Matthew 1:19 when Joseph planned to divorce her even though their marriage had not yet been consummated.

A second question about verse 8 is who is being addressed by that verse? Are we still just talking to the drunkards?

Although verse 8 may still be addressed to the drunkards we met back in verse 5, I think the better view is that these verses are now being addressed to the wider audience of all who had suffered because of the locust invasion.

Why? Because, in the Hebrew, the command to mourn in verse 8 is feminine. Something feminine is commanded to mourn like this virgin. To whom or to what is that command addressed?

Most likely, that command is addressed to Jerusalem as the daughter of Zion, which is a description of Jerusalem that we often see in the prophets.

Zechariah 9:9 – Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! ...

Here in verse 8 the command is to weep rather than to rejoice, but I think the commands are addressed to the same group – the people of Jerusalem.

The book of Isaiah opens with a description that is very similar to what we see here in Joel.

Isaiah 1:7-8 – 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. And **the daughter of Zion** is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

Joel 1:9

Joel 1:9 – The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD.

As we said in our introduction, verse 9 very important when it comes to dating the book of Joel. Although verse 9 does not tell us when the book was written, verse 9 does tell us when the book was **not** written.

And how does it do that? It does that by telling us that there was a functioning temple in Jerusalem when the locust invasion described in Joel 1 occurred. There were grain offerings and drink offerings and there were priests functioning as the ministers of God until those offerings were cut off by the locust invasion.

And so verse 9 explains why the three possible dates for Joel that we are considering all occur either before 587 BC (when the temple was destroyed) or after 515 BC (when the temple was rebuilt). I don't see how the locust invasion in Joel 1 could possibly have occurred between 587 and 515 when there was no temple.

So far we have seen how this locust invasion was a terrible agricultural disaster, but verse 9 tells us that it was more than that. This locust invasion was also a terrible theological disaster.

The Jews were commanded to make daily offerings that included lambs, grain offerings, and drink offerings.

Exodus 29:38 – Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight. And with the first lamb a tenth measure of **fine flour** mingled with a fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and a fourth of a hin of wine for a **drink offering**.

That “fine flour” is called a grain offering in Numbers 28:5. Verse 9 tells us that both that daily grain offering and the daily drink offering had been cut off from the house of the Lord.

Even though I think the intended audience of the message has broadened here from the drunkards and the gluttons we met in verse 5, I think the text may still have a specific message for those drunkards and gluttons here in verse 9.

What was their concern back in verse 6? The harvest had been destroyed – and what was their biggest worry about that terrible event? Their biggest worry was how it affected them. Would they have enough to drink? Would they have enough to eat?

And, yes, those were legitimate concerns. In fact, we will see those concerns in the very next verse. And the lack of food and drink that we will see in verse 10 was a good reason to lament, as they were told to do in verse 8.

But there is another reason to lament – a more important reason – a reason that we find in between verse 8 and verse 10 – the reason we are given here in verse 9: they should lament because of the lack of food and drink offered to God.

I think there is an important lesson for us here in verses 8–10. When disasters come is our first concern for the things of God?

We all know that we should put God first. We all know that God must always be our top priority. But if

there was ever a time when we might become our own top priority, it would be during a time of disaster. A time when a storm or a plague or a war or something else comes, and suddenly we are faced with a life or death situation. When that happens, can't we flip the order and put our concerns ahead of God?

Verses 8-10 say no. Those verses remind us of the proper order of our concerns – even in a life or death situation – and perhaps we should say **especially** in a life or death situation. The first concern here was not the agricultural disaster that affected the food on people's tables but was instead the theological disaster that affected the food on God's table.

But verse 9 tells the **priests** to mourn as the ministers of the LORD. So maybe that's it. Maybe the **priests** are supposed to be concerned about the things of God, while the ordinary people like us can be concerned about our own stuff.

No, that's not it. The command to "lament" in verse 8 applied to everyone. The priests, as the ministers of God, had a heightened responsibility to conduct the daily offerings, and so they had a heightened reason to mourn – but everyone was called to mourn the cessation of these daily offerings.

But what about today? Can we just leave the worry about the things of God to the priests today?

Yes, absolutely we can! Why? Because we are all priests today. We are all the ministers of God today. Saying that it is the priests' responsibility today is the same as saying that it is our responsibility.

1 Peter 2:9 – But you are a chosen race, **a royal priesthood**, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Revelation 1:6 – And made us a kingdom, **priests to his God and Father**, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

As priests, we have an **access** to God that the ordinary people did not enjoy in the Old Testament. But there is another side to that coin – we also have **responsibilities** to God that the ordinary people did not have in the Old Testament.

When we study the Old Testament and read about the things that the priests did, we need to always look for lessons about what we should be doing today. Why? Because we are priests. We are the royal priesthood. Because today we are the ones making the sacrifices to God.

Romans 12:1 – I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as **a living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

There is still a question about this locust invasion that we have not asked yet – **who caused it?** Who sent these locusts against the people?

Maybe the answer is no one. Perhaps this terrible invasion of locusts was just one of those things that happens.

I suspect that is how we would view a locust invasion that happened today – not as a judgment sent by God,

but just as a natural disaster that happens when you live in a world with insects.

But what about this locust invasion in Joel? Was it just a natural disaster?

Verse 9 gives us a strong indication that it was not. And how does it do that? With the verb **stem** that it uses.

A verb **tense** tells us **when** something happened, while a verb **stem** tells us **how** something happened.

Biblical Hebrew has seven common verb stems. Three of them are shown on the Handout for Lesson 6. There are two simple verb stems:

- Simple Active (Qal): “Moses broke the tablets”
- Simple Passive (Niphal): “The tablets were broken”

And there is another passive verb stem:

- Causative Passive (Hophal): “Moses was caused to break the tablets”

The verb “cut off” in verse 9 is clearly passive. We can see that in the English: “The grain offering and the drink offering **are cut off.**” That is not something the offerings are doing but rather is something that is being done to the offerings.

But which passive stem is used here for the verb translated “cut off” in verse 9? The answer to that question is surprising.

It is not the simple passive stem that would have commonly been used. In fact, we saw that simple passive form of this same verb just a few verses ago.

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.

That is the simple passive – it is cut off – but that is **not** what we find in verse 9.

Instead, in verse 9, we find the unusual **causitive** passive (“it was **caused** to be cut off”). And while that particular root verb occurs many times in the Bible, verse 9 is the only place in the Bible where the “causitive passive” stem for that Hebrew verb is found.

An English translation of verse 9 that captures that unusual verb stem might be this: “grain offerings and drink offerings **have been caused to be cut off** from the house of the Lord.”

If I told you that my house had been destroyed, you would likely have some questions for me. But what if I told you that my house **was caused** to be destroyed? Again, you would likely have some questions for me, but I suspect I already know what your first question would be: **Who caused it?** Who did it?

The use of this rare causative passive stem in verse 9 leaves any Hebrew reader with that same question: **who caused it?** Who caused these offerings to be cut off from the house of the Lord?

Maybe this natural disaster isn't as natural as we thought? Did this terrible disaster come from God?

We **may** later find an explicit answer to that question in the book of Joel, but I think we may see a hint here in verse 9 (at least in the original Hebrew of verse 9). This disaster was not just something that happened – this disaster was something that was **caused** to happen.

But who? Who caused this disaster in Joel? Lawyers might refer to such an event today as “an act of God” because it is an event beyond human control for which there is no legal redress. Is Joel telling us here that this “act of God” really was an act of God?

Let's keep reading.

Joel 1:10

Joel 1:10 – The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes.

As we said, verse 10 gives us another reason why the people were told to lament in verse 8. Not only did the locust invasion bring a terrible theological disaster, but it also brought a terrible agricultural disaster.

And not only were the people mourning and the priests mourning, but here in verse 10 the ground itself is mourning. Why? Because the fields are destroyed. The

locusts have stripped them bare so that nothing remains. The grain, the wine, and the oil have all been destroyed.

These three things – grain, wine, and oil – were the basic food requirements of the people and are described in the Old Testament as special signs of God’s blessings for the people.

Deuteronomy 7:13 – He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, **your grain and your wine and your oil**, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you.

Losing all three of those blessings in a single event would be a devastating life-ending disaster.

When we studied Hosea, we saw how the language in Hosea kept taking us back to the curses in Deuteronomy 28, where God told the people what to expect if they broke their covenant with him. Do we see something similar here in Joel? Yes, we do.

Deuteronomy 28:42 – All thy trees and fruit of thy land shall the **locust** consume.

Deuteronomy 28:48–51 – Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things: and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee. The LORD shall bring a **nation** against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a **nation** whose tongue thou shalt not understand; A **nation** of fierce countenance, which shall not

regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young: And he shall eat the fruit of thy cattle, and the fruit of thy land, until thou be destroyed: **which also shall not leave thee either corn, wine, or oil**, or the increase of thy kine, or flocks of thy sheep, until he have destroyed thee.

So what do we see in those promised curses? We see locust, and we see a nation that destroys the people and leaves neither grain, wine, nor oil.

And what have we see so far in Joel? We have seen locusts *that are called* a nation and that leave neither grain, wine, nor oil.

And perhaps that answers the question we had about verse 6 – why are these locusts called a “nation?” The answer may be that Joel wants us to think back to the curses in Deuteronomy 28.

And if that is right, then it confirms what we said earlier about verse 6 – that the word “nation” was intended to broaden our view of these events. We know that Deuteronomy 28 is not just talking about locusts, and so perhaps we now know that neither is Joel 1 just talking about locusts.

And if these verses in Joel are intended to point us back to Deuteronomy 28, then that also answers another earlier question that we had – was this event happening because the people had sinned?

If God through the prophet Joel is pointing us back to the curses in Deuteronomy 28, then we know the people had sinned. We know that these events occurred because there was sin in the camp.

How do we know that? Because the curses in Deuteronomy 28 were specifically directed to those who disobeyed God.

Deuteronomy 28:45 – Moreover all these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which he commanded thee.

And if you were reading Deuteronomy 28 in the days of Joel looking for what curse would come next, what curse would that be? We saw locusts in Deuteronomy 28:42. What comes next?

Deuteronomy 28:49–50 – The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; A nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young.

What comes next is an invasion, not of locusts, but of people – “a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand.” Is that also what we will see next in Joel? Let’s keep reading.