

INVASION BY LOCUSTS!

(Most of the following was taken from: Exploring the Book, by J. Sidlow Baxter, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.)

“The young locusts rapidly attain the size of the common grasshopper, and proceed in one and the same direction, first crawling, and at a later period leaping as they go, devouring every green thing that lies in their path. They advance more slowly than a devouring fire, but the ravages they commit are scarcely inferior or less to be dreaded. Fields of standing wheat and barley, vineyards, mulberry orchards, and groves of olive, fig and other trees are in a few hours deprived of every green blade and leaf, the very bark being often destroyed. The ground over which their devastating hordes have passed at once assumes an appearance of sterility and dearth. Well did the Romans call them ‘the burners of the land,’ which is the literal meaning of our word ‘locust.’ On they move, covering the ground so completely as to hide it from sight, and in such numbers that it often takes three or four days for the mighty host to pass by. When seen at a distance, this swarm of advancing locusts resembles a cloud of dust or sand, reaching a few feet above the ground, as the myriads of insects leap forward. The only thing that momentarily arrests their progress is a sudden change of wether; for the cold benumbs them while it lasts. They also keep quiet at night, swarming like bees on the bushes and hedges until the morning sun warms them and revives them and enables them to proceed on their devastating march. They have no king nor leader, yet they falter not, but press on in serried ranks, urged in the same direction by an irresistible impulse, and turn neither to the right hand nor the left for any sort of obstacle. When a wall or a house lies in their way, they climb straight up, going over the roof to the other side, and blindly rush in at the open doors and windows. When they come to water, be it a mere puddle or a river, a lake or the open sea, they never attempt to go round it, but unhesitatingly leap in and are drowned, and their dead bodies, floating on the surface, form a bridge for their companions to pass over. The scourge thus often comes to an end, but it as often happens that the decomposition of millions of insects produces pestilence and death. History records a remarkable instance which occurred in the year 125 before the Christian era. The insects were driven by the wind into the sea in such vast numbers that their bodies, being driven back by the tide upon the land caused a stench which produced a fearful plague whereby eighty thousand persons perished in Libya, Cyrene, and Egypt.

The locust, however, soon acquires its wings, and proceeds on its way by flight, whenever a strong breeze favors its progress. Our attention has often been attracted

by the sudden darkening of the sun in a summer sky, accompanied by the peculiar noise which a swarm of locusts always makes moving through the air; and, glancing upward, we have seen them passing like a cloud at a height of two or three hundred feet.

We call particular attention to the above mention of the fire-like effects of the locusts; of the noise made by their wings; of the darkening of the sun; and of their destruction as the sea shore exactly as Joel describes (2:20). But if a locust 'swarm' is so awful, what must a locust 'plague' be! It is little wonder that when Moses announced a coming plague of locusts Pharaoh's counselors exclaimed in desperation, "knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?"

Mr. James Bryce, in his *Impressions of South Africa*, writes: 'It is a strange sight, beautiful if you can forget the destruction it brings with it. The whole air, to twelve or eighteen feet above the ground, is filled with the insects, reddish brown in body, with bright, gauzy wings. When the sun's rays catch them it is like the sea sparkling with light. When you see them against a cloud they are like the dense flakes of a driving snow-storm. You feel as if you had never before realized immensity in number. Vast crowds of men gathered at a festival, countless tree-tops rising along the slope of a forest ridge, the chimneys of London houses from the top of St. Paul's - all are as nothing to the myriads of insects that blot out the sun above and cover the ground beneath and fill the air whichever way one looks. The breeze carries them swiftly past, but they come on in fresh clouds, a host of which there is no end, each of them a harmless creature which you can catch and crush in your hand, but appalling in their power of collective devastation.'

Or to quote, in an abbreviated form, from W.M. Thomson's classic work, *The Land And The Book*: "their number was astounding; the whole face of the mountain was black with them. On they came like a living deluge. We dug trenches, and kindled fires, and beat and burned to death 'heaps upon heaps'; but the effort was utterly useless. Wave after wave rolled up the mountain side, and poured over rocks, walls, ditches and hedges - those behind covering up and bridging over the masses already killed. It was perfectly appalling to watch this animated river as it flowed *up* the road, and ascended the hill above my house. For for days they continued to pass on toward the east....millions upon millions. In their march they devour every green thing, and with wonderful expedition. The noise made in marching and foraging was like that of a heavy shower on a distant forest. Nothing in their habits is more striking than the pertinacity with which they all pursue the same like of march, like a disciplined army.'

In the *Journal of Sacred Literature*, October 1865, a writer recorded: 'Our garden finished, they continued toward the town, devastating one garden after another. Whatever one is doing one hears their noise from without, like the noise of

armed hosts, or the running of many waters. When in an erect position their appearance at a little distance is like that of a well-armed horseman.’ Another writer says: ‘To strength incredible for so small a creature, they add saw-like teeth, admirable calculated to eat up all the herbs in the land.’ Another says: ‘After eating up the corn, they fell upon the vines, the pulse, the willows, and even the hemp, notwithstanding its great bitterness.’ and another says: ‘for eighty or ninety miles they devoured every green herb and every blade of grass.’ And another says: ‘the gardens outside Jaffa are not completely stripped, even the bark of the young trees have been devoured, and look like a birch-tree forest in winter.’ and still another: ‘the fields finished, they invade towns and houses, in search of stores. Victual or all kinds, hay, straw, and even linen and woolen clothes and leather bottles, they consume or tear in pieces. They flood through the open, unglazed windows and lattices; nothing can keep them out.’ W.M. Thomson tells us that when the millions upon millions of locust eggs hatch, the very dust seems to waken to life, and the earth itself seems to tremble with them; and later, when the vast new breed have acquired wings, the very heavens seem tremulous with them. And as for Joel’s likening of the locusts to “dawn scattered on the mountains,” G.A. Smith says: ‘No one who has seen a cloud of locusts can question the realism even of this picture; the heavy gloom of the immeasurable mass of them, shot by beams of light where a few of the sun’s imprisoned beams have broken through or across the storm of lustrous wings. This is like dawn beaten down upon the hilltops, and crushed by rolling masses of cloud, in conspiracy to prolong the night.’

We need add no more. The foregoing evidence settles two things conclusively: the *awfulness* of a really bad locust plague; and the *literalness* of Joel’s description. There can remain no doubt that the invasion which Joel announced as imminent was an invasion by locusts; nor can we doubt that it was this to which he referred, in the first place, when he said: “the day of Jehovah is at hand.” The connection in the context is too clear to mistake.

