

Joel 2:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Before their face the people shall be much pained: all faces shall gather blackness.

Analysis

Before their face the people shall be much pained (Hebrew *miphanav yachilu ammim*, *מִפְנֵי צָחַל עָמִים*—*chul*, "be pained/writhe") describes intense anguish, like a woman in labor (Isaiah 13:8, 26:17). *Ammim* (*עָמִים*, "peoples/nations") can mean both Israel and surrounding nations—everyone experiencing this judgment feels visceral fear and anguish. The phrase "before their face" (*miphanav*) emphasizes that the approaching locust/army hasn't yet arrived; mere sight of the advancing horde produces terror.

All faces shall gather blackness (Hebrew *kol-panim qibbetsu pa'rur*, *כָּל-פָּנִים קִבְּצָו, פָּאָרוֹר*)—this phrase is variously translated due to textual difficulty. The Hebrew *pa'rur* (*פָּאָרוֹר*) may relate to *par* (beauty/glow) or refer to gathering/draining of blood from face, causing pallor. The KJV's "gather blackness" suggests faces darkening with dread. Nahum 2:10 uses identical language describing Nineveh's terror. The imagery communicates comprehensive fear—not just individuals but "all faces," meaning everyone without exception, experiences this dread. Some translations render it "all faces turn pale," emphasizing bloodless terror.

This verse transitions from describing the locust army (vv. 3-5) to its effect on observers. The psychological impact precedes physical devastation—people are terrified before the invasion actually reaches them. This anticipates the Day of the LORD's effect: "Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth" (Luke 21:26). The unrighteous will experience existential dread knowing judgment approaches and no escape exists.

Conversely, believers "look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28)—the same events that terrorize the wicked bring hope to the redeemed.

Historical Context

Ancient peoples understood that invading armies brought comprehensive destruction. News of approaching Assyrian or Babylonian forces would spread ahead of actual arrival, creating panic. Refugees would flee, attempting to escape. Those unable to flee would barricade themselves in fortified cities. The terror Joel describes—people writhing in anguish, faces darkening/paling—was experiential reality for populations facing invasion.

The physical symptoms Joel describes (pain, changed facial color) reflect acute stress response. Modern physiology explains this: fear triggers adrenaline release, causing rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, and blood redistribution. Extreme fear can cause blood to drain from face (pallor) or, in some cases, flushing (darkening). Ancient observers couldn't explain the physiological mechanisms but accurately described the symptoms.

Theologically, this verse demonstrates that God's judgments have psychological dimension. The wicked won't merely experience physical destruction but existential terror. The book of Revelation repeatedly describes unbelievers' terror during end-times judgment: they hide in caves crying for mountains to fall on them (Revelation 6:15-17), they blaspheme God because of their pains (Revelation 16:9-11), and ultimately stand before the great white throne in dread (Revelation 20:11-15). Reformed theology affirms that hell includes not just physical suffering but conscious, eternal awareness of God's wrath—the ultimate terror.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. What does the terror people experience before the locust army even arrives teach about the psychological dimension of divine judgment?
2. How should awareness of coming judgment affect evangelistic urgency and compassion for the lost?
3. What difference does faith in Christ make when facing fearful circumstances —how does the gospel transform terror into hope?

Interlinear Text

פָּנָים	עַמּוֹת	כָּל	פָּנָים
Before their face	shall be much pained	the people	Before their face
H6440	H2342	H5971	H3605
לְכַבֵּץ	פָּאָרוֹת:		
shall gather	blackness		
H6908	H6289		

Additional Cross-References

Nahum 2:10 (Parallel theme): She is empty, and void, and waste: and the heart melteth, and the knees smite together, and much pain is in all loins, and the faces of them all gather blackness.

Isaiah 13:8 (Parallel theme): And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames.

Jeremiah 30:6 (Parallel theme): Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness?

Lamentations 4:8 (Parallel theme): Their visage is blacker than a coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin cleaveth to their bones; it is withered, it is become like a stick.

