

Lesson 4

Joel 1:1, Continued

Joel 1:1 – The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:

Last week we discussed the use of God's name in verse 1, and we saw how the use of that name in this opening verse would have conveyed some very important messages to any faithful Jew who was hearing it or reading it.

The first message that name conveys involves the redemption by God of his people, and we discussed that message last week.

But there is a second message. There is still something more that is revealed by the use in verse 1 of the name of God – God's name tells us something about God's **retribution**.

We see examples of that use of God's name elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 16:20–21 [ASV] – Shall a man make unto himself gods, which yet are no gods? Therefore, behold, I will cause them to know, this once will I cause them to know **my hand and my might**; and they shall know that **my name is Jehovah**.

Ezekiel 25:7 [ASV] – Therefore, behold, I have stretched out my hand upon thee, and will deliver thee for a spoil to the nations; and I will cut thee off from the peoples, and I will cause thee to perish out of the countries: I will destroy thee; and thou shalt know that **I am Jehovah.**

Likewise, when we see God's name in Joel 1:1, we are also given a glimpse of God's retribution that will be revealed more fully later in this book. We will soon see God's judgment of the nations and all who are opposed to him. "Thou shalt know that I am Jehovah."

And so, we see both redemption and retribution in the opening words of the first verse of Joel.

And the remainder of the book of Joel? What will we see there? We will see the same thing. We will see both redemption and retribution. We will see the special relationship between God and his people, and we will see the terrible judgment that awaits all others.

But we are not yet through with verse 1: "The word of the LORD **that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel.**"

The word of the Lord in the book of Joel came to a person named Joel, who was the son of someone named Pethuel.

All that we know about Joel comes from that verse along with whatever personal information we can uncover about him by reading between the lines in the text of his book. (For example, I think we will see later that Joel was most likely **not** a priest.)

If you search the Bible for the name “Joel” you will find 21 matches dating from the 10th century BC to the 5th century, but only two of those verses are talking about the Joel of interest here – Joel 1:1 and Acts 2:16.

But we can learn something from all of those other people named Joel – we can learn that Joel appears to have been a common name over a wide range of time – and, in fact, Joel is still a common name today.

Joel’s introduction of himself is very brief, which likely suggests that Joel was well-known to those who first received his message. He did not need to give them his credentials, but he only needed to give his father’s name to distinguish himself from any others who shared the name Joel.

In Hebrew, the name “Joel” means *Jehovah is God*. It is a reverse form of the name “Elijah,” which means *God is Jehovah*.

Unlike Joel, Pethuel does not seem to have been a common name. This is the only place in the Bible where we find that name. Some suggest that it means “persuaded by God.”

Some commentaries try to find the themes of Joel hidden somewhere in the meaning of the names of its author and his father, but to me that seems a bit like putting the cart before the horse. Joel and his father had these names long before Joel received this word from God and long before the events described in this book.

If we are looking for themes of Joel in a name from verse 1, I think a better name to choose is the name of God rather than the name of Joel or the name of his father. As we saw, it is the name of God that shows us the great themes of this book – redemption, retribution, and the Day of Jehovah.

And one final point about the name of God the Father in verse 1 – that same name also applies to God the Son. We will see that great truth later in this book of Joel.

Joel 2:32 [ASV] – And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of **Jehovah** shall be delivered.

Romans 10:9, 13 [ASV] – Because if thou shalt confess with thy mouth **Jesus as Lord**, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: ... for, Whosoever shall call upon the name of the **Lord** shall be saved.

What the Old Testament tells us about Jehovah is attributed to Jesus in the New Testament.

One more example: What did Isaiah prophecy?

Isaiah 40:3 [ASV] – The voice of one that crieth, Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of **Jehovah**; make level in the desert a highway for our God.

And what did John say?

Matthew 3:3 – For **this is he** that was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the **Lord**, Make his paths straight.

When Isaiah prophesied about Jehovah, Isaiah was prophesying about Christ. "This is he," John said.

And which religious group today denies that great truth? Ironically, it is a group that has named itself "Jehovah's Witnesses." When we compare their false teaching about God with what we read in the word of God, we can quickly see that they are not Jehovah's witnesses, but rather are false witnesses.

Jesus is Lord. Jesus is God. Jesus is Jehovah.

And so if we are looking for Jesus in the book of Joel, we have found him in the very first verse!

Joel 1:2

Joel 1:2 – 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?

"Okay – I have an announcement to make. I have something very important to say to the whole congregation. **Now, hear this, you elders!**"

If I had started my first class that way, there might not have been a second class! But that is precisely how Joel begins in verse 2! Joel did not lack for courage or boldness!

But there is a reason why Joel could be so bold in verse 2, and that reason is in verse 1 – what Joel was boldly proclaiming was the word of God. And we should all be

bold whenever we are proclaiming the word of God. That is never a time to shrink back or be timid.

2 Timothy 1:7-8 – For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord..

I think we can see that spirit of power in Joel as soon as he opens his mouth in verse 2!

“Hear this, you elders.”

With that statement, we meet the first of four groups that Joel will address in this first chapter. And it is a strange assortment – elders in verse 2, drunkards in verse 5, farmers in verse 11, and priests in verse 13.

Why those groups? What do elders, drunkards, farmers, and priests have in common? Let’s save that question until we get to the final group in verse 13 – the priests. Maybe we can figure it out along the way.

For now, let’s ask a different question – who are these elders? Does their description here as “elders” mean that they are leaders, or does it just mean that they are old?

Let’s keep in mind that we are studying this book of Joel under three possible dating scenarios – the early view, the pre-exile view, and the post-exile view. We discussed all of that in our introduction, and you can see the three options on the Handout for Lesson 1.

Under the post-exile view, there was no Jewish king reigning in Jerusalem. Instead, the king over Palestine

was a Persian king. So, those who hold the post-exile view about when Joel was written argue that verse 2 is evidence in their favor. They say that the leaders at this time were the elders because there was no king.

But does that make sense with what we see here in verse 2? Are these elders presented to us as leaders? I don't think so.

First, as we said, Joel's rather brusque command to these elders in verse 2 might suggest they were not the ones in charge. Verse 2 does not seem to be ringing with respect.

But second, look at what Joel asks these elders in verse 2 – "Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?" That is not a question you address to leaders – that is a question you address to old people. That is a question for the old-timers in the group.

I think Joel calls out these elders, not because they are leaders, but because they are old. If these elders can't remember such an event in their lifetime, then it has truly been a long time since such a thing has happened before.

Another thing we should note about verse 2 is that the elders are not the only ones addressed – Joel also says, "Give ear, all inhabitants of the land!"

Why are they included? I think the answer is simple – the question in verse 2 is for the elders, but Joel wants everyone in the land to listen to their answer.

I think the elders are told to listen to the question from God, and the inhabitants of the land are told to listen to the answer from those elders.

And what was the answer? We know the answer. The question is rhetorical. God would not have asked that question had the answer been anything other than “never.” Such a thing had never happened in living memory.

Finally, let’s not leave verse 2 until we have noticed the first word in that verse – “Hear!” That is the same Hebrew word *shema* that begins the famous passage from Deuteronomy 6 that faithful Jews recited every day.

Deuteronomy 6:4 – Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Or, as we read in the ASV:

Deuteronomy 6:4 – Hear, O Israel: **Jehovah** our God is one **Jehovah**.

Just that single opening word “Hear” in verse 2 is itself a reminder of the special relationship between God and his people that we also saw in verse 1.

Joel 1:3

Joel 1:3 – Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.

Verse 1 reminded us about the special relationship between God and his people. Verse 2 also reminded us about the special relationship between God and his people. And verse 3? The reminders continue!

We just looked at the first verse in the daily *Shema* recitation – let's read some more of it.

Deuteronomy 6:4-7 – Hear, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah: and thou shalt love Jehovah thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; **and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children**, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Hear this – and tell your children! That is what we read in Deuteronomy 6, and that is the first thing we read in Joel 1.

With this language, God is reminding the people about their relationship with him using something that they recited every day. Hear this, and tell your children!

Had they become guilty of just saying the words without thinking about the words? Perhaps.

We also see similar language in another well-known Old Testament passage.

Exodus 12:24-27 – You shall observe this rite as a statute for you **and for your sons** forever. And when you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. **And when your children say to you**, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed their heads and worshiped.

Had the people forgotten what God had done for them?
Had the people failed to teach their children about it?
Perhaps.

And that may be why the thing they are told to hear and to tell their children about in Joel 1 has changed dramatically from what we read in Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 6. Rather than hearing about who God is and what God had done **for them**, they will soon be hearing about who God is and what God had done **to them**.

But we are not finished looking at parallels between Joel 1:2 and the rest of the Bible. There is another important one that we must consider.

Acts 2:38-39 – And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you **and for your children** and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

We already know that there is a connection between Joel 2 and Acts 2, but I think there is also a connection (or at least a similarity) between Joel 1 and Acts 2.

Yes, God was dealing with a specific generation in Joel 1 – but his message in Joel 1 was for more than just that specific generation. “Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.”

Likewise, there was a promise in Acts 2 that was a promise for more than just the specific generation that heard it in Acts 2. “For the promise is for you **and for your children**.”

We will have more to say about that when we get to Joel 2, but for now I think there is an important lesson in these verses for us today. All throughout the Bible we find God's concern that his word be passed on to future generations. In Exodus 12, the children asked questions, and the parents were told how to answer them.

There are no more important Bible classes than the classes in which we teach our children about the word of God. If our children have questions about the Bible, and if we are not answering those questions, then that is a terrible failure on our part. If their questions remain unanswered, they will eventually quit asking them. We need to teach our children about God and about the word of God. Nothing we do here is more important when it comes to answering Jesus' question in Luke 18:8 – "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

But, back to verse 3, what is the message here? What is it that the people are to tell all future generations so that they never forget it?

It is a great locust invasion!

Yes, that may seem like a surprising thing to pass down to all generations, but let's take a close look at it, starting with verse 4.

Joel 1:4

Joel 1:4 – What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.

Now, before we talk about what verse 4 **says**, let's first talk about how verse 4 **sounds**.

Even in the English translation, there is a cadence or a rhythm to how the verse sounds when we read it out loud.

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.

We can also see an unusual parallel structure in how those phrases are arranged.

What A left, B has eaten.
What B left, C has eaten.
What C left, D has eaten.

And verse 4 is not the only verse in Joel that has some of these unusual characteristics. In fact, in the book of Joel, such characteristics are not really that unusual at all. The unusual verses in Joel are the verses **without** such characteristics.

If you are the using the ESV translation, notice how verse 4 is typeset. It is written, not as prose would be typeset, but rather as we might expect to see a poem or the lyrics of a song typeset.

If you look back at verse 1, you will see that it is typeset as ordinary prose. But starting with verse 2, that changes. The ESV begins typesetting the text as poetry.

And notice that poetic typesetting continues all throughout the remainder of chapter 1, and almost to the end of chapter 2. But starting with Joel 2:30 it switches back to prose, continuing through Joel 3:8, where it switches back to poetry. What is going on?

The first thing to note about the difference between Hebrew prose and Hebrew poetry is that it is usually not a clear cut division. For example, not everyone agrees that the poetry in Joel ends in Joel 2:29 and picks up again in Joel 3:9. The typesetting that we see in the ESV was a decision made by the translators.

The second thing to note is that this different typesetting is, for the most part, a modern phenomenon. In the ancient manuscripts, the text is all shown in the same way except for Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and a few special passages such as the Song of Moses and the Song of Deborah.

For example, in the KJV and the ASV, the text of Joel is all shown as prose. The RSV of 1952 was the first major English translation to show it otherwise – as we also see in the ESV. Here is how one commentary describes the situation:

“No definitive answer can be given on this complicated question, and nothing crucial is at stake. Hebrew poetry is usually recognized by parallelism, as units of thought are put side by side. But there is no strict delineation between poetry and prose, and sometimes it is difficult to determine if poetic parallelism is present or not.”

But I think it is helpful for a translation to show the text differently as we see in the ESV. Why? Because the text is different. We can see that difference easily in the English when it comes to verse 4, but that difference is more difficult to see elsewhere in the English translations, and so the special typesetting can help.

Perhaps we should pause for a moment and discuss what we mean by the word “poetry” when it comes to the Bible.

If we today were going to write poetry in English about Joel, it might be something like this:

The prophet Joel saw locusts galore,
“Repent!” he cried, “or there will be more!”

But that is not what Hebrew poetry is like. When we think of poetry we usually think first of rhyme, but rhyme is very rarely found in Hebrew poetry.

Instead, the primary characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism in which two or more lines of the poem contain corresponding elements. Joel 1:4 is a perfect example of Hebrew parallelism, but we could find many other examples.

But that is not the only characteristics of Hebrew poetry. We also see many other characteristics as shown by the examples on the Handout for Lesson 4 (which is **not** an exhaustive list).

Yes, rhyming is on the list, but rhymes are very rarely found in Hebrew poetry. Why? Most likely because of the different vocabularies.

There are between 600,000 and 1 million English words, and even then we have words such as “orange” and “month” that lack an exact rhyme. Modern Hebrew has fewer than 100,000 words, and ancient Hebrew had fewer than 10,000 words. That makes it very difficult to come up with rhymes!

And so Hebrew poetry is not based on rhymes, but instead is largely based on parallel statements. And, again, you can see some examples of that on the handout – with Joel 1:4 being one of the best examples.

Unlike prose, poetry is usually figurative and indirect. Poetry also often uses a meter or a cadence that is different from ordinary speech.

What can we say about the use of such language in the Bible?

The first thing we can say about poetry is that God must really like it! Why? Because, by most estimates, about a third of the Old Testament uses Hebrew poetry.

But why? Why does God so often speak to us that way?

Isaiah may answer that question.

Isaiah 55:8-9 – For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Perhaps Hebrew poetry is used so often because it can provide a perfect bridge between the thoughts of God and the thoughts of man – just as Jesus so often spoke to us with parables.

- Poetry grabs our attention.
- Poetry makes us think.
- Poetry is easy to remember.
- Poetry can convey multiple thoughts and multiple meanings.
- Poetry is beautiful.
- Poetry is forceful.
- Poetry can show us something new about that which we see as familiar and well-known.
- Poetry is different.

And perhaps that final characteristic of poetry is the most important – **poetry is different**. It uses different words in different arrangements with a different cadence. Poetry is not ordinary everyday language.

And, again, Joel 1:4 is a great example. That verse causes us to sit up and take notice. After reading it, we can easily picture in our minds the locusts as they cut and swarm and hop and destroy.

Poetry is never the everyday language of the people. Not in the Bible and not anywhere else. Poetry always uses some sort of specialized language. If it didn't, it wouldn't be poetry.

We often hear from the modern translators of the Bible how we should translate the Bible into the ordinary language of the people. But much of the Bible was never written in the ordinary everyday language of the people, not even the original language received by the original recipients.

As the famous poet Thomas Gray said, "the language of the age is never the language of poetry." Poetry always has what Tolkien described as an "arresting strangeness." Otherwise it would not be poetry.

And, once again, Joel 1:4 is a great example. No one ordinarily talks that way! No one has ever ordinarily talked that way! That is not ordinary language. It is Hebrew poetry, and much of the Old Testament uses it.

It is different, and we need to recognize those differences if we want to understand it.

Let's look at an example of how we can go wrong.

Psalms 38:1 – O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath!

That verse uses the different words "rebuke" and "discipline," and that verse uses the different words "anger" and "wrath." What are we to do with those differences?

If I were to put my lawyer hat on for a moment, my answer would be simple – if you use two different words, you

must have intended them to mean two different things. That is Contracts 101. Lawyers don't like synonyms!

But that is not how you read Hebrew poetry. The primary characteristic of all Hebrew poetry is parallelism. It says something, and then it says it again using parallel language.

That is certainly what we see in Psalm 38:1 – “O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath!” And, of course, we see it in many other verses.

Yes, there may very well be some nuanced differences in phrases such as that, but we need to be very careful if we start driving wedges between such terms when those wedges are not supported by the text.

For example, someone might say, “God uses two different words in Psalm 38:1 – anger and wrath. Because God used two different words, they must mean two different things – otherwise God would have used only one word. Therefore, let's look at the anger of God, and then we can look at the wrath of God – and we can discuss how the anger of God is different from the wrath of God.”

If you have never heard a sermon like that, I suspect you have not been a Christian for very long!

And that sort of a study might be interesting up to a point, but I think it badly misses the boat when it comes to recognizing and interpreting Hebrew poetry. Sometimes God says the same thing in two different ways to better drive home a single point.

Modern translations such as the ESV can help us recognize such language by typesetting the language differently.

But, unfortunately, some modern translations typeset the poetry but then proceed to then effectively remove it all by stripping out all the strangeness and all the imagery! Here is how one author describes the problem:

“The translator who removes biblical metaphors to make the text easier for readers may defeat the purpose of the Holy Spirit, who chose a metaphor in the first place. Metaphors grab us and work on us and in us. They have spiritual power to transform our minds.”

And let me give a plug here for the KJV. When it comes to appreciating the Hebrew poetry in the Bible, you will never find a better English translation than the KJV. Listen to this example:

Psalms 24:1 – The **earth** is the **LORD’S**, and the **fulness thereof**; the **world**, and **they** that **dwell** **therein**.

The KJV was translated at the height of the English language. Here is how one author describes it:

Stylistically, the King James Version is the greatest English Bible translation ever produced. Its style combines simplicity and majesty as the original requires, though it inclines toward the exalted. Its rhythms are matchless.

Yes, the ESV is good for everyday use, and the ASV is good for word studies – but we should never set the KJV aside. We should always have it close by on our

shelf when we study the Bible. The KJV was the Bible of the restoration movement, and it was the Bible that the church was using when it experienced its greatest growth in modern times.

Much more could be said on this subject, but for now let's get back to the text of verse 4.

We need to look at the specific words used to describe the insects in verse 4. And, perhaps not surprisingly, there is a great deal of controversy about the meaning of these words.

Let's start by looking at some other translations.

Joel 1:4 [KJV] – 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.

Joel 1:4 [NIV] – What the **locust swarm** has left the **great locusts** have eaten; what the great locusts have left the **young locusts** have eaten; what the young locusts have left **other locusts** have eaten.

Joel 1:4 [NASB] – What the **gnawing locust** has left, the **swarming locust** has eaten; And what the swarming locust has left, the **creeping locust** has eaten; And what the creeping locust has left, the **stripping locust** has eaten.

As one commentary explains:

The precise meaning of the four Hebrew words translated "locust" in this verse is a long-standing challenge to Hebrew linguists; the problem combines etymology with entomology.

Here we see four words, but we could have seen even more. The Old Testament uses no less than ten different words for locusts and grasshoppers, and the Talmud uses twenty. (Don't worry! We aren't going to look at all of them!)

Various interpretations have been proposed for the words found in verse 4.

- First, the words may refer to different species of insects.
- Second, the words may describe subspecies of locusts or even locusts of different colors.
- Third, the terms may refer to different stages of development in the life cycle of the locust.
- Fourth, the terms may reflect regional differences in dialect as to the words used to describe the locusts.
- Fifth, the terms could refer to four different locust swarms that each hit Jerusalem.
- Sixth, the terms may be synonyms that are all used just for rhetorical effect.

I think we can quickly scratch some of these off our list.

As for different species, that is what we see in the KJV with its palmerworms and cankerworms, but that does not seem likely. The descriptions we are about to see all point to an invasion of locusts, not an invasion of worms.

As for regional differences in dialect, the focus here seems to be on Jerusalem, and so would likely not expect to see a wide variety in dialects.

As for multiple swarms, the text seems to describe a single swarm, and it is not clear what the later swarms would find to eat and destroy after the first swarm had already done its work. And even if there were multiple swarms, it is not clear why different words would be needed to describe the locusts in the different swarms.

So which of the remaining options is best?