

## Invasion

Joel 1:1-2:11

Sunday, June 8, 2025

Finish this sentence: "I remember where I was when..."

Most people remember specific details about where they were when world-changing events occurred. On January 28, 1986, I was in 5th grade when I learned of the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion. I was working as a college intern when news came over the radio the morning of April 19, 1995 about the Oklahoma City bombing. On September 11, 2001, I was commuting to campus for an early morning seminary class when on-air breaking news reported that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center.

What is your "I remember where I was when..." moment?

Perhaps your moment wasn't a world-changing event, but it was a moment that changed your world. Maybe you can still picture yourself in a doctor's office going over scan results. Perhaps you remember the moment you received unexpected news about the death of a loved one. Maybe you recall how you felt when you were asked to leave a job.

What is your "I remember where I was when..." moment?

These deeply personal and often painful moments might best be described as an *invasion*. Events like these that change our world leave us dismayed and disoriented. No one is prepared to hear the word "cancer." No one is ready to care for an aging parent experiencing rapid decline. None of us expects to lose our job, suffer a miscarriage, or be on the receiving end of betrayal. No one anticipates an invasion.

By the time the word of the LORD came to Joel, the invasion had already taken place. Look with me at how Joel's prophecy begins.

"Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation. 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 1:2-4, NIV).

In 2020, we latched onto a term that described the world-changing events of the day. Everything from the Covid-19 pandemic, to the nationwide spirit of racial unrest, to the November presidential election was described as *unprecedented*. This was our way of saying, "We've never seen anything like this before! Someday, we'll be telling our grandkids what it was like to live through 2020."

In Joel's day, the unprecedented event that took place was an invasion of locusts. My wife and I can tell you stories about the Southeastern Ohio Cicada invasion of 1999. Those ugly little bugs were everywhere! But while that invasion was annoying, the locust invasion in Joel's day was devastating.

Next Sunday, when we come to the second half of this prophecy, we'll come to Joel 2:25. There God says to his people,

"I will repay you for *the years* the locusts have eaten— the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm— my great army that I sent among you" (Joel 2:25, NIV).

For now, simply notice the phrase "*the years* the locusts have eaten" in that verse. *Years*. The wake of destruction left by the locust invasion in Joel's day would be measured in *years*.

Notice how Joel describes the incredible impact left by these terrible insects.

"A nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white. ...The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails. ...The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree— all the trees of the field—are dried up." (Joel 1:6-7, 10, 12, NIV).

You parents of teenagers have probably at one time or another compared your teen to locusts. You know how it goes. You shop for a week's worth of groceries, and within two or three days, your ravenous teens have eaten everything in sight. The pantry is bare and the fridge is empty. There's a reason we compare these adolescent garbage disposals to locusts.

Try and picture the devastation that Joel describes here. This flying insect, no larger than a tube of lip balm, invaded the land in swarm after swarm. By the billions they came until every crop, every vine, and every fruit tree was stripped bare. This not only disrupted the food supply, but it also ruined the local economy.

"Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed" (Joel 1:11, NIV).

It's no surprise then to read in verse 12 that along with the agricultural devastation,

"the people's joy [had] withered away" (Joel 1:12, NIV).

But there's another reason why God's people had lost their joy. We don't tend to associate corporate worship with offerings and sacrifice. Sure, every Sunday we worship through the giving of our offerings. But under the old covenant, the way in which God's people approached a holy God was through offerings and sacrifices at the temple mediated by the priests.

Leviticus describes the grain offering that God's people were instructed to bring in worship.

"When anyone brings a grain offering to the LORD, their offering is to be of the finest flour. They are to pour olive oil on it, put incense on it and take it to Aaron's sons the

priests. The priest shall take a handful of the flour and oil, together with all the incense, and burn this as a memorial portion on the altar, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. The rest of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the food offerings presented to the LORD” (Lev. 2:1-3, NIV).

But when the locust invasion of Joel’s day left the grain fields empty, the olive trees stripped, and the vines without grapes, there was no way for a worshiper to bring his or her prescribed offering before the Lord.

In verse 8, Joel compares interrupted fellowship with God with the grief we feel at the unexpected loss of a loved one.

“Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the betrothed of her youth. Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the LORD” (Joel 1:8-9, NIV).

Maybe you’ve felt this way during a season of suffering. Invasion may leave us with little energy to open the Scriptures. Invasion can snuff out any desire to pray. When invasion comes, coming to church can feel like a chore. When invasion has left a path of destruction, who wants to sing songs of praise with a bunch of happy Christians?

Invasion is inevitable. If you live long enough, you will experience an unprecedented invasion of grief that will forever change your world.

We’re at the midpoint of this sermon, and by now you’re probably wondering how much more doom and gloom you can take. The good news is that next Sunday’s sermon—Part Two of our sermon mini-series through Joel—is titled *Restoration*. I promise, hope is on the horizon.

But in the time that remains, I want to finish looking at the first half of Joel’s prophecy. The first part of Joel’s message provides us with three **evidences of God’s grace that are present even in the face of unprecedented invasion**.

Before the plot of Joel’s prophecy unfolds, we’re given the first evidence of God’s grace in the face of unprecedented invasion.

“The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel” (Joel 1:1, NIV).

Don’t miss the evidence of God’s grace on display here: “The word of the LORD...came to Joel.” **The book of Joel is evidence of God’s grace in the face of unprecedented invasion.** To be clear, the book of Joel is as much evidence of God’s grace as are the other 65 books of the Bible. My point is simply this: God has graciously revealed himself to us in his word.

Can you imagine what life would be like if we didn’t have the Bible? How could we know anything about God? How could we make sense of who we are and how sin has impacted our world? How could we know anything reliable about Jesus Christ, his saving death, and his glorious resurrection? On what basis could we anchor our hope for the future?

When was the last time you read the book of Joel? Aside from preparing for these sermons, I can't tell you the last time I did. I've learned more about this book in the last two weeks than I did in four years of seminary and twenty years of pastoral ministry. Why? Because Joel takes work, and the Psalms, the Gospels, and Paul's letters are much easier to read. That's why last summer we took time to look at a few of the Minor Prophets and it's why we're looking at Joel today and next Sunday.

As I said earlier, invasion is inevitable. But by his grace, God chose to include a book of the Bible all about invasion and how we're to respond when it comes. The book of Joel is itself evidence of God's grace in the face of unprecedented invasion.

Let's read a little more from Joel 1 to discover the second evidence of God's grace. Read along with me starting at Joel 1:13.

"Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

Has not the food been cut off before our very eyes—joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seeds are shriveled beneath the clods. The storehouses are in ruins, the granaries have been broken down, for the grain has dried up. How the cattle moan! The herds mill about because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep are suffering.

To you, LORD, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness and flames have burned up all the trees of the field. Even the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness" (Joel 1:13-20, NIV).

The second evidence of God's grace in the face of unprecedented invasion that we see is this: **Believers have been given a God-honoring way of expressing their grief—lament.**

Recently, I started reading a book by pastor Mark Vroegop titled *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*. In his book, Pastor Vroegop describes how the Lord used some difficult seasons of life to bring him to a place where he has learned to love lament.

Notice in verse 13 that the LORD said through the prophet Joel, "Put on sackcloth, you priests, and *mourn*." The verb "to mourn" can also be translated *wail*, or *lament*. There is nothing quiet and reserved about this expression of grief.

Pastor Vroegop offers this helpful definition of biblical lament.

“Lament can be defined as a loud cry, a howl, or a passionate expression of grief. However, in the Bible lament is more than sorrow or talking about sadness. It is more than walking through the stages of grief.

Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.

Throughout the Scriptures, lament gives voice to the strong emotions that believers feel because of suffering. It wrestles with the struggles that surface. Lament typically asks at least two questions: (1) “Where are you, God?” (2) “If you love me, why is this happening?” Sometimes these questions are asked by individuals. At other times they are asked by entire communities. Sometimes laments reflect upon difficult circumstances in general, sometimes because of what others have done, and sometimes because of the sinful choices of God’s people in particular.

You might think lament is the opposite of praise. It isn’t. Instead, lament is a path to praise as we are led through our brokenness and disappointment. The space between brokenness and God’s mercy is where this song is sung. Think of lament as the transition between pain and promise.

It is the path from heartbreak to hope.”<sup>1</sup>

By God’s grace, through lament, believers have a God-honoring way of expressing their grief.

In verse 14, God’s people are told to “cry out to the LORD.” In that same verse, God’s people are instructed to set aside times to come together for a time of fasting and prayer.

Here at our church, we set aside one Sunday a month to come together and pray. We call it Second Sunday Prayer. Today happens to be the second Sunday of June, and following this service, we’ll gather down in the Chapel to pray. Over the years at Second Sunday Prayer, we’ve prayed about some tough stuff. At times, tears have been shed. I’m no expert, but in these times of corporate prayer, I hope we can learn to lament together. If you would like to join us, I hope you’ll come and pray down to the Chapel after today’s service.

We’ve been given a God-honoring way of expressing our grief through lament, and this too is evidence of God’s grace in the face of unprecedented invasion.

There is a phrase that appeared back in verse 15 that I want you to notice. Verse 15 says,

“Alas for that day! For **the day of the LORD** is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.”

Similarly, as we read on into chapter 2, the LORD continued to speak through Joel saying,

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019)

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for **the day of the LORD** is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.

Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste— nothing escapes them. They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle.

At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defenses without breaking ranks. They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves they enter through the windows.

Before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. **The day of the LORD** is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?”

Some scholars interpret this passage to mean that the locust invasion described in chapter 1 was merely a preview of worse things to come. Either the damage done by the locusts was so bad, it could be compared to an invading army of soldiers, or quite literally, an invasion from a foreign army was on the horizon. Either way, Joel spoke of these manifestations of God’s judgment as “**the day of the LORD**” (2:1, 11).

In his essay, author Jason S. DeRouchie writes,

“The phrase “the day of [the LORD]” and its abbreviated parallels (e.g., “the/that day”) refer both to the ultimate time when Yahweh will punish and restore/re-create the whole world and to the periodic pen-ultimate days that clarify and anticipate it. In this context, therefore, “day” refers more to an event in time rather than an extent of time.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, there is an ultimate, final day of the LORD that will take place at the end of history, but in the meantime, throughout history there will also be *days* of the LORD that anticipate and point to that future day of judgment.

In the Old Testament, the phrase primarily is used by the prophets. But the phrase and references to the day also appear in the New Testament. Jesus often spoke about the day of the LORD. For example,

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<sup>2</sup> Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Day of the Lord,” The Gospel Coalition (website), accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-day-of-the-lord/>.

“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on **the day of judgment** for every empty word they have spoken” (Matt. 12:36, NIV).

Paul’s letters include references and allusions to the day of the LORD. He reminded the church in Corinth that,

“[W]e must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10, NIV).

Would you believe me if I told you that the threat of a coming day of the LORD is a third evidence of God’s grace that we find in Joel’s prophecy?

**The day of the LORD is evidence of God’s grace in the face of unprecedented invasion.**

How can an announcement of judgment be evidence of a gracious God, you ask? Consider these words from the Apostle Peter,

“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

But **the day of the Lord** will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to **the day of God** and speed its coming. **That day** will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:8-13, NIV).

Every instance of the day of the LORD, every preview of the final day of judgment, every occurrence of unprecedented invasion is God’s gracious way of calling sinners to repentance and believers to greater obedience and holiness. When the locusts come and leave nothing but devastation, in those seasons of suffering God graciously provides us with time to reflect, repent, and respond.

The locust invasion in Joel’s day was a manifestation of God’s judgment against his people. But not this doesn’t mean that every invasion we encounter is necessarily tied to an instance of personal sin. Yet, Hebrews reminds us that the Lord disciplines those he loves, and

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11, NIV).

Of course, the greatest evidence of God's grace in the face of unprecedented invasion took place on the cross. What do we see when we look at the cross of Jesus? We see the day of the LORD. We see an invasion of God's judgment. We see God's righteous wrath poured out against sin, not on us sinners, but on the sinless Son of God.

Isaiah foresaw this day of the LORD when he said,

“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:4-6, NIV).

The day of the LORD is evidence of God's grace in the face of unprecedented invasion.

I hope that as we've walked through the first part of Joel's prophecy together, you've seen the evidence of God's grace even in the face of unprecedented invasion.

But there's more to the story. Joel's prophecy speaks not only of invasion, but also of restoration. That's what we will consider together next Sunday when we come back to the book of Joel.

Let's pray.