

Lesson 13

Joel 2:2, Continued

Joel 2:2 – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.

When we ended last week, we were considering the question of whether verse 2 is talking about locusts or people.

Although we will ask that question again as we move through the opening verses of this chapter, the answer seems pretty straightforward for verse 2 – the text says that we are hearing about “people.” “Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful **people.**”

As we said last week, the Hebrew word translated “people” in verse 2 is used 11 other times in Joel, and we looked at each example last week.

Every other time that word “people” is used in Joel, it means people rather than locusts. I think the same is true right here in verse 2. I think “people” means

“people.” “There is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful **people.**”

Yes, Joel 2 has some language that sounds like an invasion of locusts, but Joel 2 opens by talking about an invasion of **people**. And so, I think the natural way to see the remainder of Joel 2 is as a description of those people – as a description of those human invaders.

And, yes, Joel 1:6 described the locusts as a “nation,” but that word is a different word than “people.” And, more importantly, I think verse 6 used that word “nation” so that we would start thinking about something else even while we were still hearing about the locusts. I think the “nation” in Joel 1:6 foreshadowed the “people” that we see here in Joel 2:2.

There is an interesting translation issue with verse 2.

The ESV translation says that this invasion is “like **blackness**” – but that English word “blackness” is the **exact opposite** of what the Hebrew text says!

Other translations of verse 2 are a much better translation of the Hebrew:

Joel 2:2 [ASV] – A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, as the **dawn** spread upon the mountains; a great people and a strong;...

Joel 2:2 [KJV] – A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the **morning** spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong;...

Joel 2:2 [NAS] – ...As the **dawn** is spread over the mountains, So there is a great and mighty people...

So we have two questions – what does that statement mean, and why does the ESV translation replace the Hebrew word for “dawn” or “morning” with the opposite word “blackness” in that statement? Let’s start with the second question.

The reason the ESV changes “dawn” to “blackness” in verse 2 is that the two words are very similar in Hebrew. In fact, we have already seen that similar word in verse 2 – it is the same word translated “darkness” at the beginning of verse 2 – “a day of **darkness.**” And, in Hebrew, that word for “darkness” is very similar to the word for “dawn.”

But that similarity still doesn’t answer our question – why would the ESV replace the Hebrew word for “dawn” with the similar Hebrew word for “blackness”? The Hebrew text in this phrase uses the word for “dawn” – it does not use the similar word for “blackness.” So why the switch in the ESV?

The answer is that the ESV translators thought that the replaced version made more sense, and so they concluded that the similar word “dawn” must have been the result of a scribal error. They concluded that the original word must have been “darkness,” but somewhere along the line some scribe mistakenly copied that word so that it became “dawn.”

As I have said, I like the ESV for the most part, but it is translations like this one that cause me to say only

for the **most** part! The ESV thinks there is a scribal error in verse 2, but there is no reason for the ESV to jump to that conclusion here.

Yes, I think that small scribal errors sometimes happened when the text was copied, but I think it was a rare occurrence given how carefully the scribes treated the text of the Bible. And I certainly don't think we should ever reach such a conclusion if the text as we have it makes sense (as we will see it does here).

And perhaps the biggest problem with what the ESV does here is that there is no footnote or any other indication that the translators have replaced a word in the text with its antonym! The only way we can know that is to look at the Hebrew text or to look at some other translations. That makes me wonder where else the ESV has done that!

So, what does the text of verse 2 mean if we use the original word "dawn"? "As the **dawn** is spread over the mountains, so there is a great and mighty people."

Well, let's think about what it looks like for dawn to break over a valley surrounded by mountains. What can we say about that? What we can say is that it is both irresistible and widespread. Nothing can stop it from happening, and it covers every part of that valley. At one moment, all you see is darkness, but then dawn breaks – and all you see is light!

And we can add to that vivid picture the fact that ancient armies usually moved into position in the early hours just before dawn so that they could attack with

the rising of the sun. That, for example, is what we see with Jericho.

Joshua 6:15-16 – On the seventh day **they rose early, at the dawn of day**, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, “Shout, for the LORD has given you the city.”

In short, there is no reason to replace “dawn” with “blackness” in verse 2, and there are many reasons not to do so.

I think verse 2 is describing a massive, terrifying human army that is showing up at the break of dawn to attack the city.

“Their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.”

That statement is hyperbole.

And how do we know that? We know that because we are told something very similar about another event involving Jerusalem – the destruction of the city in AD 70 by the Romans – and such a statement cannot *literally* be true about more than one event. They both can't be the worse thing that ever happened and ever will happen!

Here are those similar statements about the destruction in AD 70.

Daniel 12:1 – ...And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.

Matthew 24:21 – For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.

I think all of those statements are examples of hyperbole in the Bible.

And why would the Bible use hyperbole? For the same reason that we use hyperbole – for emphasis. Here, this hyperbole stresses just how terrible these events would be.

But, some might say, we should just take everything in the Bible literally. Yes, we sometimes use hyperbole ourselves, but God is not allowed to use hyperbole. If God says “their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations,” then we should just take that statement literally. Yes, God is all-powerful – but he can’t use figures of speech!

So, some would say we should take this statement literally – or, as they sometimes brag, with rigid literalism.

To which I respond – no problem! If this army is the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar, then it is certainly *literally* true that no army like that had ever been seen before or would ever be seen again. The Romans, for example, were not Babylonians, and neither Vespasian nor Titus was named Nebuchadnezzar!

To which the rigid literalist will then respond – I didn't mean we should take it **that** literally! (I guess their rigid literalism is not so rigid after all!)

And one more point on this issue – if I am a rigid literalist, and if I think that Joel 2 is about locusts, then I really have a problem here! Why? Because of what God tells us about an **earlier** locust invasion.

Exodus 10:14 – 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.**

If we approach such statements with rigid literalism, then we will have all sorts of problems!

I think the better approach is to use our common sense to recognize hyperbole when we see it. We certainly see hyperbole elsewhere in the Bible.

John 21:25 – Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Psalms 6:6 – I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping.

And we use hyperbole *millions* of times each day! Are we really going to tell God that he can't use hyperbole when it suits his purposes? That God can't use hyperbole in John 21 to stress the many other things that Jesus did? That God can't use hyperbole in Psalm 6 to stress the magnitude of David's sorrow?

I think the end of verse 2 is just telling us that this coming human invasion was going to be very, very bad – and God uses hyperbole to emphasize that fact.

And if this invasion was, in fact, the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, then we know this description is entirely accurate. That invasion was very, very bad!

2 Kings 25:1 – And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siegeworks all around it.

2 Kings 25:3 – On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land.

2 Kings 25:7 – They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon.

2 Kings 25:9–10 – And he burned the house of the LORD and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem.

Here in verse 2 we read that “their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.”

If that destruction in 587 BC is the event under discussion here in verse 2, then, while I think that description does employ some hyperbole, it doesn't employ very

much! That Babylonian invasion was a terrible event that was, in fact, historically unique in many ways!

And what would this terrible event be under the early view for when Joel was written? As we said, it would be the Assyrian invasion of Jerusalem that did not happen after the people repented and prayed to God.

I think that view has some problems here, but for now let's just say again that, while the early view is possible and better than the post-exile view, the early view is still trailing pretty far behind the pre-exile view for when the book of Joel was written.

Joel 2:3

Joel 2:3 – Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them.

We saw fire earlier in Joel 1:19–20, and there we said that it was likely a figurative description of the devastation left behind by the locusts, which we know from that 1915 *National Geographic* article looked a lot like the devastation that a fire would leave behind.

But perhaps there was another reason why that locust invasion in Joel 1 was described in terms of a fire – perhaps it was the same reason why the locusts were called a “nation” in Joel 1:6. Perhaps those terms “nation” and “fire” were used in Joel 1 to foreshadow the actual nation and the actual fire that would show up in Joel 2 with this coming human army.

And, yes, the fire here in verse 3, like the fire in Joel 1, may also be a metaphor – but this fire in verse 3 may not be a metaphor. “Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns.”

We know that ancient armies very often used fire as a weapon. Archers would dip arrows in pitch or oil, set them alight, and shoot them at enemy fortifications. Fire was also used to burn enemy supply lines or food stores. Invading armies often burned fields, crops, and cities.

And, again, if we are looking at the Babylonians, then what we see here is a perfectly accurate description of what King Nebuchadnezzar did to Jerusalem.

2 Kings 25:9 – And he burned the house of the LORD and the king’s house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down.

There is an interesting pronoun question in verse 3.

The ESV reads: “Fire devours before **them**, and behind **them** a flame burns,” but the Hebrew literally reads “before **him** (or before **it**)” and “after **him** (or after **it**).”

If the intended pronoun is “it,” then the ESV is likely correct in suggesting that the “people” in verse 2 is the intended antecedent of this pronoun in verse 3. Fire devours before the invading people, and behind the invading people a flame burns.

But what if the intended pronoun is “him?” Who then would the text have in mind?

Although King Nebuchadnezzar is a possibility, I think the much better answer is God. Fire devours before **God**, and behind **God** a flame burns.

Elsewhere we see fire going out before God to devour his opponents.

Psalm 97:2-3 – **Clouds and thick darkness** are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. **Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around.**

And the clouds and thick darkness in that Psalm reminds us of the clouds and thick darkness that we just saw in the previous verse.

Elsewhere we also see an association between fire and the day of the Lord.

Zephaniah 1:18 – Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on **the day of the wrath of the LORD**. In the **fire** of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

So, verse 3 could be describing what God did rather than what this human army did, but either way, we know that this destruction is from God because this army was sent by God.

We know that from what we read in the previous chapter.

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

And, if this army is the Babylonian army, we also know that from what we read elsewhere in the Bible.

Jeremiah 27:6 – And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, **my servant.**

King Nebuchadnezzar was God's servant! This invading army is from God!

“The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them.”

Outside of Genesis, the phrase “garden of Eden” is found only here and in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 36:35 – And they will say, ‘This land that was desolate has become like **the garden of Eden**, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.’

Back in chapter 1, we suggested that the plants and animals were mentioned in the closing verses of that chapter to show God undoing his work of creation, which is something that we also see with other days of the Lord in the Bible. (See the Handouts for Lesson 9 and Lesson 13.)

I think verse 3 confirms that we were on the right track with that suggestion.

God was, in a sense, undoing his work of creation with that terrible locust invasion, and we see that same thing even more explicitly here with this human invasion as God turns the garden of Eden back into a desolate wilderness.

And, of course, that final phrase in verse 3 also reminds us of the garden of Eden: **“nothing escapes them.”**

Genesis 3:8 – And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, **and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.**

Starting with the very first couple, man has long tried to hide from God. People have very often tried to escape from God.

But whether verse 3 is talking about an escape from God or an escape from an army sent by God – neither attempted escape will be successful unless that way of escape is a way that God has provided.

Hebrews 4:13 – And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

And we will, in fact, see a way of escape provided by God later in this same chapter of Joel.

Joel 2:32 – And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. **For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape,** as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Joel 2:4

Joel 2:4 – Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run.

Locusts! Locusts! Locusts! Verse 4 has to be all about locusts, right? No. Not right. Let's look a bit more closely at verse 4 before we starting holding up a photo of a locust alongside a photo of a horse.

First, have we seen anything so far in Joel 2 that would make us think we are looking at locusts here? I say no. The invader in Joel 2 was identified as a great and powerful **people** in verse 2 – not as insects.

Second, even if we were to admit that a locust looks something like a horse, I don't think there would be any basis for such a comparison comparison here. No one who saw a locust invasion on the horizon would ever scream, "Oh, no! We are being attacked by an army of tiny horses!" Locusts were terrifying because they looked like locusts – not because they looked like horses.

Third, while a locust might in some way **look** like a horse, there is no way in which a locust **runs** like a horse! And yet, verse 2 says "like war horses they run."

Fourth, I think verse 4 explains itself once we understand what the Israelites thought of war horses – in short, they were terrified of them!

They had been chased out of Egypt by horses.

Exodus 14:9 – The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea...

And God had then warned them that they would later meet such horses again.

Deuteronomy 20:1 – When you go out to war against your enemies, **and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own**, you shall not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

And that happened in Joshua.

Joshua 11:4-6 – And they came out with all their troops, a great horde, in number like the sand that is on the seashore, **with very many horses and chariots**. And all these kings joined their forces and came and encamped together at the waters of Merom to fight against Israel. And the LORD said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel. **You shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire.**”

And while Solomon had horses and chariots (1 Kings 10:26), for most of their history the Jews relied on infantry rather than cavalry – and that proved to be the better choice when the fight was waged in the hills rather than on the plain.

1 Kings 20:21-23 – And the king of Israel went out and struck the horses and chariots, and struck the Syrians with a great blow. ... And the servants of the king of Syria said to him, “Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.”

But, for the people, the sight of an invading army on horseback was one of the most frightening things they could ever imagine.

Jeremiah 4:13 – Behold, he comes up like clouds;
his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are
swifter than eagles – woe to us, for we are
ruined!

And who is that person who was coming in Jeremiah 4:13
with horses swifter than eagles? It was King Neb-
uchadnezzar. And Habakkuk also describes those same
Babylonian horses.

Habakkuk 1:8 – Their horses are swifter than
leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on. Their horse-
men come from afar; they fly like an eagle
swift to devour.

And that description of horses, much more than locusts,
sounds like what we read in verse 4: “Their appearance
is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses
they run.”

But what about the word “like”? They look **like** horses,
and they run **like** horses. Doesn’t that mean that they
were not really horses? We have already looked at that
Hebrew preposition, and we will have more to say about
in in the next verse. But, for our purposes here, we
can just make a simple observation: whether verse 4 is
about locusts or about people, neither is a horse!

And as for locusts looking like horses, I think that
they do. I think we can see that when we look at
them, and I think the Bible tells us the same thing
elsewhere.

Revelation 9:7 – In appearance the locusts were
like horses prepared for battle...

But that comparison runs both ways – those horses also look like locusts!

Jeremiah 51:27 – Bring up horses like bristling locusts.

And so, once again, we are left with the same question: are we seeing locusts that look like a human army, or are we seeing a human army that (at least, at times) looks like locusts?

I think the evidence better supports the second option. I think we are seeing a human army in Joel 2 that, in some ways, reminds us of the locusts we saw in Joel 1.

Many people see these horses in verse 4 as strong evidence of a locust attack, but I think the opposite is true. I think these horses are strong evidence that we are **not** seeing locusts here. Why?

Let's again recall what happened in Chapter 1. When the prophet Joel arrived, the people had just experienced a terrible locust invasion. And that invasion was so bad that Joel could ask, "Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?"

So let's assume for a moment that Joel 2 is also about locusts. Let's assume that Joel is telling the people that another locust invasion is coming soon. I don't think that is correct – but let's assume it is correct for a moment.

Now, with that assumption about Joel 2, let me ask a question: **Why would anyone need a metaphor to describe something they had just personally experienced?**

Why would Joel need to tell them that this second locust invasion would be like the attack of a human army with rumbling chariots? Why would Joel need to tell them what the locusts would look like horses? Why would Joel need to tell them that the locusts would sound like a crackling fire?

Do we really think that there were people in Jerusalem who didn't know what a locust invasion was like? Who didn't know what those locusts did? Who didn't know what those locusts looked like? Who didn't know what those locusts sounded like?

Many of us here today have lived through more than one terrible hurricane. I still remember when the eye of Hurricane Alicia went over our house in 1983. What if another hurricane was coming today and was near, and what if I was in charge of warning you all about that approaching storm? Is this what you would expect me to say?

Something is coming that's like a massive, roaring blender the size of a city. Trees will crack and fall like matchsticks, and anything not secured will fly through the air like a Frisbee. Water will gush like there is a giant sponge in the sky that is being wrung out all at once.

If I said that to you, how would you respond? Wouldn't you think that was a rather odd way for me to warn Houstonians about a hurricane? A massive, roaring blender? A flying Frisbee? A giant sponge?

We all know what a hurricane is! We all know what they are like! We don't need a bunch of analogies to

explain what we will see and hear when another hurricane arrives! And the same is true for these locusts when it comes to the people listening to Joel!

In short, if Joel 2 is just about more locusts, then why all these descriptions? Couldn't Joel just have said, "The locusts are coming back!" What more would need to be said to people who had just lived through the worst locust invasion any of them had ever experienced?

But what if Joel 2 is about something different? What if Joel 2 is about a human invasion that the people had not already experienced? Then we would need these vivid descriptions to understand it – and naturally some of those vivid descriptions of the human army that was coming would be based on the locust invasion that had already come.

Joel 2 is describing a human invasion, not a locust invasion.

Joel 2:5

Joel 2:5 – As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle.

Verse 5 would have been terrifying to those who first heard it.

And I think we can imagine how they felt. Just think about waking up one day and seeing a huge army of war

horses and chariots stretched out across the horizon as far as the eye can see. And then you hear it – the rumble of the chariots! It is coming! The army is now so near that you can both see it and hear it!

And again in verse 5 we see a devouring fire. As we said, I think that fire can be either literal or figurative, or perhaps both literal and figurative.

We know that ancient armies used fire as a weapon, but we also know that a fast moving fire is like a fast moving army – both are terrifying, inescapable, and destructive. They both create feelings of great fear and helplessness.

“Like a powerful army drawn up for battle.”

As we said when we looked at verse 1, this phrase is Exhibit A for those who think Joel 2 is about nothing more than locusts. Most of them agree that the verb tenses require a different event in Joel 2, but they believe that different event is just a different locust attack.

And they point to verse 5 as proof – the villain in Joel 2 is not a powerful army drawn up for battle, but is just **like** a powerful army drawn up for battle.

On the surface, that argument seems pretty strong – but let’s dig down a bit.

First, as we said when we looked at verse 1, the preposition translated “like” in verse 5 can be used either for an imperfect comparison or a perfect comparison. We saw an example of that latter usage back in Joel 1:15, and I think we are seeing it again here. The “people”

from verse 2 are not coming “like” a powerful army, but rather they are coming “as” a powerful army.

To add a bit to what we said earlier, we can look at what the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* says about this Hebrew preposition. That lexicon says that the Hebrew preposition is sometimes used “to compare an object with the class to which it belongs, and express its correspondence with the idea which it ought to realize.”

I think that is how we see the word used in Joel 1:15 and in Isaiah 13:6.

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

Isaiah 13:6 – Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; **as** destruction from the Almighty it will come!

Those verses are not saying that the day of the Lord is not a coming destruction from God but rather is just **like** that. Instead, those verses are telling us this day is coming as “a veritable, or ideal, destruction” from God (again, quoting the lexicon). The comparison is giving us a true, real, and genuine example. It is an exact comparison.

In short, those verses are telling us that if we want to see the perfect example of destruction from God, then we should look at this day of the Lord!

Likewise, here in verse 5: if we want to see the perfect example of a huge terrifying army from God, then we should look at what is coming over the hill!

We see that same usage elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Zechariah 14:3 – Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations **as when he fights on a day of battle.**

Ezekiel 26:10 – His horses will be so many that their dust will cover you. Your walls will shake at the noise of the horsemen and wagons and chariots, when he enters your gates **as men enter a city that has been breached.**

So the Hebrew grammar in verse 5 does **not** mean that we are still looking at locusts (even though the English grammar in the ESV might cause us to think otherwise before taking a closer look).