

# Trial by Locusts

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*Joel 1:2-12*

## I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. In the days of the pioneers a group was making their way across one of the central states to a distant place that had been opened up for homesteading.
1. They traveled in covered wagons drawn by oxen, and progress was necessarily slow.
    - a. One day they were horrified to note a long line of smoke in the west, stretching for miles across the prairie, and soon it was evident that the dried grass was burning fiercely and approaching them rapidly.
    - b. They had cross a river the day before but it would be impossible to go back to there before the flames would be upon them.
  2. Only one man seemed to have understanding as to what could be done.
    - a. He gave the command to set fire to the grass behind them. Then when a space was burned over, the whole company moved back upon it.
    - b. As the flames roared on toward the west, a little girl cried out in terror, "Are you sure we shall not all be burned up?"
    - c. The leader replied, "My child, the flames cannot reach us here, for we are standing where the fire has been!"
- B. We understand the principle of setting a fire to stop the spread of a dreadful forest fire. We also understand that, metaphorically speaking, Jesus took the flames so that we wouldn't be burned up. It was he who took our punishment.
1. "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rm 8:3-4).
  2. Jesus "himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pt 2:24).
- C. In Joel's day, the people did not have an Advocate with the Father to bear their sins, but God often punished his people directly for their own sins.
1. Think of the different captivities the Israelites endured because of sin, Jonah's three days in the fish, Ahab's death in battle, and many other examples.
  2. The Book of Jonah deals with a great plague of locusts which had descended upon God's people because of their sinfulness.
    - a. Locusts were quite problematic in the ancient world.
      - Locusts breed in the region of Sudan. Their migration would strike in February or March, and they would follow the prevailing winds wither to Egypt or to Palestine.
      - A locust will consume its own weight each day.
      - Locusts swarms have been known to cover as much as four hundred square miles, and even one square mile could teem with over 100 million insects.
        - If the locusts laid their eggs before being blown out to sea, the problem would recur in cycles.
        - A single female laying her eggs in June could potentially result in eighteen million offspring within four months.
    - b. Therefore, Joel and his contemporaries knew quite well the problems locusts could bring.
  3. Our text this evening makes clear that this was no ordinary locust plague, but one specifically brought about because of the people's sins. Tonight, let's think about "Trial by Locusts." As we do so, we'll notice: A DIFFERENT TRIAL, A DEVESTATING TRIAL, & A DEPRESSING TRIAL.

## II. A DIFFERENT TRIAL, vv. 2-3.

- A. "Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation."
- B. Nothing like this plague of locusts had ever occurred in Israelite history.
1. No doubt the people of Joel's day had heard of that great plague of locusts upon Egypt in the days of Moses.
    - a. "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" (Ex 10:14-15).
    - b. Remember, though, that this plague did not come upon the Hebrews who were Egyptian slaves; it just came upon the Egyptians.
  2. Now it was the Hebrews' turn to deal with the plague of locusts—Just as Pharaoh sinned by not allowing God's people to go free and incurred judgment by locusts, so now God's people have sinned and are incurring a judgment of locusts.
- C. This plague was to be passed on from generation to generation.
1. Throughout the OT, we find God's telling his people to tell their children and grandchildren of specific events in their history—e.g., Joshua set up twelve stones at Gilgal to remind future generations of how God allowed his people to cross the Jordan on dry ground (Josh 4:20-24).
  2. Here, the same instruction is given: tell your children and encourage them to tell your grandchildren about the locust plague you witnessed.
    - a. How often do parents tell their children and grandchildren about the trials they had growing up?
      - I tell my kids all the time about the trials I had growing up: getting up to change the TV channel, having to go outside and adjust the antenna, and doing without Playstation. We didn't even have an Atari until I was in middle school!
      - Seriously, though, aren't there times that younger generations can learn much about the trials of previous generations?
        - How many of us have not learned valuable lessons of sacrifice by hearing stories of the Great Depression and World War II?
        - How many of us have not been encouraged to work harder by hearing stories by parents and grandparents of the long, hard, tedious labor they did to provide for their families?
    - b. Is there not a spiritual lesson here for us?
      - Are we open enough with our children and grandchildren about the spiritual struggles we have faced in life?
        - I understand that this is a physical catastrophe which came upon the Israelites, but it had a spiritual root! Were it not for their sinfulness, they would never have suffered like this.
        - Are there not great teaching moments when we say, "Let me tell you what happened to Daddy because he didn't do what he was supposed to do. I don't want this to happen to you"?
      - Brethren, let us pass our trials on to future generations in order that they might learn to avoid those same mistakes!

## III. A DEVESTATING TRIAL, v. 4.

- A. "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."
- B. Interpreters are divided as to whether this text mentions four different types of locusts or the four stages of development.
- C. I personally don't think that these four different terms for locusts refer either to different types of locusts or the four stages of development.

1. I think the idea is that if there is something still standing that one locust hasn't devoured, another locust comes right behind it and devours the vegetation.
  2. However we understand these terms, the idea is very clear: the people of Joel's day were facing complete and utter devastation by these locusts—there isn't any vegetation left.
- D. This is an utterly devastating trial for the Jews.
1. Notice in this chapter alone the devastation Joel describes:
    - a. Vineyards are destroyed: "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" (v. 5).
    - b. Vines and fig trees have been destroyed:
      - "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" (v. 7).
      - Locusts do not favor either the vine or the fig tree—they only devour them when everything else is gone; thus, this is a picture of complete ruin.
      - In the ANE, the idyllic picture of peace—kinda like the dove with an olive branch in our own culture—was of one's sitting under his vine and fig tree, so this is a picture of the disruption of peace.
    - c. There was no produce to offer sacrifice to God: "The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD" (v. 9).
    - d. Agriculture failed throughout the land: "Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine dried up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man" (vv. 11-12).
  2. That is a picture of complete and utter ruin.
- E. Does not sin continue, even in this life, to bring complete and utter ruin?
1. Some people want to point to someone suffering and say, "He's being punished for sin."
    - a. We've seen a lot of that in this country in recent years.
      - How many of us recall Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson's saying that 9/11 occurred because of gays?
      - How many times did we hear in the aftermath of Katrina that New Orleans was laid waste because of sin?
    - b. I have a problem with that:
      - In Joel, we have a prophet's standing up and saying, "Hear the word of the LORD: These locusts have come upon you to punish you for your sin."
      - I don't have that today when some catastrophe befalls man, for God no longer speaks directly to any man.
  2. At the same time, there can be no doubt that people often suffer as a direct result of their own sins.
    - a. We have the Word of God on that:
      - David writes: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Ps 32:3-4).
        - We don't know the circumstances which surrounded this psalm: was it the affair with Bathsheba, the census of Israel, or some other sin which entangled David?
        - Yet, notice the guilt David expresses.
      - Notice carefully what Solomon writes about adultery: Prov 6:23-35.
    - b. Is there a person here who has not suffered because of our own sin?
      - How many of us have lain in bed unable to sleep because we deeply hurt someone so dear to us?
      - How many of us have wept bitterly, as did Peter, because we have acted unrighteously before a righteous God?
      - How many of us have sinned and had to endure the consequences of that sin, consequences we may bear to this very day?
    - c. Is there not much good which can come from suffering on account of sin?

- Speaking of God's discipline, the author of Hebrews reminds us: Our earthly fathers "disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (12:10-11).
  - In context, the author is **NOT** saying that God disciplines us for sin; in fact, he is using Jesus as an example of suffering for doing the **RIGHT** thing. Thus, discipline in this context has to do with becoming stronger and more Christlike for suffering righteously.
  - Yet, is the principle not still valid? Is it not true that if we bear the consequences of sin we can learn from it and become better people?
- Brethren, let us learn from the consequences of sin and become better people!

#### IV. A DEPRESSING TRIAL, vv. 5-12.

- A. Notice the depression that Joel calls for: the drunkards are to weep and wail; the nation is to mourn like a virgin who loses her fiancé; the priests are mourning because they cannot offer sacrifices; the ground mourns because it has no vegetation; and farmers are to be ashamed and wail.
- B. Can you imagine what the Israelites of Joel's day were enduring?
  1. There is no vegetation—locusts have come and devoured everything.
    - a. There's going to be much death—the elderly and children stand little chance of survival in a famine.
    - b. It's going to take years to get vegetation back to any level near what it was before the locust plague.
      - After a locust plague, fields often had decreased fertility.
      - Topsoil would often erode because trees and other vegetation weren't there to keep the topsoil in place.
      - The palm tree, for example, takes twenty years before it can produce fruit, so even if the Israelites started planting trees immediately after the plague, it could take a generation before they are able to get fruit from them.
  2. Can you imagine what it would be like for such a catastrophe to occur in this nation?
    - a. Granted, on account of the advances in science, plague and pestilence don't generally have near the effect on our food supply that it did in ancient Israel.
    - b. But forget our technological advances for a moment:
      - How would you parents like to tell your children that there is absolutely nothing to eat—you don't have anything made from produce and livestock have died due to starvation?
      - How would you like to watch those who love more than life itself die a slow and painful death due to starvation?
      - How would you like to try to plant a garden but be unable to because the locusts have eaten all the seeds and what few seeds you are able to find don't sprout because there isn't any topsoil?
  3. Is it any wonder that Joel called upon the people to mourn and that many were mourning already?
- C. Whatever the physical effects of the plague, God wants that sorrow and grief to translate into repentance.
  1. Joel often uses the plague as a backdrop to call for repentance:
    - a. "Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD" (1:14).
    - b. "'Yet even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rent 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" (2:12-13).
  2. Is it not true that true sorrow often leads to true repentance?
    - a. Biblical characters often faced great sorrow which led to their repentance:
      - When 70,000 men died because David numbered Israel, we read: "Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. And David said to God, 'Was it not I who gave command to number the people? It is I who have sinned and done great evil. But these sheep, what have they

done? Please let your hand, O LORD my God, be against me and against my father's house. But do not let the plague be on your people'" (1 Chr 21:16-17).

- After Simon the Magician fell back into sin and was denounced by Peter, he said, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me" (Acts 8:24).
  - We well remember Paul's words to the Corinthians: "I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret" (2 Cor 7:9-10).
- b. What will we do with the sorrow which comes from sin—will we wallow in it, or shall we take that grief and turn to the Lord in repentance? Do you need to turn to the Lord in repentance this very evening?