

Introduction to Joel Chapter 1

The Locust Invasion: A Disaster Without Precedent and the Call to National Lamentation

The book of Joel opens without a single word of biographical context beyond the prophet's name and his father's name. We are given no king's reign to anchor the chronology, no city where Joel lived, no specific occupation or social position. This deliberate absence of historical mooring is not careless but theologically intentional: the message Joel is about to deliver is addressed to every generation of God's people that encounters the devastating visitation of the divine judgment, and it resists being safely enclosed in a single historical moment that later readers might regard as safely in the past.

The occasion of the book is a catastrophic locust invasion unlike anything in living memory — a plague so total and so devastating that Joel calls on the elders to confirm that nothing like it has ever been seen in their lifetimes or in the lifetimes of the generation before them. What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. The four-fold description of the devastation is the poetry of total loss: not merely a bad harvest season but the systematic stripping of everything that sustains the agricultural community's life.

The chapter moves through three interconnected movements. The first (verses 1–4) is the summons to attention: hear this, elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land. Has this happened in your days? The unprecedented nature of the disaster is the first pastoral claim Joel makes upon his audience — this is not routine; this demands notice. The second movement (verses 5–12) is the call to lamentation: wake up, drunkards, and weep; wail, all drinkers of wine; lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth. Successive groups are addressed — the drunkards, the nation, the priests, the farmers — each called to mourn what the locust has taken from them. The third movement (verses 13–20) is the call to corporate religious response: gird on sackcloth and lament, O priests; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the elders; cry out to the LORD.

The theological significance of the chapter extends far beyond the historical crisis of a locust plague. Joel sees the locust invasion as the instrument of the day of the LORD — the first introduction of that vast eschatological concept into the book, which will come to dominate chapters 2 and 3. The devastation of the locusts is not merely an agricultural catastrophe but a theological sign: the day of the LORD is near; it comes as destruction from the Almighty. The physical stripping of the land — the vine, the fig tree, the grain, the pomegranate, the palm, the apple tree — is the visible expression of a spiritual condition that has left the house of the LORD without offering and the priests without the means of their sacred service. What the locust has done to the land, the day of the LORD will do — and is already beginning to do — to the covenant community that has lost the vitality of its relationship with the God whose house stands desolate.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to Joel chapter 1 as people who need to learn to weep before we learn to hope. We live in a culture that has largely lost the capacity for the kind of corporate lamentation that this chapter calls for — the sackcloth, the assembly, the crying out, the honest naming of the devastation that the judgment has produced. We are more comfortable with the managed grief of the therapeutic session than with the raw, public, community-wide mourning that Joel demands of the elders, the priests, the farmers, and the drunkards alike.

Lord, let the locust invasion of this chapter be the mirror that shows us what devastation looks like when it is named honestly rather than managed carefully. Let the what has the vine done, the fig tree withered, the pomegranate, the palm, and the apple tree dried up be the honest inventory of what we have lost — not merely agricultural but spiritual, not merely material but covenantal. Where the house of our God has been deprived of grain offering and drink offering, where the priests mourn because the ministry has been stripped of the substance that gives it meaning, let us see that condition clearly rather than maintaining the appearance of a flourishing that the locust has already consumed.

And let the call to solemn assembly be received as the invitation it is — not the punishment of the God who enjoys the mourning of His people but the provision of the God who knows that the community which refuses to lament what it has lost cannot receive the restoration that the rest of the book will promise. Form in us the capacity to cry out to the LORD before we ask what the LORD will do for us. Let the lamentation precede the expectation.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Joel 1:1–4

The Unprecedented Disaster: Hear This, Elders — Has This Ever Been in Your Days?

(1) The word of the LORD that came to Joel the son of Pethuel.

*(2) Hear this, ye old men,
and give ear, all ye inhabitants of the land.*

*Hath this been in your days,
or even in the days of your fathers?*

*(3) Tell ye your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children another generation.*

*(4) That which the palmerworm hath left
hath the locust eaten;*

*and that which the locust hath left
hath the cankerworm eaten;
and that which the cankerworm hath left
hath the caterpillar eaten.*

The Context

The word of the LORD that came to Joel is the standard formula for prophetic authority — the message is not Joel's opinion about a national crisis but the divine word that has been given to him to deliver. The Pethuel whose son Joel is unknown outside this verse, and the deliberate minimalism of the introduction has led to centuries of scholarly debate about the date and historical context of the book, without any consensus being reached. What is clear is that the divine word has come, and the prophet's primary task is to make that word heard by those who most need to hear it.

The summons of verse 2 is addressed first to the elders — the bearers of the community's collective memory — and then to all the inhabitants of the land. The question Has this been in your days, or in the days of your fathers? is a challenge to the communal memory: search as far back as living recollection can reach, search the stored memory of the previous generation, and tell me if anything like what is happening now has ever happened before. The implied answer is no. The disaster is unprecedented within living or transmitted memory, which makes it impossible to manage by applying the lessons of previous experience. This is something new, something worse, something that demands a different kind of response.

The instruction of verse 3 — tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation — establishes the event as something that must be transmitted through the generational memory rather than allowed to fade with the passing of the generation that witnessed it. This is the same pattern as the Passover — the command to tell the story to the next generation so that the memory of the formative event shapes the identity of those who did not witness it. The locust invasion is to be remembered not as a historical curiosity but as a defining moment of encounter with the judgments of God.

The four-fold description of verse 4 — what the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten; what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten — is the poetry of total consumption. Whether the four terms refer to four different species of locust or to four different stages of the same insect's life cycle has been debated, but the poetic effect is clear: wave after wave of destruction, each consuming what the previous wave left, until nothing remains. The completeness of the devastation is the subject of the verse, and the fourfold structure enacts it — there is no remainder, no remnant of the harvest that has escaped the successive waves of the plague.

Plain American English

This is the message the LORD gave to Joel son of Pethuel. Listen to this, you elders! Pay attention, everyone who lives in this land! Has anything like this ever happened before in your lifetime, or in your parents' lifetime? Tell your children about it. Let them tell their grandchildren, and their grandchildren the next generation. What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust ate. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust ate. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust ate.

Key Observations

“Hath this been in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?”: This signifies The Appeal to Communal Memory Is the Pastoral Claim That the Present Disaster Is Genuinely Unprecedented and Therefore Cannot Be Managed by the Lessons of Previous Experience — It Requires a Different Kind of Response.

The challenge to the elders' collective memory is not rhetorical posturing but a genuine pastoral strategy. The elders are the community's archive of experienced wisdom — they have seen droughts, they have seen poor harvests, they have seen the ordinary cycles of agricultural difficulty that every farming community navigates. What Joel is insisting is that what is happening now exceeds all of that accumulated experience: no one in living memory, and no one in transmitted memory, has seen anything like this. This claim of unprecedented-ness is the pastoral device that prevents the community from defaulting to the managed coping strategies that have worked before, and forces them to look for a response adequate to the actual scale of what is happening.

“Tell ye your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation”: This signifies The Generational Transmission Command Establishes the Locust Invasion as a Defining Moment of Encounter with the Divine Judgment That Must Be Carried Through the Community's Memory Rather Than Allowed to Fade.

The command to tell the children what the present generation has seen is one of the most theologically significant instructions in the opening section, because it establishes the purpose of the recording of the disaster: not to preserve a historical memory for its own sake, but to ensure that the theological significance of the encounter with the divine judgment — what the disaster reveals about who God is and how He relates to His people — is not lost when the generation that witnessed it has passed. This is the Passover pattern applied to a prophetic crisis: the formative experience must be transmitted so that the community's theological identity is shaped by it. The locust invasion, like the Exodus, is meant to be remembered by those who were not there.

“That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten”: This signifies The Fourfold Description of the Progressive Devastation Is the Poetry of Total Consumption — Wave After Wave Until Nothing Remains.

The four-fold pattern of verse 4 is among the most carefully crafted lines in the book for its enactment of the content it describes. Each clause begins with what the previous actor left — establishing that there was something remaining — and ends with the next actor's consumption of that remainder. The cumulative effect is the sense of the relentless, sequential elimination of every surviving portion of the harvest. The four actors are not four simultaneous destroyers but four successive ones, each one arriving to finish what the previous one started. The pattern is both

agricultural description and theological statement: when the divine judgment comes in this form, it is thorough. There is no remnant that escapes the successive waves.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the Challenge to Communal Memory as the Pastoral Invitation to Name the Present Crisis Honestly Rather Than Assimilating It to the Precedents That Make It Manageable:

Joel's question to the elders is the question that every community of faith needs to ask in every season of genuine crisis: has this happened before, within living or transmitted memory? The honest answer sometimes is yes — the present difficulty fits the pattern of previous difficulties and can be navigated with the wisdom accumulated from them. But sometimes the honest answer is no — the present crisis genuinely exceeds the precedents, and the community that manages it with the coping strategies of previous experience has misread the scale of what is happening. The capacity to say has this happened before? honestly is the precondition for the appropriate response.

2. Practice the Generational Transmission of the Formative Encounters with the Divine Judgment as Well as the Formative Encounters with the Divine Grace:

The tell your children is typically associated with the Passover and other stories of divine deliverance — the generational transmission of the great acts of God on behalf of His people. Joel applies the same command to the experience of divine judgment. The community that transmits only the stories of grace and deliverance, without transmitting the stories of the disasters that the covenant violations produced, has given the next generation an incomplete theological education. The locust invasion is as much a part of the testimony of God's dealings with His people as the Exodus, and the community that remembers only the Exodus has lost half of the story.

3. Take the Totality of the Four-Fold Devastation as the Reminder That When the Divine Judgment Comes in a Particular Season, It Is Designed to Be Total Rather Than Partial — and That the Totality Is the Measure of the Seriousness of the Condition Being Addressed:

The four waves of locusts that leave nothing remind the community that the divine judgment is not a polite correction. When the locust descends in wave after wave, consuming what each previous wave has left, the theological message is that the condition being addressed is serious enough to require the complete stripping of the prosperity that has been misused or the abundance that has been misattributed. The total loss is the inverse of the total provision that the covenant had promised: the community that has treated the covenant's abundance as its own possession has had the abundance fully consumed by the judgment that demonstrates its true character as gift rather than entitlement.

How This Relates to Today

The refusal to provide Joel with a specific historical context is one of the most pastorally significant features of the book's opening. Every generation of the covenant community is invited to read itself into the situation of verse 2: is there something in your own experience or in the experience of the generation before you that resembles the unprecedented disaster Joel is describing? The book's generational application — tell your children, and their children, and their children after them — establishes from the first verses that the locust invasion is not a crisis safely confined to

the eighth century BC (or whenever Joel wrote) but the paradigmatic encounter with the divine judgment that every generation is called to recognize when it encounters it in its own form.

The fourfold description of verse 4 has also been read typologically in the history of Christian interpretation — most notably in the use Joel 1:4 and 2:25 (I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten) share as a pair. The four locusts of the devastation become, in the promise of restoration, the four locusts whose years will be restored. The total consumption of verse 4 is the measure of the restoration of verse 25 — and the completeness of both the devastation and the restoration is the theological point that the fourfold pattern establishes from the beginning.

Key Lesson: **The opening of Joel establishes that the locust invasion is unprecedented within living or transmitted memory, demands the generational transmission of what the present generation witnesses, and enacts in the fourfold poetry of verse 4 the completeness of a consumption that leaves nothing — the pastoral strategy of naming the disaster accurately and in its full severity as the precondition for the lamentation that the rest of the chapter will call for and the restoration that the rest of the book will promise.**

Joel 1:5–12

Wake Up and Weep: The Call to Lamentation for Every Group the Disaster Has Stripped

(5) *Awake, ye drunkards, and weep;
and howl, all ye drinkers of wine,
because of the new wine;
for it is cut off from your mouth.*

(6) *For a nation is come up upon my land,
strong, and without number,
whose teeth are as the teeth of a lion,
and he hath the cheek teeth of a great lion.*

(7) *He hath laid my vine waste,
and barked my fig tree:
he hath made it clean bare, and cast it away;
the branches thereof are made white.*

(8) *Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth
for the husband of her youth.*

(9) *The meat offering and the drink offering
is cut off from the house of the LORD;
the priests, the LORD's ministers, mourn.*

(10) *The field is wasted, the land mourneth;
for the corn is wasted:
the new wine is dried up,
the oil languisheth.*

*(11) Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen;
howl, O ye vinedressers,
for the wheat and for the barley;
because the harvest of the field is perished.
(12) The vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth;
the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree,
even all the trees of the field, are withered:
because joy is withered away from the sons of men.*

The Context

The successive calls to lamentation in verses 5–12 address four groups in turn, each identified by their relationship to what the locust has destroyed. The drunkards and wine drinkers of verse 5 are addressed first — not to mock their addiction but because the destruction of the vine has hit them where they are most immediately affected: the new wine is cut off from your mouth. The call to weep is the pastoral strategy of starting where each group is most viscerally aware of the loss. For those who have been living for the wine, the cutting off of the wine is the most immediate path to the lamentation that Joel needs to produce in the whole community.

The locust army itself is described in verses 6–7 with military imagery: a nation, strong and without number, with the teeth of a lion and the fangs of a great lion. The vine laid waste, the fig tree stripped bare, the branches made white — these are the images of a military conquest in agricultural form. Joel will develop this military imagery much more fully in chapter 2, but already in chapter 1 the locust invasion is being interpreted through the lens of covenant judgment: the land is described as my land, which is the LORD's possessive claim on the territory that the invasion has stripped.

Verse 8 introduces the most emotionally resonant comparison in the section: lament like a young woman wearing sackcloth for the husband of her youth. The virgin betrothed and then bereaved before the marriage is consummated — mourning for a relationship whose fullness she never experienced — is the image of the most complete form of grief available in the ancient Near Eastern emotional imagination. The lamentation Joel is calling for is this intense, this personal, this devastating. It is not the polite mourning of a community that has suffered an inconvenience; it is the grief of the one whose entire future has been taken from them at the moment of its beginning.

The theological center of this section is verse 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. The physical devastation of the agricultural crisis has become a liturgical crisis: the temple worship requires grain and wine for the offerings, and the locust has consumed the grain and dried up the vine. The priests can no longer offer what the covenant worship requires. The house of the LORD is not merely impoverished in a material sense; it is liturgically disabled. And Joel makes this the explicit

theological significance of the disaster: the locust has not merely taken the harvest; it has interrupted the covenant worship that the harvest was meant to sustain.

Plain American English

Wake up, you drunkards — weep! Wail, all you wine drinkers, because the new wine has been taken right out of your mouths. A powerful nation without number has invaded my land. Its teeth are like the teeth of a lion, its fangs like those of a great lion. It has stripped my grapevines bare and splintered my fig trees — it has peeled the bark and thrown the branches aside, leaving them white. Weep like a young woman dressed in burlap who is grieving for the husband she married in her youth. There is no grain or wine for the offerings in the LORD's house. The priests — the LORD's ministers — are in mourning. The fields are ruined, the land dries up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine has dried up, and the olive oil fails. Farmers are devastated, vine growers are wailing — weeping over the wheat and the barley because the harvest of the field is ruined. The grapevines have dried up and fig trees have shriveled — the pomegranates, palms, and apple trees, every tree in the field is withered. And joy has shriveled up from the human heart.

Key Observations

“Awake, ye drunkards, and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the new wine; for it is cut off from your mouth”: This signifies **The Pastoral Strategy of Starting Where Each Group Feels the Loss Most Immediately Is the Model for the Call to Lamentation That Meets People in the Specific Form of Their Grief Rather Than in an Abstract General Mourning.**

Joel begins the call to corporate lamentation not with the priests or the elders but with the drunkards and the wine drinkers — the people who will feel the loss of the new wine most acutely and most immediately. This is deliberate pastoral strategy, not social commentary. The path to genuine communal lamentation runs through the specific, concrete, felt losses of each group in the community. The drunkard who has been cut off from the wine can be brought to the genuine grief that Joel is calling for more readily than the person who is being called to grieve abstractly on behalf of the community's agricultural loss. Starting with the most viscerally felt impact of each group is the pastoral wisdom of the chapter: lamentation is mobilized through the specific, not the general.

“For a nation is come up upon my land, strong, and without number, whose teeth are as the teeth of a lion”: This signifies **The Military Imagery Applied to the Locust Invasion Interprets the Agricultural Disaster as a Covenant Judgment — the Nation Without Number Is the Instrument of the Divine Claim on the Land That the My Establishes.**

The description of the locust as a nation, strong and without number, with the teeth of a lion is the first move in the theological interpretation of the disaster that will become explicit when Joel introduces the day of the LORD in verse 15. The locusts are not merely an unfortunate natural phenomenon; they are the instrument of a military-scale judgment, arriving on my land — the possessive claiming of the land for the LORD whose covenant gave it to the people on specific conditions. The military imagery establishes that what is happening is a matter of covenant consequence, not merely natural calamity, and the intensity of the devastation — the lion's teeth,

the bare white branches — is the measure of the severity of the covenant condition being addressed.

“Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth”: This signifies **The Most Emotionally Resonant Comparison in the Section Establishes the Depth of Grief That Joel Is Calling For — Not the Polite Mourning of Inconvenience but the Devastating Loss of the One Whose Future Has Been Taken at the Moment of Its Beginning.**

The comparison of the required lamentation to the grief of the young woman mourning the husband of her youth is the most emotionally demanding image in the passage. The betrothed virgin who has lost her husband before the marriage has been consummated mourns not merely a relationship but an entire future — the whole anticipated life with the person who was to be the center of it. Her grief is disproportionate to what she has actually experienced together with the lost husband, because what she is mourning is not past shared experience but lost anticipated future. Joel is calling the community to a grief of this quality: not the manageable sadness of a difficult season, but the devastating grief of a future that has been taken before it could be fully experienced.

“The meat offering and the drink offering is cut off from the house of the LORD; the priests, the LORD’s ministers, mourn”: This signifies **The Liturgical Significance of the Agricultural Disaster Is the Theological Center of the Section — the Locust Has Not Merely Taken the Harvest but Has Disabled the Covenant Worship That the Harvest Was Meant to Sustain.**

Verse 9 is the verse that most clearly establishes the theological frame for the entire disaster: the locust has not merely impoverished the farmers; it has interrupted the house of the LORD. The grain offering and the drink offering that the covenant worship required have been consumed before they could be offered, leaving the priests without the means of their sacred service. This is the theological escalation that the rest of the chapter will develop: the locust invasion is not a natural disaster with spiritual implications; it is a spiritual crisis with natural manifestations. The house of the LORD mourning because the offering is cut off is the most explicit statement in the chapter that the agricultural and the liturgical, the physical and the covenantal, are inseparable in Joel’s theological vision.

“Because joy is withered away from the sons of men”: This signifies **The Final Line of the Lamentation Section Identifies the Deepest Loss — Not the Specific Agricultural Products That Have Dried Up but the Joy That the Abundance Was Meant to Express and Sustain.**

The closing line of verse 12 — joy is withered away from the sons of men — is the most theologically concentrated statement of loss in the section. Joel has listed the specific agricultural losses one by one: the vine, the fig tree, the grain, the new wine, the oil, the wheat, the barley, the pomegranate, the palm, the apple, all the trees of the field. But the culminating loss is not another item on the list; it is the joy that the entire list of abundance was meant to express and sustain. The harvest was not merely the source of physical nourishment but the occasion of the communal celebration that the feast calendar organized — and when the harvest is consumed by the locusts, the joy that the harvest was meant to generate has withered along with it. The ultimate loss is the affective one: the community has been stripped not just of its food but of its capacity for celebration.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Practice the Pastoral Wisdom of Starting Where People Feel the Loss Most Concretely When Calling Them to Genuine Lamentation: Joel's strategy of addressing the drunkards before the priests, the vinedressers before the elders, is the pastoral wisdom of meeting people in the specific, concrete, felt dimension of their loss before calling them to the general communal mourning. Contemporary pastoral care and preaching that calls communities to abstract corporate lament without first attending to where each person or group is specifically feeling the loss has skipped the step that Joel models: the path to genuine communal grief runs through the honest, specific acknowledgment of each person's actual experience of the disaster. Meet people where the loss is concrete before calling them to where the loss is theological.

2. Read Natural and National Disasters Through the Theological Lens That Joel Applies — as Instruments of the Divine Claim on the Created Order Rather Than as Random Natural Events with No Theological Meaning: Joel's identification of the locusts as a nation and his use of the my land claim establish the pattern for the theological reading of natural disasters that the prophetic tradition consistently applies. The covenant community that reads its crises exclusively through the lens of natural cause and effect, without asking the theological question of what the divine claim on the created order means in the context of this specific disaster, has lost the interpretive framework that Joel models. This does not mean that every flood or drought is a specific judgment for a specific sin; it means that the covenant community should always be asking the theological question that Joel makes explicit: what is the LORD saying through this, and what response does it call for?

3. Take the Liturgical Disability of the Disaster as the Most Serious Form of Loss — When the Community's Capacity for the Covenant Worship Is Compromised, the Agricultural and the Spiritual Have Converged in a Crisis That Requires the Full Pastoral Response Joel Models: The cutting off of the grain offering and the drink offering is the specific form of the disaster that moves Joel from agricultural observation to prophetic proclamation. When the physical impoverishment of the community has reached the point where the community's capacity to maintain the covenantal relationship through the prescribed worship has been compromised, the crisis has moved from the material to the spiritual in the most direct possible way. Communities today that find their financial crises, their cultural marginalization, or their institutional decline compromising their capacity for the forms of worship and community that sustain their covenant life should read their situation through this lens: the liturgical disability is the theological signal that the crisis has reached its deepest dimension.

How This Relates to Today

The because joy is withered away from the sons of men of verse 12 is one of the most widely applicable lines in the chapter to contemporary experience, because it names what all the specific losses of the chapter ultimately produce: the loss of the capacity for joy. The community that has been stripped of the abundance that organized its celebration — not merely the material abundance but the relational, institutional, spiritual, and cultural abundance that made the celebration possible — is the community that has experienced the withering of joy. Contemporary churches, denominations, and Christian communities that are navigating institutional decline, cultural marginalization, theological confusion, and relational fracture are experiencing the contemporary

form of what verse 12 describes: the specific losses have accumulated into the general loss of the capacity for the celebration that the community was meant to practice.

The image of the young woman mourning the husband of her youth is also one of the most emotionally resonant images in the chapter for communities that have experienced what might be called anticipatory grief — the loss not of what was experienced together but of what was hoped for and expected and was taken before it could be fully realized. Churches that have seen their communities fragment before they fully formed, relationships that ended before they could deepen, ministries that were shut down before they could bear their intended fruit — these are the contemporary experiences of the grief that verse 8 describes. Joel is giving the community permission to mourn what was lost before it could be fully possessed, not only what was taken from a mature and fully experienced life.

Key Lesson: **The call to lamentation in verses 5–12 moves through four groups — the drunkards, the nation, the priests, the farmers — each addressed in the specific dimension of their loss, with the theological center of the section being the liturgical disability of verse 9 — the grain offering and drink offering cut off from the house of the LORD — and the most concentrated statement of the ultimate loss being the final line: because joy is withered away from the sons of men; the community that has been stripped of its abundance has been stripped of its capacity for the celebration that the covenant life was designed to produce.**

Joel 1:13–20

The Day of the LORD Is Near: The Call to Solemn Assembly, the Theological Interpretation of the Disaster, and the Cry to God

(13) Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests:

howl, ye ministers of the altar:

come, lie all night in sackcloth,

ye ministers of my God:

for the meat offering and the drink offering

is withholden from the house of your God.

(14) Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly,

gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land

into the house of the LORD your God,

and cry unto the LORD.

(15) Alas for the day!

for the day of the LORD is at hand,

and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come.

(16) Is not the meat cut off before our eyes,

yea, joy and gladness from the house of our God?

(17) The seed is rotten under their clods,

*the garner are laid desolate,
the barns are broken down;
for the corn is withered.
(18) How do the beasts groan!
the herds of cattle are perplexed,
because they have no pasture;
yea, the flocks of sheep are made desolate.
(19) O LORD, to thee will I cry:
for the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness,
and the flame hath burned all the trees of the field.
(20) The beasts of the field cry also unto thee:
for the rivers of waters are dried up,
and the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness.*

The Context

The call to the priests in verse 13 is the most urgent directive in the chapter. The priests have been mourning since verse 9 — the passive mourning of people who have lost the means of their service. Now Joel directs them to an active response: gird yourselves with sackcloth and lament, pass the night in sackcloth, call the solemn assembly. The passive grief of the mourning priests is insufficient for what the situation requires; they need to be the active leaders of the community's response, calling the people to the fast and the assembly rather than simply lamenting their own disabled service.

The call to the solemn assembly in verse 14 is one of the most important pastoral instructions in the chapter. Sanctify 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. The fast, the assembly, the gathering of both the elders (the leadership) and all the inhabitants (the whole community), and the crying out — these are the specific, public, corporate religious acts that the situation requires. This is not private spiritual reflection or individual repentance, though those are appropriate responses. It is the full communal gathering of the covenant people in the house of their God, engaging together in the public mourning that the covenant relationship makes available as a resource for exactly this kind of crisis.

Verse 15 introduces the most theologically significant element of the chapter: alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it comes. The day of the LORD (yom Yahweh) is the great eschatological concept of the prophetic tradition — the day of the LORD's decisive intervention in history, which the earlier prophets (Amos, Isaiah, Zephaniah) had announced as a day of judgment that Israel should dread rather than anticipate. Joel introduces this concept by rooting it in the present crisis: the locust invasion is not merely itself but a manifestation of the day of the LORD, a foretaste of the more comprehensive divine intervention that is coming. The disaster that has already happened is the beginning of something larger.

The description of verses 16–18 widens the scope of the devastation: is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed rots in the clods, the storehouses are desolate, the barns are broken down; the herds of cattle are bewildered because there is no pasture, the flocks of sheep are impoverished. The disaster has not confined itself to the agricultural sector; it has extended to the animals that depend on the same agricultural abundance. The whole living community — human and animal — is caught in the failure of the land.

The chapter closes with one of the most moving moments in the prophetic literature: the prophet himself crying out (verse 19) and the animals of the field crying out alongside him (verse 20). O LORD, to you I cry, for fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field. Even the beasts of the field pant for you; the water brooks have dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. The cosmic scope of the disaster — extending from the human community to the animal creation, from the agricultural fields to the wilderness pastures, from the rivers to the trees — is the backdrop against which the cry to the LORD ascends. The entirety of the created order is caught in the disaster, and the entirety of the created order joins the cry.

Plain American English

Dress in burlap and weep, you priests! Wail, you ministers of the altar! Come, spend the night wearing burlap, you ministers of my God, because the grain and wine offerings are withheld from the temple of your God. Announce a time of fasting; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the people of the land to the house of the LORD your God and cry out to him. What a terrible day! The day of the LORD is near, coming like destruction sent from the Almighty. Our food is taken away right in front of our eyes — joy and gladness are gone from the house of our God. The seeds are shriveled under their husks; the grain storage buildings are empty; the barns are torn down because the grain has dried up. How the animals moan! The herds of cattle wander confused because there is no pasture; even the flocks of sheep suffer. To you, LORD, I call! The fire has burned up the pastures in the wilderness, and flames have scorched all the trees in the field. Even the wild animals pant and look to you, because the water sources have dried up and fire has burned up the pastures in the wilderness.

Key Observations

“Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD”: This signifies **The Corporate Religious Response Is Specific, Public, and Communally Comprehensive — It Is Not Private Spiritual Reflection but the Full Gathering of the Covenant People in Their Corporate Assembly Before Their God.**

The call to the solemn assembly is the most important pastoral instruction in the closing section and one of the most practically applicable verses in the chapter. The four specific acts — sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the leaders and all the people, cry out to the LORD — constitute the full corporate response that the disaster requires. Each element is significant: the fast marks the seriousness of the occasion and the community’s willingness to interrupt the ordinary

rhythms of life; the solemn assembly gathers the people in a specific public event; the gathering of both the elders (leadership) and all the inhabitants (the whole community) ensures that the response is comprehensive rather than restricted to the religious professionals; and the crying out to the LORD is the specific, directed, purposeful prayer that brings the communal gathering to its proper conclusion. This is the template for the corporate response to national and communal crisis that the covenant tradition makes available.

“For the day of the LORD is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come”: This signifies **The Theological Interpretation of the Locust Invasion as the Nearness of the Day of the LORD Is the Most Significant Conceptual Move in the Chapter — the Present Disaster Is Not Merely Itself but the Foretaste and Beginning of Something Larger.**

The introduction of the day of the LORD in verse 15 is the moment at which Joel transforms the chapter from a pastoral response to an agricultural crisis into a theological proclamation about the character of the God who is speaking through the crisis. The day of the LORD in the prophetic tradition is the day of the divine intervention in history — the day when the God who is LORD over all things makes His lordship unmistakably visible in the affairs of nations and peoples. Joel’s claim that the locust invasion is the nearness of that day establishes the agricultural disaster as eschatological sign: what is happening in the fields and vineyards and storehouses of Judah is the beginning of what the day of the LORD means. The disaster is not the day of the LORD itself but its harbinger, its foretaste, the form in which its approach is being made visible.

“O LORD, to thee will I cry: for the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and the flame hath burned all the trees of the field”: This signifies **The Prophet’s Own Cry Is the Model of the Corporate Lamentation He Has Been Calling the Community to — He Does Not Call Others to Cry Without Crying Himself.**

The O LORD, to you I cry of verse 19 is the moment when the prophet steps out from behind the prophetic commission and cries out in his own voice. Joel has been calling the drunkards, the nation, the priests, the farmers to lament, and now he himself laments. The pastoral model is the one who calls others to the grief that he himself is practicing — not the detached professional who prescribes mourning for others while maintaining a clinical distance from it himself. The prophet’s own cry is the first instance of what he is calling the community to produce: the direct, first-person, urgent address to the LORD that names the specific disaster and brings it into the presence of the God who alone can address it.

“The beasts of the field cry also unto thee: for the rivers of waters are dried up, and the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness”: This signifies **The Extension of the Lamentation to the Animal Creation Is the Most Striking Statement of the Cosmic Scope of the Disaster — the Entirety of the Created Order Caught in the Failure of the Land Joins the Cry That Ascends to the LORD.**

The panting of the beasts of the field toward the LORD, the crying out of the animal creation alongside the human prophet, is one of the most unusual images in the chapter and one of the most theologically rich. The animals do not understand the theological significance of what is happening; they simply experience the failing of the water and the burning of the pasture, and in their distress they do the only thing available to the creature in extremis: they cry out. Joel uses this image to extend the scope of the lamentation from the human community to the animal creation, establishing that the disaster is truly cosmic — not confined to the agricultural economy

of the human community but affecting the whole living world of the land. And the animals' cry is, in Joel's rendering, a form of prayer: the creature in extremis cries to its Creator, even without theological understanding of what it is doing.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Respond to Community and National Crisis with the Full Corporate Religious Response That the Solemn Assembly Models Rather Than with Purely Private or Individualistic Spirituality:

The call to sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants, and cry out to the LORD is the template for the communal religious response to communal disaster. Contemporary Christian communities that respond to national or communal crisis exclusively through private prayer, individual spiritual reflection, or the therapeutic management of anxiety have not yet reached the full corporate response that Joel models. The gathering of the whole community — leadership and people together — in a specific public act of communal prayer and fasting, with the specific purpose of crying out to the LORD in the house of God, is the response that the covenant tradition makes available and that the scale of genuine communal crisis requires.

2. Interpret the Nearness of the Day of the LORD in Every Season of Genuine Crisis as the Theological Frame That Makes the Crisis Intelligible and the Call to Corporate Repentance Urgent:

The introduction of the day of the LORD in verse 15 is the hermeneutical move that transforms a local agricultural disaster into a theological proclamation about the character of the God who is Lord over history. Contemporary communities of faith that read their crises — ecological, social, institutional, relational — exclusively through the lens of natural cause and effect have not yet applied the interpretive frame that Joel applies to the locust invasion. Every genuine crisis in the experience of the covenant community is, in some sense, the nearness of the day of the LORD — the moment when the divine claim on the created order and on the covenant people is being made visible in a way that demands the response of solemn assembly and crying out to the LORD.

3. Lead the Community's Lamentation from Within It Rather Than from Above It — the Prophet Who Calls Others to Cry Cries Himself:

Joel's O LORD, to you I cry of verse 19 is the model of pastoral leadership in lamentation: the leader who calls the community to the grief that the situation requires must be found practicing that grief himself. The pastoral leader who prescribes communal mourning from a position of emotional detachment has not understood what Joel models. The prophet who called the drunkards and the priests and the farmers to weep is himself weeping. The community that observes its leaders genuinely entering the lamentation that the situation requires is more likely to follow them into it than the community that is being called to emotions that the leaders are not themselves exhibiting.

How This Relates to Today

The day of the LORD introduced in verse 15 is one of the most significant theological concepts in the prophetic tradition, and its introduction in the context of an agricultural disaster that had already happened establishes the interpretive pattern for reading every subsequent disaster: the judgment that has already begun points toward the more comprehensive judgment that is coming. The New

Testament reading of Joel is dominated by Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, where he identifies the outpouring of the Spirit with the prophecy of Joel 2 — but the first chapter's theology of the day of the LORD provides the context in which the Spirit's outpouring in chapter 2 makes sense as the divine response to the crisis that chapter 1 describes.

The beasts crying out to the LORD in verse 20 also anticipates Paul's image of the whole creation groaning in Romans 8 — the created order waiting with eager longing for the redemption that the day of the LORD will bring. Joel's animals panting for the dried-up water are the Old Testament version of the groaning creation, and the connection between the two passages establishes that the biblical theology of creation includes the non-human created order as a participant in the experience of the disaster and in the cry for the restoration.

Key Lesson: **The closing section of the chapter calls the priests to active leadership of the community's response through the solemn assembly, introduces the day of the LORD as the theological frame that makes the locust invasion eschatologically significant rather than merely historically catastrophic, and closes with the prophet's own cry and the animals' panting cry together establishing the cosmic scope of the disaster and the full-creation scope of the lamentation that ascends from it toward the LORD who alone can address it.**

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We close Joel chapter 1 having been called to the lamentation that this chapter makes available as the proper response to the unprecedented disaster that Joel is addressing. We have heard the call to the drunkards and the priests and the farmers and the whole community. We have been confronted with the theological center of the chapter: the grain offering and the drink offering cut off from the house of the LORD, the liturgical disability that is the deepest form of the agricultural disaster. We have received the introduction of the day of the LORD as the eschatological frame that makes the locust invasion not merely a local crisis but a sign of something larger. And we have heard the prophet cry out and the beasts pant and the whole creation groan toward the God who is the only possible source of the restoration that the second and third chapters will promise.

Lord, form in us the capacity for honest lamentation that this chapter models. Not the managed grief that maintains the appearance of composure while the disaster continues, but the sackcloth and the all-night vigil and the solemn assembly and the crying out that acknowledges the full severity of what has happened and brings it into Your presence without the diplomatic softening that would make the lamentation more comfortable but less honest. Let us gird on sackcloth. Let us lie all night in the posture of mourning. Let us sanctify the fast and call the assembly and gather the elders and all the inhabitants and cry unto the LORD.

And let the day of the LORD be the theological frame within which we read the disasters of our own time — not with the anxiety of those who have no hope, but with the sobriety of those who understand that the crises of the present age are the nearness of the day that You have appointed for the decisive vindication of Your purposes. Hear the cry of Your people. Hear the cry of the creation that groans with us. And prepare us for the restoration that the second chapter will promise when the lamentation of the first chapter has been honestly and fully expressed.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God Alone