

Lesson 10

Joel 1:15, Continued

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

We have been looking at verse 15 for several lessons, and we still have a few more things to say about it.

But before we do that, let's briefly look again at an issue we discussed last week – the meaning of the word "near."

As I said last week, in my opinion, we should interpret the word "near" to mean just that – "near." And although it does not seem that such an opinion should be controversial, it is. Why? Because the word "near" in the Bible very often creates a conflict with our preconceptions about the Bible.

And what should we do when there is a conflict between the text of the Bible and our preconceptions about the Bible? Do we change or twist the text or do we change our preconceptions? We all know the answer to that question!

One thing I said last week was that the New Testament writers never wrote that the end of the world was near. But, we might ask, what about verses such as these?

1 Peter 4:7 – The end of all things is **at hand**.

James 5:8 – You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is **at hand**.

Hebrews 10:37 – For, **yet a little while**, and the coming one will come and will not delay.

Revelation 22:20 – He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming **soon**.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

We will not take the time to do a deep dive into those verses now, but perhaps we will have an opportunity to do that later. Meanwhile, here are some things to consider in a study of those and similar verses.

First, as we said, we cannot simultaneously hold that those verses teach that the end of the world was “near” in the first century and that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, unless we are willing to twist the word “near” to the point that it becomes meaningless.

Second, last week we saw that Paul did not believe Jesus could return at any time in the first century – and Paul is not the only such example among the apostles.

The first verse that I just quoted was 1 Peter 4:7. Did Peter believe that Jesus would return in his lifetime? We sometimes hear or read that he did. But did he?

We know with absolute certainty that Peter did not believe that Jesus would return in his life time. And how do we know that? We know that because in John

21:18 Jesus told Peter “by what kind of death he was to glorify God.” For that prophecy to be fulfilled, Jesus could not come again until after Peter had died.

Third, just as we have seen in the Old Testament, there are judgments in the New Testament that are also described with language that could also be used to describe the end of the world.

For example, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 is sometimes described with language that could also be used to describe the end of the world. Just read Matthew 24 and note that everything prior to Matthew 24:34 occurred during that first century generation. And, likewise, God’s judgment of Rome (the first century Babylon) is vividly described in the book of Revelation.

And both of those events were “near” in the first century. Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, and two great Roman dynasties ended in the first century with the deaths of Nero and Domitian.

Fourth, it is possible that some or all of those verses are describing another first century event that was near.

We know that the end of the world will come on a day known only to God, and we know that a great judgment will occur at the end of the world. And we know now, 2000 years later, that the last great day was not near in the first century.

But there was another event coming for a person in the first century that also had a date known only to God,

that also was a day of judgment, but that, unlike the end of the world, was near in the first century.

And what was that other event? It was death; it was that first century person's death. And the same is true for our death today.

We don't know when that day will occur, but we know it is near.

And we also know that we will be judged on that day. That was certainly true of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 – neither one of them had to wait until the end of the world to know their final destination. They were judged the moment they died.

Yes, each person's judgment will be declared at the end of time and the sentence (if any) will be imposed at the end of time, but that judgment will not come as a surprise to anyone who died prior to the Lord's coming. Neither the rich man nor Lazarus is waiting around to see how things turn out at the end of the world. They already know.

And, again, those are just some things we should keep in mind as we study what the New Testament has to say about the end of the world.

And, as for the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, I think we often make two mistakes. We either magnify that event to the point that we see it in places where we should not, or we minimize that event to the point that we fail to see it in places where we should. The first path leads to Max Kingism, and the second path leads to premillennialism.

And another thing – the prophecies in the Bible very often do not just tell us **what** would happen – but they also tell us **when** it would happen.

Daniel 2:44 is a great example – that verse tells us that the eternal kingdom of God would be established in the days of the first century Romans kings. But we dilute the amazing wonder of such prophecies when we spread the time frame so thin that it covers thousands of years.

If I told you that the Texans would **soon** win the Super Bowl, but then they lost their first playoff game, what would you say? Would you say that I am a false prophet? Or would you say, “Well, if they win the Super Bowl some time in the next thousand years, I guess that would still qualify as **soon!**” A little common sense goes a long way in Bible study!

When we ended last week, we were listing some facts about the day of the Lord that we can learn from the verses on the handout for Lesson 9, and we were about to look at the fifth such fact when class ended.

Fifth, we know that the phrase “the day of the Lord” does not always refer to the end of the world, but sometimes “the day of the Lord” does refer to the end of the world. We see that, for example, in verses #20, #21, #22, and #23 from the handout for Lesson 9.

And, while we see many different days of the Lord in the Bible, I think we can say that this final day of the Lord is unique. That is why Paul could write what he did about it to the Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 2:2 – Not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

We know that other days of the Lord had come – we can see them on the handout from last week. But the final day of the Lord had not come in Paul's day and has still not yet come in our own day.

That final day will be unique and different from the other such days. But how? How is it different?

- While we again see universal cosmic upheaval in those verses describing the final day of the Lord, this time the language is literal rather than figurative. Earlier days of the Lord were something like the end of the world to whatever group was being targeted, but the final day of Lord will be the actual end of the world for every group – and the cosmic upheaval will be a literal cosmic upheaval.
- While some of the earlier days of the Lord were calls to wake up and repent, the final day of the Lord will be a call to wake up and be judged. The time for repentance will have ended.
- While some of the earlier days of the Lord were said to have been near, the final day of the Lord is said to come like a thief in the night, which suggests two things about such a day: we don't know whether or not it is near, and it will not be preceded with any signs.

The sixth fact we can say about the day of Lord from the verses on the handout for Lesson 9 is that Peter mentioned a great and awesome day of the Lord in Acts 2 on the day that the church was established.

We see that in verse #19 from the handout for Lesson 9, which quotes verse #10 from Joel 2. We also see that same phrase in verse #18 from Malachi, which Matthew 17:10–13 and Mark 9:11–13 tell us refers to John the Baptist. We will save that discussion for later, but for let's just note the similarity.

So those are six things we can learn about the day of the Lord from the verses on the handout. I think we will learn some more about it from the verses in Joel, and I also think we should look later at the verses that describe the day of the Lord without using that exact phrase.

What about the verses on the handout that are not highlighted?

As we know, the book of Joel has more to say about the day of the Lord than any other book in the Bible. Other than verse #10 (which we just mentioned), I have not highlighted the other verses from Joel. We will classify them later in our study of the book.

The other non-highlighted verse is verse #3 (Isaiah 58:13), which uses the day of the Lord to refer to the Sabbath day. That verse reminds us of another day of the Lord, which we see in the book of Revelation.

Revelation 1:10 – I was in the Spirit on **the Lord's day**, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet

The Sabbath was a day of the Lord in the Old Testament, and Sunday is a day of the Lord in the New Testament! And it is interesting to compare Sunday with our working definition of the day of the Lord:

“A sudden intervention by God into the affairs of a self-satisfied complacent people that leaves those people with a world that is completely changed from what they knew before.”

On the surface that does not sound much like Sunday, but don't we see some similarities?

When we gather on Sunday to worship God, isn't that an opportunity and a call for each of us to wake up and remember who we are and whose we are?

Aren't we reminded each Sunday that this world is not all that there is, that we are pilgrims, and, that we must love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength? And doesn't all of that prevent us from becoming self-satisfied and complacent throughout the next week? Sunday is **the Lord's day!**

Finally, let's circle back now and look again at that working definition of the day of the Lord that I quoted just a moment ago.

We have been calling that our working definition, but now that we have looked at how the Bible describes the day of the Lord, can we promote our **working** definition to our **actual** definition?

I think we can, but perhaps with some caveats.

If we look at the examples on the handout for Lesson 9, I think what we find are examples confirming our definition of the day of the Lord.

For example, consider the day of the Lord in Zephaniah, which we see in verses #15, #16, and #17 on the handout for Lesson 9. Those verses are directed to Judah, as are the verses we are studying in Joel.

Do we see **a sudden intervention by God**? Yes, we do.

Zephaniah 1:4 – I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Do we see a sudden intervention by God **into the affairs of a self-satisfied complacent people**? Yes, we do.

Zephaniah 1:12 – At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are **complacent**, those who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.’

Do we see a sudden intervention by God into the affairs of a self-satisfied complacent people **that leaves those people with a world that is completely changed from what they knew before**? Yes, we do.

Zephaniah 1:2-3 – I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the LORD. I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the LORD.

That's just one example, but I think if we checked the others we would find very similar descriptions. And so, I think we can be pretty confident in our working definition for the day of the Lord.

But what about that caveat I mentioned? The caveat is that sometimes the day of the Lord is directed at God's people (Judah or Israel) and at other times the day of the Lord is directed at the nations that have harmed God's people (Babylon, Egypt, Edom).

In the latter case, the emphasis is more on waking the people to face judgment than in waking them up to repent – but even there we should not rule out a focus on repentance.

Jonah, for example, was sent to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh to tell them that they would be overthrown in 40 days (Jonah 3:4) – but that did not happen.

Why not? Because the people repented (Jonah 3:5) and “God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them” (Jonah 3:10). That threatened event is not explicitly called “a day of the Lord,” but it certainly looks like one.

And so, while there are some differences in the day of the Lord when it comes to Judah or Israel and when it comes to other nations, those differences may not be as pronounced as we might think.

We will, of course, have much more to say about the day of the Lord as we continue our study of Joel, but for now we need to move on to the next verse.

Joel 1:16

Joel 1:16 – Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God?

Verse 16 is back to talking about the locusts and the drought – the food has been cut off, and joy and gladness have also been cut off from the house of God. That is what we were hearing from Joel back in verse 12.

Does that mean we were wrong about verse 15? Does that mean the day of Lord in verse 15 really was the locust invasion after all? No, it doesn't.

We still have that imperfect verb tense that we saw in verse 15. “For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it **comes**.” The Hebrew word translated “comes” that we saw in verse 15 was an imperfect tense verb, which means that it was **not** describing some action that was completed in the past.

And how many imperfect verbs have we seen so far in Joel? Only that one.

The handout for Lesson 10 shows all of the perfect and imperfect verbs in the book of Joel. The verbs in the **perfect** tense are highlighted in **yellow**, and the verbs in the **imperfect** tense are highlighted in **blue**.

Note that this is not all of the verbs. There are also **imperative** verbs (like the verb “awake” in verse 5), and there are also **participles** (like the word “drinkers” in verse 5). Those other types of verbs are not highlighted on the handout.

There is something that immediately stands out when we look at the front side of the handout – we see a lot of yellow in chapter 1, and we see a lot of blue in chapter 2. In fact, as I said a moment ago, we don't see any blue at all in chapter 1 until we get to verse 15.

What can we conclude from that? Well, "conclude" may be a bit strong, but I do think we can see a very strong indication that we are looking at two different events in Joel 1 and Joel 2.

The event in Joel 1 is something that occurred and was completed in the past, and the event in Joel 2 is something that was either ongoing or yet future.

And verse 15? I think that the tense of the verb in verse 15 is the link between the event in Joel 1 and the event in Joel 2. That is, I think that the event in Joel 1 that had already occurred was pointing toward the event in Joel 2 that had not yet occurred.

But what then is the purpose of verse 16? Why does Joel mention the coming day of the Lord in verse 15 with the imperfect tense and then switch back to the perfect tense in verse 16? The answer is clear when we read verse 16.

The questions in verse 16 are rhetorical questions: Is not the food cut off? Is not the joy and gladness cut off? The answers, of course, are yes and yes. Those things were cut off, and everyone could see that they were cut off. There was no food. There was no joy. There was no gladness.

And verse 16 includes a very important phrase that I think by itself explains why we have verse 16: **before our eyes**. “Is not the food cut off **before our eyes**?”

Verse 16 is the **evidence** for what Joel said in verse 15. What the people could see with their own eyes in verse 16 establishes the truth of what they heard from Joel in verse 15.

In effect, Joel is saying: “The day of the Lord is coming. It is near. And can’t you see the truth of that now? Hasn’t such a day already arrived? How can you say now that such a day will never come to you?”

The locusts and the drought were a warning of something that was yet to come. They were intended to awaken the people to something yet to come.

And if anyone had been thinking that the day of the Lord was something that only **other** people should worry about – those locusts and that drought should have convinced them otherwise. Those things were evidence that the people could see with their own eyes.

And that phrase “before our eyes” also tells us that we are not looking here at the so-called prophetic perfect verb form. That is when a future event is so certain it is spoken about in a past tense. We see that used elsewhere in the Bible, but not here. And how do we know? Because only evidence from a past event could ever be described as something that is “before our eyes.”

We have talked about verbs, but we also need to talk about pronouns.

We see something here in verse 16 that we have not seen before in Joel – we see a first person plural pronoun. “Is not the food cut off before **our** eyes, joy and gladness from the house of **our** God?”

Joel has now taken his place among the people of God. Joel was also suffering from the lack of food (“cut off before our eyes”), and God was also Joel’s God (“the house of our God”).

Finally, we see something in verse 16 that might be very unexpected to modern readers – “joy and gladness.”

Why might “joy and gladness” be unexpected to us? Because we usually don’t associate joy and gladness with worship in the Old Testament. Instead, I think we often see Old Testament worship as daunting and bloody and grueling and monotonous.

Deuteronomy 12:6 – And there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock.

But let’s read the very next verse in Deuteronomy 12.

Deuteronomy 12:7 – And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall **rejoice**, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has **blessed** you.

There has never been a time when the worship of God has been anything other than a joyous occasion for sinners to worship the one true God who has redeemed them, called them, and blessed them!

Psalm 98:1-4 – Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

And if that was true under the Old Testament, how much more must it be true under the New Testament when we have been freed from the old law and when we can see the plan of God fully revealed through Jesus Christ!

Sometimes I fear that joy and gladness has been cut off again in the worship of God, but not by any locusts! I think we may sometimes cut it off all by ourselves. Our worship of God should always be filled with joy and gladness!

Joel 1:17

Joel 1:17 – The seed shrivels under the clods; the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are torn down because the grain has dried up.

Verse 17 begins with the most difficult translation problem in the entire book of Joel. “The seed shrivels under the clods.”

That English sentence is a translation of four Hebrew words, three of which are not found anywhere else in

the Hebrew Bible. Also, in the Hebrew, the phrase translated “the clods” is actually “**their** clods.”

Translations vary, and sometimes they vary very widely.

- For example, the Septuagint translates the phrase this way: “Heifers danced at their mangers.”
- Another has this: “Beasts rot in their dung.”
- Another has this: “The granaries have rotted from their plaster.”
- And yet another has this: “The bottles of wine are decaying under their seals.”

So what is the answer? The answer is that we don’t know the answer. As one commentary explains:

“Barring further discoveries ... the first four words of the verse remain something of an enigma; it is not possible to establish their meaning with confidence.”

However we translate that opening phrase, the verse itself seems to be describing the results of a drought. We have already seen some hints of that drought in chapter 1, but now we are seeing more than just hints. The people were suffering under a terrible drought.

What is the relation between the locust invasion and the drought?

I think verse 15 is telling us that both were sent by God as a warning and a wake up call.

Perhaps God sent them as separate events, with the drought compounding the disaster of the locusts. Or perhaps the drought was caused in whole or in part by the locusts as the defoliation lowered the water table and increased the dryness of the soil.

The storehouses are desolate, and the granaries are torn down. What does that mean?

It may just mean that the storehouses and the granaries are not maintained because they are no longer needed. There is nothing to store in them, and so they are either left to rot or they are torn down.

But we should note that the storehouses and the granaries were there in the first place to be torn down or left to rot. That fact tells us that the date of Joel was not during the exile after Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the city and before the city was later rebuilt.

But, of course, we had already deduced that fact from other evidence, so verse 17 does not really tell us anything new about the date of the book.

Joel 1:18

Joel 1:18 – How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep suffer.

“How the beasts groan! ... Even the flocks of sheep suffer.”

The Hebrew word translated “suffer” at the end of verse 18 refers to suffering as a result of punishment. These sheep are not just suffering; they are suffering due to punishment.

What does that tell us? It tells us at least two important things.

First, that the sheep are suffering punishment confirms that this locust invasion and this drought were, in fact, a punishment. They were not natural occurrences, but rather they were punishments sent by God.

Second, that the sheep are suffering punishment confirms something we already know about punishments in general – sometimes (and perhaps often) the innocent suffer when others are punished.

Think, for example, about the great flood. We know that many children must have suffered and drowned when that flood covered the earth. Were those children being punished by that flood? We know that they were not. But were those children suffering because of that flood? We know that they were.

I think we see the same thing here with these animals. They were not being punished, but they were suffering from the punishment of others.

And anyone who has ever seen an old Western movie knows that sheep eat much closer to the ground than cattle. What that means is that sheep are better than cattle at surviving harsh conditions. So if even the sheep were suffering, then we know the situation caused by

the locusts and the drought must have been extremely dire.

Why do we see this concern in verse 18 for the beasts, the cattle, and the sheep?

We know that God cares for the welfare of all of his creatures, including animals.

Luke 12:6 – Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?

But I think there is another even more important reason why see these animals here in verse 18 – but let's save that second reason until we meet these beasts again in verse 20.