

Lessons from Locusts

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everyone. My name's Ian and I'm delighted to be speaking to you this morning, albeit that I'm not able to see you. It's been great, hasn't it, to be able to be reminded of some of the Christmas carols, to enjoy them again, and to think of all that the Lord Jesus did for us after he came into the world on that first Christmas.

For the next few minutes, though, I want to pick up on the other theme that's been in our service, particularly in our second video and in Fraser's Prayer, and to reflect on some of the things that have been happening in our world this year.

End of the year is a good time to take stock, isn't it, and to think where are we and where are we likely to go in the future. And it's been a really, really hard year.

At best, all of us have suffered great inconvenience and changes to our lifestyle over the year. But for many people, it's been much worse than that.

There have been financial pressures, perhaps worries about job. Many have been ill, whether with COVID-19 or with other things. People have suffered in their mental health, made worse by the restrictions we've been living under.

[1 : 1 5] And of course, some too have suffered terrible bereavements over the year. It's been a hard time. And I was trying to think what part of the Bible could speak into our current situation.

And my mind kept going back to the book of Jewel and the plague of locusts that we read about earlier. I know we studied Jewel a couple of years ago, but I think it is worth revisiting it briefly this morning.

Because I was thinking that the plague of locusts in Jewel has many similarities to the COVID-19 pandemic we've been suffering this year.

Both of them came on us very suddenly. For most of us, there was little warning or little expectation of what was about to hit us.

Both of them were disastrous in the lives of individuals and of families. A plague of locusts can destroy your livelihood overnight.

[2 : 1 7] Both of them also provoked national economic crises. And for both of them, there's this feeling of wave after wave of things coming.

Did you notice in our reading that it talks about the different kinds of locusts that would come? The locust swarm, the great locusts, the young locusts, the other locusts, one after another.

And just when you think things are getting better, they get worse again. And isn't that very much where we've been and where we are? We had the initial lockdown, as bad as that was.

And then we thought, well, it's getting better. The number of deaths is reducing. And maybe things are getting back to normal. And then in September, it all picked up again. And we were back under more restrictions.

And then when the vaccine was coming along, we thought, great, there's hope now. We have a new variant of COVID that is coming and has forced us into even more restrictions. One thing after another.

[3 : 17] So I want to learn today some lessons from locusts that I hope will help us in our current situation. And assure us in particular of God's presence and of God's love for us.

That love that was revealed so wonderfully in sending his son into the world. We're going to come to Joel in just a few minutes. But I want to begin by talking more generally about locusts.

They're going to be in many ways the villains of this sermon. But they also are wonderful creatures. Locusts are among the most isolated of all insects.

You won't find locusts gathering together as you would bees in a hive or hornets in a nest. Or other animals, other insects, ants in a hill perhaps.

Locusts are very solitary. Locusts are very solitary. They live in the desert. They find somewhere where they can nest individually and can mate.

[4 : 22] And they stay there. And they actually, if they see other locusts coming, they very actively run away from them. Now I can almost hear some of you shouting, that can't be right.

The whole thing about locusts is that they come in their millions. There are huge swarms of them. There are no other creatures that gather together as much as they do.

And you're right. But so am I. Because there are two forms of locusts. And they're called solitary and gregarious.

And in many ways they're very different from each other. Different in character and also different in their looks. The solitary locust is designed to blend in with its surroundings.

So it's brown or sometimes green. The gregarious locust is much more colourful, often yellow. And it also has bigger wings and a shorter body than the solitary locust.

[5 : 19] And the gregarious locust indeed does swarm in its millions. When there is a plague of locusts, there can be as many as 50 million locusts in one square kilometre.

And the whole swarm can be bigger than the human population of the world. They come in their billions. And they are so different from the solitary locust.

But here's the remarkable thing. I'm not talking about two subspecies of locusts. Because a solitary locust can change almost overnight into a gregarious locust.

Change its character. Even change its appearance. And change what it does. The way it happens, and scientists have only learned this in the last hundred years or so, I guess.

Is that most locusts most of the time live this solitary existence. They find a patch of green that they can live in and that they can eat from.

[6 : 27] And they stay there by themselves. They lay their eggs. And they have very little contact with other locusts. And then the rains come. And as the rains come, the eggs that are around the locusts and the various locusts quite close to each other, they hatch.

And there's a huge number of new locusts. And there are so many that they rub against each other. And scientists believe that it's when they rub against each other their legs that a chemical is released, which brings about this dramatic change in character.

And because there are so many of them, there's not enough food for them to eat where they are. And they go flying away, flying in their millions, carried along by the wind. And everywhere they go, they descend.

They ravage the land. They eat their own weight in food every day. And they create the kind of crisis that we are familiar with that is described in the book of Joel.

But I think there's a really important lesson for us here. When the locusts get into the time of crisis, that's when they come together and work together.

[7 : 44] And my first lesson from locusts for us this morning in the circumstances that we're facing at present is that God wants us to face trials together.

Now, as Christians, we're never solitary. We're not called to live a solitary existence. We're called to be part of a church and to enjoy fellowship and support of other Christians.

But perhaps it's in the times of trial that we should and do most come together. Remember Paul's description in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 of the church as being like a body.

And when one member suffers, everyone suffers. We pull together in times of trial, just as the locust does. I think looking back over this year, one of the things that's been quite noticeable and has been a real evidence of God's grace in our church is the togetherness that there's been.

Not together physically. Only recently have we been able to have services at the church and only a limited number of people were able to come to them. But together in many other ways.

[8 : 57] As we've been going around the last couple of weeks and giving small Christmas presents to many of our members, very often the thing that we've talked about is the fact that although we've been apart as a church, we've been together because we've been able to worship as one every Sunday morning throughout the whole of the year and Sunday evenings as well.

And these services, although we couldn't physically be together a lot of the time, have brought us together as we have worshipped together and as we have continued to learn together.

Alongside that, another blessing this year has been our prayer times on Zoom. Every evening during the first lockdown, twice a week now.

And these for many of us have been an enormous blessing. As we've been able to come together and to bring to God our requests and our thanksgivings and to enjoy the fellowship and support and prayers of others.

And during the lockdown, whatever kind of day you'd been having, even if you had a really hard time, you could know in the evening there was opportunity to pray together and to talk together with Christian brothers and sisters.

[10 : 14] And maybe one more. As most people we know, we run a food bank, the Basics Bank, at the church here at Brunsfield. And the thing that's been really wonderful this year has been how the Basics Bank has brought our community together.

Our neighbours in Leamington Terrace have been enormously generous in the provision. They've made wheelbarrows every week of food. And not just them. Political groups, other churches, local supermarkets, local school.

Lots and lots of people at the time of crisis thinking of others and saying we're going through it together. Let's see what we can do for one another.

I don't want to paste too rosy a picture here. I'm aware that for some people you may feel you haven't been supported as well as you might be. And we need to address that. But very much in this year there's been a sense we've all been suffering.

We've all been struggling, some more than others. And there have been opportunities to face that together. And as we go into 2021, and as we have further uncertainty, certainly for a few months, let's go together and as believers in the Lord Jesus, as a church of his people, let's continue to support and encourage one another.

[11 : 41] And if you're joining us today and you're not a member of Brunsfield, but you're at another church, I pray that similarly you may be able to support and encourage each other through these difficult times.

Let's move on now and let's think about the book of Joel. Joel is a book where the people of Israel are facing a crisis.

In chapter 1, the crisis is clearly a plague of locusts. In chapter 2, it's a bit less certain. The language is still about locusts, but it appears it may have been a metaphor for an invading army which was going to come and attack the people.

Either way, there was a crisis. And when you get a plague of locusts, that is an enormous crisis. You may have missed it in everything else that's going on this year.

But 2020 has been one of the worst years on record for locust plagues. The worst worldwide for at least 25 years.

[12 : 50] The worst in many parts of the world for 70 years or more. And note it in some of the countries that have had very significant locust infestations.

Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Somalia, Eritrea, India, Pakistan, Iran, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia.

Right throughout Africa, the Middle East and large parts of Asia. Indeed, even as far away as South America, there have been issues with locusts this year. It has been a bad year for people in these countries, not just because of COVID-19, but because of the locust plague that has been a feature of 2020.

It would be good to pray for them. In this prayer, Fraser mentioned other things that maybe we're not so aware of this year. And this certainly could be one of them, that we could pray for these nations, even as the locust problems still continue.

But anyway, in Israel, in the time of Joel, they were in the midst of one of these plagues of locusts. And Joel says to the people in his letter, what God is saying to you now is you need to listen and you need to act.

[14 : 11] And that's my second lesson from locusts this morning. God speaks to us in our suffering. When we are going through difficult times, when times are hard for us, we should be saying to God, what is it that you want to say to me?

What lessons are there to be learned? Over the last few days while I was preparing for today, I usually watched a film on the television.

It was Shadowlands, the story of C.S. Lewis, a man who is recognized as one of those who was really expert and really thought deeply about the subject of suffering.

Look up Christian and suffering and Google or any other search engine and you will certainly find lots of quotes by C.S. Lewis on it. And Shadowlands points out that C.S. Lewis had been through a difficult time in his childhood.

He'd suffered a lot of loss then, but he had kind of internalized it and it made him repressed and he had sought to hide and disguise his suffering.

[15 : 25] And he spoke a lot about suffering. He developed the theology of it that many of us would still hold on to today. And then there was a big change in his life when an American came, Joy Davidman, came into his life and eventually married her, then fell in love and then he lost her to cancer.

And for what for him had been in some ways a theoretical thing, talking about suffering and presenting it to others became very real.

And he came to understand something more of the nature of suffering and also to understand that the joy of love justifies the pain that often comes with it.

And C.S. Lewis, there are many quotes that we could bring from him on the subject of suffering, but let me just bring you this. You've probably have heard it before. C.S. Lewis wrote, Pain insists upon being attended to.

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

[16 : 42] When we are going through times of suffering, we should be asking to God, what are the lessons you want us to learn from it? And that's what Joel is saying in his context.

At the beginning of our reading, hear, listen, tell. In other words, pay attention. This is something that's important. And in the core of the message, perhaps in chapter 2, even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart.

God is speaking to his people through the time of suffering and saying you need to change, and here is what I am saying to you.

I wonder what God is saying to us in our time of difficulty. What are the lessons that we need to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic?

I don't claim prophetic powers, so in some ways I'm speculating, but let me say on a national level, on an international level, I think we need to learn that we're not as in control of our circumstances as we might like to think.

[17 : 57] Yes, there have been great developments in science and in technology and in learning in recent years. And they're wonderful and they've helped human beings to make more and more of this wonderful world that God has given us.

And yet something can come along totally out of the blue and derail almost everything. And perhaps God is saying to us, as a nation, as a world, you're not as in control of things as you thought you were.

You need to return to me. And what is God saying to us as a church and as individuals? Well, again, I wouldn't presume to know what God is saying to each of us.

But I think God is certainly saying, aspect to all of us, that there are things that you depend on in your lives. And some of these things have been taken away from you in the last year.

The meetings with family, the ability to interact with others, to give your grandchildren a hug, even to shake hands with other people as a sign of friendship.

[19 : 11] These things have gone for now. But the thing that remains is God's love for us and our relationship with him, if we have it.

And perhaps God is saying to us, some things have gone. Some things you would normally rely on and would value are no longer available.

But you still have me and you need to get back to the basics and to understand if you have God, if you have Christ in your life, then you can face whatever the world throws at you.

Now, maybe God's saying something completely different to you. If that is the case, please listen and act as appropriate. But God speaks in our suffering.

That's a key lesson from our locus. And then finally, the positive message is that God loves us and never leaves us.

[20 : 17] Joel chapter 1 is very gloomy. The Lord is pointing out all the faults of the people and the consequences of them. Parts of chapter 2 are also gloomy.

But amid all of that, God has a message of hope. You are still my people, Israel. I still love you. And if you return to me, if you repent and choose to go my way rather than your way, I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten.

You will have plenty again. The food that you so wish for now, it will be there, it will be on your tables. You will be able to enjoy life to the full again.

And that's a great message, a great lesson for us from the locusts and in this time of pandemic. God still loves us and God is still with us.

That was the thrust, wasn't it, of our reading from Romans earlier on. That there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

[21 : 33] And how do we know that? How do we know that God's love is with us and will continue to sustain us? It's a few verses earlier in Romans chapter 8.

He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

How do we know that God loves us? We know because he gave his son for us. He didn't withhold the one who was most dear to him. He sent him into the world that first Christmas day.

He lived a perfect life as a man. He died on the cross of Calvary, taking our sins on him. And because we know that God has done that for us, we know that God cares and that God will continue to be with us whatever our circumstances.

And perhaps today, God is saying to us, depend on me, depend on my love, and look to the future. This situation won't last forever.

[22 : 44] These circumstances are short term. And even the problems and the trials of this world are not forever. If we know and trust the Lord Jesus, if we enjoy God's love in our lives, we know that ultimately we'll go to be with him and to be with him forever.

God left his son. Christ on the cross could say, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But those who know and love the Lord Jesus can have this confidence that God will never leave us.

We can always be in his love. But let me just say, God doesn't trust himself upon us. The Israelites, before they could enjoy the benefits of God's love and see the restoration, they had to come to God and recognize their need of him.

If they continued to reject God, they would experience his judgment. If they continued to ignore him and to try to do things their own way, they would never get back to the state that they would want to be in.

And similarly for us, we need to come to God, we need to come first in repentance and faith, trusting in the Lord Jesus for our salvation, for forgiveness, for all that we've done wrong and that he took the punishment for on the cross.

[24 : 16] And then when we come into times of trial, and not just then in our daily lives as well, we need to recognize our dependence on God and to live in his love and to be obedient to him.

And I think is the great forward-looking lesson from the locusts. God loves us. God wants us to enjoy his presence with us.

God will never leave us. And if we trust in him, we can be confident, not just for the next few months, but for the next years, however long we have in this world, and then beyond that, that we will go and be with the Lord Jesus.

So three lessons from locusts. God wants us to come together, to face trials together. God wants to speak to us in our suffering. Are we listening to what he has to say to us?

And God loves us and will never leave us. At our Christmas Day service, if you watched it, at the beginning, people were describing in one word what Christmas meant to them.

[25 : 28] and by far the most common word that people use was hope. Hope in a time of difficulty. Hope also for eternal life.

Let's leave this morning with that hope that we can have in Jesus, trusting in him and knowing that he will never leave us or let us down.

Let's join together in prayer. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Our Father, we thank you for what we have been celebrating over the last few days. We thank you for the joy of Christmas, the joy of the fact that your Son came into the world to be our Savior.

And yet we do recognize again that it's been a very different Christmas. And that now it is again very different as we have moved back into very high levels of restrictions.

And we recognize again that for many of us this year has been really, really difficult. We pray for those who have suffered loss, for those who perhaps have lost jobs, have lost health, have lost loved ones.

[26 : 40] And we pray that you will be particularly close to them at this time. We pray for lands where the situation is in many ways even worse than here. And we pray particularly for the lands that have been affected by the locust plague this year as they seek to rebuild not just from a health point of view but from agriculture as well.

That you will help them and be with them and give wisdom particularly to governments and to leaders. And we pray for all of us that all of us may at this time as we look back and as we look forward that we may hear what you are saying to us.

That we may live within your love. that we may together be able to support and encourage one another and live for the Lord Jesus.

We thank you for this time together and we ask for your blessing on us in the coming days. In the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen.