



# THE LOCUST SWARMS

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Joel ii. 12, 13.

Therefore also now, saith the Lord, Turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. \*\*\*

This is one of the grandest chapters in the whole Old Testament, and one which may teach us a great deal; and, above all, teach us to be thankful to God for the blessings which we have.

I think I can explain what it means best by going back to the chapter before it.

Joel begins his prophecy by bitter lamentation over the mischief which the swarms of insects had done; such as had never been in his days, nor in the days of his fathers. What the palmer worm had left, the locust had eaten; what the locust had left, the cankerworm had eaten; and what the cankerworm had left, the caterpillar had eaten. Whether these names are rightly rendered, or whether they mean different sorts of locusts, or the locusts in their different stages of growth, crawling at first and flying at last, matters little. What mischief they had done was plain enough. They had come up a nation strong and without number, whose teeth were like the teeth of a lion, and his cheek-teeth like those of a strong lion. They had laid his vines waste, and barked his fig-tree, and made its branches white; and all drunkards were howling and lamenting, for the wine crop was utterly destroyed: and all other crops, it seems likewise; the corn was wasted, the olives destroyed; the seed was rotten under the clods, the granaries empty, the barns broken down, for the corn was withered; the vine and fig, pomegranate, palm, and apple, were all gone; the green grass was all gone; the beasts groaned, the herds were perplexed, because they had no pasture; the flocks of sheep were desolate. There seems to have been a dry season also, to make matters worse; for Joel says the rivers of waters were dried up likely enough, if then, as now, it is the dry seasons which bring the locust-swarms. Still the locusts had done the chief mischief. They came just as they come now (only in smaller strength, thank God) in many parts of the East and of Southern Russia, darkening the sky, and shutting out the very light of the sun; the noise of their innumerable jaws like the noise of flame devouring the stubble, as they settled upon every green thing, and gnawed away leaf and bark; and a fire devoured before them, and behind them a flame burned; the land was as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; till there was not enough left to supply the daily sacrifices, and the meat offering and the drink offering were withheld from the house of God.

But what has all this to do with us? There have never, as far as we know, been any locusts in England.

And what has this to do with God? Why does Joel tell these Jews that God sent the locusts, and bid them cry to God to take them away? For these locusts are natural things, and come by natural laws. And there is no need that there should be locusts anywhere. For where the wild grass plains are broken up and properly cultivated, there the locusts, which lay their countless eggs in the old turf, disappear, and must disappear. We know that now. We know that when the East is tilled (as God grant it may be some day) as thoroughly as England is, locusts will be as

unknown there as here; and that is another comfortable proof to us that there is no real curse upon God's earth: but that just as far as man fulfils God's command to replenish the earth and subdue it, so far he gets rid of all manner of terrible scourges and curses, which seemed to him in the days of his ignorance, necessary and supernatural.

How, then, was Joel right in saying that God sent the locusts? In this way, my friends.

Suppose you or I took cholera or fever. We know that cholera or fever is preventible; that man has no right to have these pestilences in a country, because they can be kept out and destroyed. But if you or I caught cholera or fever by no fault or folly of our own, we are bound to say, God sent me this sickness. It has some private lesson for me. It is part of my education, my schooling in God's school-house. It is meant to make me a wiser and better man; and that he can only do by teaching me more about himself. So with these locusts, and still more so; for Joel did not know, could not know, that these locusts could be prevented. But even if he had known that, it was not his fault or folly, or his countrymen's which had brought the locusts. Most probably they were tilling the ground to the best of their knowledge. Most probably, too, these locusts were not bred in Palestine at all; but came down upon the north-wind (as they are said to do now), from some land hundreds of miles away; and therefore Joel could say Whatever I do not know about these locusts, this I know; that God, whose providence orders all things in heaven and earth, has sent them; that he means to teach you a lesson by them; that they are part of his schooling to us Jews; that he intends to make us wiser and better men by them: and that he can only do by teaching us more about himself.

What, then, does Joel say about the locusts, which he might say to you or me, if we were laid down by cholera or fever? He does not say, these troubles have come upon you from devils, or evil spirits, or by any blind chance of the world about you. He says, they have come on you from the Lord; from the same good, loving, merciful Lord who brought your fathers out of Egypt, and made a great nation of you, and has preserved you to this day. And do not fancy that he is changed. Do not fancy that he has forgotten you, or hates you, or has become cruel, or proud, or unlike himself. It is you who have forgotten him, and have shown that by living bad lives; and all he wishes is, to drive you back to him, that you may live good lives. Turn to him; and you will find him unchanged; the same loving, forgiving Lord as ever. He requires no sacrifices, no great offerings on your part to win him round. All he asks is, that you should confess yourselves in the wrong, and turn and repent. Turn therefore to the Lord with all your heart, and with weeping, and with fasting, and with mourning (which was, and is still the Eastern fashion); and rend your heart, and not your garments. And why? Because the Lord is very dreadful, angry and dark, and has determined to destroy you all? Not so: but because he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

Yes, my friends: and this, you will find, is at the bottom of all true repentance and turning to God. If you believe that God is dark, and hard, and cruel, you may be afraid of him: but you cannot repent, cannot turn to him. The more you think of him the more you will be terrified at him, and turn from him. But if you believe that God is gracious and merciful, then you can turn to him; then you can repent with a true repentance, and a godly sorrow which breeds joy and peace of mind.

So Joel thought, at least; for he tells them, that if they will but turn to God, if they will but confess themselves in the wrong, all shall be well again, and better than before.

Now, if Joel had been a heathen, worshipping the false gods of the Canaanites, he would have spoken very differently; he would have said, perhaps Baal, the true God, is angry with you, and he has sent the drought.

Or, Ashtoreth, the Queen of Heaven, by whose power all seeds grow and all creatures breed, is angry with you, and she has destroyed the seeds, and sent the locusts.

Or, Ammon, the Lord of the sheep, is angry, and he has destroyed your flocks and herds.

But one thing we know he would have said These angry gods want blood. You cannot pacify them without human blood. You must give them the most dear and precious things you have the most beautiful and pure. You must sacrifice boys and girls to them; and then, perhaps, they will be appeased.

We know this. We know that the heathen, whenever they were in trouble, took to human sacrifices.

The Canaanites and the Jews when they fell into idolatry used to burn their children in the fire to Moloch.

We know that the Carthaginians, who were of the same blood and language as the Canaanites, used human sacrifices; and that once when their city was in great danger, they sacrificed at one time two hundred boys of their highest families.

We know that the Greeks and Romans, who had much more humane and rational notions about their gods, were tempted, in times of great distress, to sacrifice human beings. It has always been so. The old Mexicans in America used to sacrifice many thousands of men and women every year to their idols; and when the Spaniards came and destroyed them off the face of the earth in the name of the Lord as Joshua did the Canaanites of old they found the walls of the idol temples crusted inches thick with human blood. Even to this day, the wild Khonds in the Indian mountains, and the Red men of America, sacrifice human beings at times, and, I fear, very often indeed; and believe that the gods will be the more pleased, and more certain to turn away their anger, the more horrible and lingering tortures they inflict upon their wretched victims. I say, these things were; and were it not for the light of the Gospel, these things would be still; and when we hear of them, we ought to bow our heads to our Father in heaven in thankfulness, and say what Joel the prophet taught the Jews to say dimly and in part what our Lord Jesus and his apostles taught us to say fully and perfectly.

It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, at all times and in all places whether in joy or sorrow, in wealth or in want, to give thanks to thee, O Lord, Holy Father, Almighty, Everlasting God.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, according to whose most true promise the Holy Ghost came down from heaven upon the apostles, to teach them and to lead them into all truth, and give them fervent zeal, constantly to preach the Gospel to all nations, by which we have been brought out of darkness and error into the clear light and true knowledge of thee and of thy Son Jesus Christ.

Yes, my friends, this is the lesson which we have to learn from Joel's prophecy, and from all prophecies. This lesson the old prophets learnt for themselves, slowly and dimly, through many temptations and sorrows. This lesson our Lord Jesus Christ revealed fully, and left behind him to his apostles. This lesson men have been learning slowly but surely in all the hundreds of years which have past since; to know that there is one Father in heaven, of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things; that they may, in all the chances and changes of this mortal life, in weal and in woe, in light and in darkness, in plenty and in want, look up to that heavenly Father who so loved them that he spared not his only begotten Son, but freely gave him for them, and say, "Father, not our will but thine be done. All things come from thy hand, and therefore all things come from thy love. We have received good from thy hand, and shall we not receive evil? Though thou slay us, yet will we trust in thee. For thou art gracious and merciful, long-suffering and of great goodness. Thou art loving to every man, and thy mercy is over all thy works. Thou art righteous in all thy ways, and holy in all thy doings. Thou art nigh to all that call on thee; thou wilt hear their cry, and wilt help them. For all thou desirest, when thou sendest trouble on them, is to make them wiser and better men. And that thou canst only make them by teaching them more about thyself.

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