

Joel 1:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten;
and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm
eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the
caterpiller eaten.

Analysis

This verse employs devastating Hebrew parallelism to describe comprehensive agricultural destruction through four successive stages of locust invasion. The terms gazam (palmerworm/cutting locust), arbeh (swarming locust), yeleq (hopping locust/cankerworm), and chasil (destroying locust/caterpillar) describe either different species or lifecycle stages of locusts. The repetitive structure—"that which X left, Y ate"—emphasizes total devastation. Nothing escapes; each wave consumes what the previous wave spared. This systematic destruction serves dual purposes: literal description of agricultural catastrophe Joel's generation experienced, and prophetic symbol of coming Day of the LORD judgment.

The Hebrew verbal pattern uses perfect tenses (yeter, akal), indicating completed action—this devastation has already occurred or will occur with certainty. The imagery teaches God's sovereignty over nature and history. He commands even insects to accomplish His purposes (Exodus 10:12-15, Deuteronomy 28:38-42). The locusts function as God's army (Joel 2:25: "my great army which I sent among you"), executing covenant curses for disobedience. This demonstrates that temporal judgments typologically prefigure eternal realities—just as locusts progressively destroyed physical crops, sin progressively destroys spiritual life until nothing remains apart from divine grace.

Theologically, this verse illustrates the principle of measure-for-measure judgment.

Israel had consumed God's blessings without gratitude or obedience; now judgment consumes their produce. Yet even this severe judgment serves redemptive purposes—driving people to recognize dependence on God and repent (2:12-14). The Reformed doctrine of common grace explains how God ordinarily restrains such judgments, making their occurrence all the more striking as wake-up calls to covenant faithfulness. The New Testament applies this principle spiritually: sin progressively consumes until nothing remains (James 1:15), but God's grace through Christ restores what "the locust hath eaten" (Joel 2:25, John 10:10).

Historical Context

Locust plagues were devastating realities in ancient Near East, not mere metaphors. Swarms containing billions of insects could darken the sky for miles, descending to devour every green plant within hours. Ancient records from Egypt, Assyria, and Mesopotamia describe similar catastrophes causing famine and economic collapse. Modern locust swarms in Africa and Middle East demonstrate this plague's continued reality. Joel's audience knew this horror experientially or through collective memory, making his imagery viscerally powerful.

The covenant structure established in Deuteronomy 28 explicitly warned that disobedience would bring agricultural judgment: "Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in; for the locust shall consume it" (Deuteronomy 28:38). Joel's prophecy fulfills this covenant curse, demonstrating God keeps His word—both threats and promises. The question facing Joel's generation: would they recognize judgment's purpose and return to God, or harden their hearts like Pharaoh during Egypt's locust plague (Exodus 10:1-20)?

This verse establishes the foundation for Joel's subsequent message. Chapter 1 describes literal devastation; chapter 2 transitions to eschatological Day of the LORD using locust imagery; chapter 3 promises restoration. The pattern teaches that God uses temporal judgments as warnings of ultimate judgment, calling people to repentance while mercy remains available. Peter applies Joel's prophecy at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21), showing the Day of the LORD has inaugurated in Christ's first coming and will consummate at His return. The locust plague

typologically points to final judgment when all who reject God's grace will experience comprehensive, irrevocable loss.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does the progressive nature of judgment described here warn against tolerating small compromises that lead to total spiritual devastation?
2. What areas of your life are being progressively consumed by sin's destructive power, and how does God's call to repentance offer hope?
3. How does recognizing God's sovereignty over both blessing and judgment shape your response to hardship and prosperity?

Interlinear Text

וְיִתְרָא	בְּגַתִּים	אֲכַל	בָּאָרֶב הַ	וְיִתְרָא
hath left	That which the palmerworm	eaten	and that which the locust	hath left
H3499	H1501	H398	H697	H3499
בָּאָרֶב הַ	אֲכַל	בִּלְבָד	וְיִתְרָא	וְיִתְרָא
and that which the locust	eaten	and that which the cankerworm	hath left	
H697	H398	H3218	H3499	
בִּלְבָד	אֲכַל	בְּחַסִּיל:	בְּחַסִּיל:	
and that which the cankerworm	eaten	hath the caterpillar		
H3218	H398	H2625		

Additional Cross-References

Joel 2:25 (Parallel theme): And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpiller, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.

Amos 4:9 (Parallel theme): I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD.

Amos 7:1 (Parallel theme): Thus hath the Lord GOD shewed unto me; and, behold, he formed grasshoppers in the beginning of the shooting up of the latter growth; and, lo, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings.

Isaiah 33:4 (Parallel theme): And your spoil shall be gathered like the gathering of the caterpiller: as the running to and fro of locusts shall he run upon them.

Psalms 78:46 (Parallel theme): He gave also their increase unto the caterpiller, and their labour unto the locust.

Exodus 10:4 (Parallel theme): Else, if thou refuse to let my people go, behold, to morrow will I bring the locusts into thy coast:

Psalms 105:34 (Parallel theme): He spake, and the locusts came, and caterpillers, and that without number,

Jeremiah 51:14 (Parallel theme): The LORD of hosts hath sworn by himself, saying, Surely I will fill thee with men, as with caterpillers; and they shall lift up a shout against thee.

Deuteronomy 28:38 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in; for the locust shall consume it.

2 Chronicles 7:13 (Parallel theme): If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people;