

## **The Worst Hard Time: A Plot Twist**

***Joel 1:19-2:14***

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,  
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### **It is a Critical Detail**

There are some stories, from books to movies, that hold critical plot twists. These twists sneak up on you and once you catch up to them, you never view the story the same. Once you know the great plot twist, it changes how you interact with that story on further viewings or readings.

For example, once you've seen *Planet of the Apes*, you are jolted with a critical detail that has been unveiled near the very end.

Once you watched *The Empire Strikes Back*, you now have almost two movies' worth of details to re-process. You begin to work backwards, revisiting the beginning of a story that took place a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

Once you've seen the *Sixth Sense*, you never see Bruce Willis the same and begin to wonder if he was alive in all of his other movies. Especially the *Die Hard* sequels.

You almost have to re-read books like *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Jane Eyre*, *Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected* because of their shocking plot twists.

Our text today contains a surprising development from what we started with in Joel chapter one. And this development, once you understand what it means, will force readers and hearers to re-consider what they have bet their entire lives upon. It will push people to consider re-evaluating the stories of their own lives.

From chapter one of Joel into chapter two, disasters just sort of pile up on each other. We saw an agricultural catastrophe and now we have this description of an invading army. We get an understanding of the destructive capabilities of the invaders. It draws further attention to the Day of the Lord, the day when the Lord returns. This will be a day that is so momentous that everyone needs to be warned of its approach.

Our passage today continues to describe what that day will be like, warning readers about the darkness that will accompany it. This darkness is compared to the approaching army. We then see the metaphor change to overwhelming fire and then to an army that is impossible to stop. This army's coming results in an apocalyptic cataclysm affecting the entire universe. However, as we read through the first half of chapter two, we discover a surprising detail that is perhaps even more devastating than the physical presence of the army: the identity of the army's commander. I invite you to read with me this morning Joel 1:19-2:13. (read text)

### **POST TEXT**

Have you ever heard an alarm and ignored it? One of those lights come on alerting you that the water filter needs to be replaced or the little wrench light is on in the car or the tornado siren blares and you decide that your immediate attention should be diverted elsewhere? For all of you snooze button smashers, this text is a “take notice” text.

This section begins with an urgent series of commands. There is a trumpet signaling a warning made from a ram's horn. This was a horn blown as a warning for an attack. There is an alarm being sounded on God's holy mountain. A loud noise is to be raised here. Whatever is coming will make the inhabitants of the land shake in terror. We read later in chapter two that the place where the alarm is raised is called Zion (2:15) and “my holy hill.” Zion was the site of the temple, which the psalmist calls the “dwelling of God himself” (Ps 76:2), so it is the natural source for his warnings.

The warning is coming about the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord bookends 2:1-11. While the Day has yet to occur, its nearness, or its imminence, is the warning. Obadiah writes that the Day of the Lord is “at hand.” (Obad 15)

Joel quotes Zephaniah verbatim as the Day of the Lord is described. As we see the description of this day, we connect it to God's presence among the Israelites back in Exodus. Darkness was one of the plagues, along with locusts bringing darkness. It is a day of gloom – which is used as a synonym for darkness.

In Genesis 1:2-5, God set boundaries and limits on darkness by creating light. What he limited then will return.

Darkness and gloom are appropriate parallels to this empty, lifeless landscape that has destroyed all the vegetation – vegetation that God also created in Genesis 1. This text corrects any sort of escapism distortion people might have. Along with the prophet Amos, Joel uses “darkness and gloom” to correct Israel’s optimistic understanding of the Day of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Israel had limited their understanding of the Day of the Lord to be one of blessing, light, and brightness. Amos corrected that misperception. Zephaniah also warns his audience about the Day of the Lord with these same terms. Joel uses these terms to build on Amos and Zephaniah’s teaching. There is to be a cautionary view of the Day of the Lord rather than a popular, happy, party.

We need to be sure to have a measured, fully orbed understanding of what the Day of the Lord brings. God clearly wants warning and weight brought to our concept of the Day.

### **Like a Mighty Army**

Joel then expands on the nature of the Day of the Lord with this image of a mighty army. He paints a picture of a darkness spreading out like a net over the hills of Jerusalem in a slow but inevitable approach. As you read Joel, you realize that this army is without any comparison and it is from time immemorial. This will be unlike anything ever before or ever again.

Joel then uses spatial words to describe the invasion. He describes what happens before it and behind it. There is an understanding of a scorched earth policy here. First there was beautiful land like the Garden of Eden. After the invasion, it is only destruction. They turn Eden into desert.

Joel then takes two other prophecies of hope and turns them on their heads. Both Isaiah 51:3 and Ezekiel 36:35 declare that God restores his errant people, making their ruins and deserts like the Garden of Eden. Imagine the rhetorical power of reversing that image. The listener would have had raised expectations upon mention of Eden, and then those expectations are shattered as they listen to this new meaning.

This fire, there is no escape. Conventional wars generate an expected amount of refugees, escapees, or survivors. But not here. Nothing will escape this horde.

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 5:18, 20.

Next this devouring army is compared to war horses and chariots. The army will be as swift as war horses and sound like careening chariots. This helps to illustrate the dread that this unprecedented force will bring on anyone who encounters it. From the military metaphors to this fiery destruction, Joel drives the point home. This force is awesome and unstoppable.

Imagine the terror and fear of foot soldiers on the run from cavalry? Where do you go? What do you do? One does not outrun horses. What was once beautiful has been destroyed. This is devastating, so much so, that the people are to respond to this dread like a woman in the anguishing pain of labor. This is physical and psychological torment and pain. Gloom and darkness. And it is meant to be real and immediate to the people who read and hear it. Remember, labor back then did not happen in hospitals assisted by pain medication.

This army attacks at a run, scaling the protective city walls as if they never existed in the first place. They never stop. Joel 2:7-9 describes how this army shows unswerving commitment to their own course, moving straight ahead, going through rather than around obstacles.

Look closer and you see that there are no defenses. This foe climbs over walls, never stopping, never turning back, moving straight ahead and coming through windows. This army is unswerving. And then we read it.

The Hebrew in Joel 2 makes this surprising development ominous. Read new information in verse 11. The elements of the universe are in turmoil. The earth shakes. The very heavens tremble like the earth moving in an earthquake. The sun and the moon blacken like the night, using a verb in Hebrew that is often used in texts of grief and mourning (Psalm 36:14; Jeremiah 8:21). The stars literally “remove their light.”

All of this leads us to the twist here. The focus shifts from people and earth and creation and it centers on God, the Creator of everything. God reveals things from His perspective here. This is not a comforting message to His people. God has raised his voice. And when this happens, it usually is not to share good news.<sup>2</sup> This is devastating information. God’s voice has been raised from where? “In the presence of His army.”

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 22:14; Jeremiah 25:30; Amos 1:2

This devastating army is not some freakish, accidental, random thing. It is a force that is brought and controlled by God himself. This changes everything. With this information, the audience is forced to now rethink what they had just heard and experienced. This new understanding changes perspective. God commands this army.

### **Terrifying Clarification**

This is a terrifying clarification. Up until verse eleven, that locust army could have been some enemy, some antagonistic force bringing pain on God's people. They could've envisioned themselves up to then as victims, being unjustly attacked by the bad guys.

But if that is God's army, well that fact changes everything. All the details of the text take on new meaning. God's divine appearances, called theophanies, are accompanied by cloud and blackness, especially in the Exodus account<sup>3</sup>. Trumpet blasts accompanies God's presence there too. Fire is also a manifestation of the Lord at Sinai as well as other places in the Old Testament.

God's appearance is associated with his "arm," a symbol or metaphor of his strength and military might<sup>4</sup>. Earthquake is also associated with the appearance of God at Mt. Sinai as it accompanies smoke, fire, and trumpet.

But what to make of this new twist? In the middle of this anguish, darkness, and gloom, it becomes clear that a person cannot figure this out alone. You cannot pull yourself up by the bootstraps here. There is no A for effort. No, in this darkness, there needs to be an external source of light and hope. Another voice indicating that the darkness is not permanent. Bracketing this bleak and gloomy picture are rays of hope.

**First, we acknowledge that God hears his people (1:19-20) and that people can turn back to him in grace if they respond to him in appropriate ways. (2:12-14)**

The message here is not "darkness does not exist." And we are not supposed to deny the pain or anguish that exists within that darkness. It is real and the pain and the hurt that it brings is real. That is not the message of Joel 2.

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<sup>3</sup> Ex 19:16, 19; 20:18; Ps 47:5; Zeph 1:16; Zech 9:4)

<sup>4</sup> Ex 15:16; Deut 4:34; 5:15; 1 Kings 8:42; Isa 51:9

The message here is that though darkness is rising in this world, it will be overcome by the light. In reality, that light has already dawned and the darkness could not overcome it.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to understand that darkness does not exist independently of God. God has been in control of it from the very beginning of creation. And God is present and at work in it even when our eyes cannot see it. God is not just God in the darkness, He is God of the darkness. Sovereign over all of it.

And yes, God's army is focused and determined because the will of God is focused and determined. And the destruction depicted here is not random either. This is what judgment against sin will look like on the Day of the Lord. Devastating. Relentless. Complete. And we see God's heart revealed through this.

God's heart is not bent toward destruction. God's heart is revealed here. This great and terrible Day has not yet happened. It is a day in the future. It is coming, to be certain, but it has not yet come. This twist here doesn't reveal God's desire for destruction. It reveals God's desire for reconciliation.

God is terrifyingly holy. That is true. But God is also infinitely loving and merciful. This awful warning is an extension of His love for us. Even now, God's declaration to his people: "Turn to me with all your heart." That is what God desires. He does not want ANYONE to perish. He wants everyone to turn to him, to repent, and be reconciled. God wants us to turn back, to repent. And in His infinite love and mercy, God sent the One solution to us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

It is an old, old, true story. Jesus, the Savior, came to us from glory. He was the outside voice calling to us, the outside Light that overwhelmed the darkness and gloom. He gave His life on calvary to save wretched messes like you and me. On that day of darkness, Jesus bled and died for us, so that we could repent from our sins.

And everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ alone can have life.

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<sup>5</sup> Isa 9:2; Matt 4:16; John 1

**FURTHER THOUGHTS:**

Have you ever experienced a house fire or a large-scale fire that was out of control? What was that like?

What movies, books, or stories do you remember that had a plot twist that forever changed how you watched the movie?

What are some difficult, painful, gloomy or dark seasons of life that people you know (or perhaps you yourself) have or are experiencing?

When you consider that God limits darkness, he set boundaries for it, does that comfort you? Why or why not?

Have you ever considered before that God is sovereign of the darkness and also present with you in the darkness?

The painful moments, the seasons of darkness and gloom may seem random. But are they really? How does God redeem pain and hurt in our lives?