

"The Years That the Locust Hath Eaten"

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"I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten" (Joel 2:25).

If we are to understand the full force of this passage and the richness of the promise it contains, we must remind ourselves of the terrible effect of a plague of locusts in the East. It will be remembered that one of the ten plagues of Egypt took this form. It is thus described in Exodus 10:14-15: *"The locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous were they ... for they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt."*

In the most graphic language, the prophet Joel depicts the devastation wrought by these insects. He tells us, "The land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them. The appearance of them is as the appearance of horses; and as horsemen, so shall they run. ... They shall march every one on his ways, and they shall not break their ranks. ... They shall run to and fro in the city; they shall run upon the wall, they shall climb up upon the houses; they shall enter in at the windows like a thief. The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining" (Joel 2:3-10).

Other descriptions tell us that they come as "thick as snowflakes, darkening the sky, the rustling of whose wings is as the sound of a broad river. Their ceaselessly moving jaws make a noise comparable to a spreading flame or to chariots in battle, and in a few hours cornfields are reduced to bare stalks or even to stubble. Two hundred thousand millions of them were destroyed at *one time* in Cyprus alone."

Yet, in the face of this terrible scourge, and in the presence of bare fields and ruined harvest, God says, *"I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten."* Does not the extent of the calamity only make the promise more wonderful and more welcome?

May we not derive some comfort from this promise for ourselves, even though living in a country where this spoiler is a stranger? Are there not locusts of another sort? In other words, are not human lives often laid bare — does there not come, from one cause or another, what seems often like irreparable loss? Years of sorrow, sickness or some form of suffering, when life seems stripped of all that it once promised us; barren patches, produced by our own failure or the failure of others; a wilderness stretching across our life, which the memory can never recall without a pang or a shudder? If our experience is anything akin to this, is there not a wonderful comfort contained in the promise, *"I will restore the years that the locust hath eaten"*?

Sorrow

1. *Some sorrow may have darkened your life.* Just as we have seen that the sun and moon and stars may be darkened by a swarm of locusts, so it seems as if the sun would never shine again for you — at least, not in the same way as before. But God can make you forget that you were ever sad. *"I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten."* Have you not been nursing your sorrow and brooding over it, instead of seeing

that out of the eater may come forth meat, and that even tribulation may become a thing to glory in and produce hope instead of despair, when the love of God is shed abroad in the heart?

Your sorrow may be caused by disappointment in someone you love. The locusts have come up upon your married life. The field from which you expected such a rich harvest of happiness is almost bare. You look back, perhaps, over years of emptiness, years devoid of that which you coveted most. You expected to be made much of, you anticipated that every attention would be paid to your wishes, you hoped that everything would be laid at your feet, and you thought of all you would give in return. But the locusts have come, and they seem to have left very little. Can you trust God to restore these years? Will you not take this promise home to your own heart and *count* upon the One who made it?

Or the sorrow may be over a son or daughter. He promised so well. There was a time when he obeyed your will and sought to please you. He had gifts, but they have been squandered. He has spent his all, but has not yet returned to you. You are silent about him now. Once you loved to talk of him. But think of what God can do: "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten."

Financial Trouble

- You may have met with misfortune in financial matters.* In temporal affairs life seems to be something of a desert compared with what it was. The locusts have left little of those luxuries and comforts you once thought essential to your happiness. You have moved to a smaller house, been compelled to abolish your carriage and dismiss some of your servants. Not only this, but some of your friends have vanished with these appurtenances. They only hung on to your fine house and carriage, and while they professed to love you, when in possession of these, they somehow have forgotten your existence now. All this is very painful. Where are you to turn? To Him whom you may have been inclined to forget in your prosperity, but who has never forgotten you. And if He does not see fit to give you back these earthly possessions you once prized so much and have lost, He can in a higher and better way "restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten." He wants you to understand how very, very small a part of real happiness depends upon external things, for the world can never, never give peace; the more people possess of it the more anxiety they often have, and He wants you to possess that which He alone is able to give — "the peace which passeth all understanding" — that peace of which Christ spoke when He said, "*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid*" (John 14:27).

Bereavement

- "The years that the locust hath eaten."* Is it through *bereavement* in your case? Is it husband, wife, son or daughter, lover or friend who has been taken from you? Whoever it may be, you feel that life is dreary; it has lost its zest; things fail to interest you as once they did. You think of what the locusts have eaten. Can God restore these years? Some

reading these lines may remember the story, told by Washington Irving in his sketchbook, of a young Irish girl whose lover was an Irish patriot who, during the troubles in Ireland, was tried, condemned and executed on a charge of treason. From this blow the young woman never recovered. "The most delicate and cherishing attentions," we are told, "were paid her by families of wealth and distinction. She was led into society, and they tried by all kinds of occupation and amusement to dissipate her grief and wear her from the tragic story of her love. But it was all in vain. There are some strokes of calamity which scathe and scorch the soul — which penetrate to the vital seat of happiness — and blast it, never again to put forth bud or blossom. She never objected to frequent the haunts of pleasure, but she was as much alone there as in the depths of solitude. Nothing could cure the silent and devouring melancholy that had entered into her very soul. She wasted away in a slow but hopeless decline, and at length sank into the grave, the victim of a broken heart."

Such is the sad account. How true it is, "The sorrow of this world worketh death." How differently it might have turned out had there been anyone near to lead her to the true source of peace and rest. She needed an object greater and better and more satisfying than the one she had lost. This God alone can supply. But this He has supplied — it is Christ. The One who promises rest to those who come to Him, who has said, "*He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life,*" and whose words to a once empty-hearted woman still remain to do for us what they did for her: "*If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink; thou wouldst have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water.*" If He is once known, however sore the heart may be, it can be solaced; however broken, it can be healed; however empty, it can be filled. He knows, alas! the poor human heart may refuse this comfort, may prefer the human object and what appeals to nature, and may pine and die under the loss it has sustained, preferring to nurse its grief, but this, after all, if called by its right name, is only another form of human depravity, *for it makes the creature an object superior to the Creator*. But this does not alter the fact that Christ is enough, though everything else be taken from us. He is worthy of our heart's affections, and He can entwine them around Himself, if only the heart is willing, even though these affections may have been nipped and blasted. To refuse to be comforted may be as sinful as open rebellion against the providence of God. It supposes that He is not enough.

Probably few men suffered more from bereavement than Jacob. And yet Jacob's last days were his best days. The years that the locust had eaten were restored to him. He not only once more looked upon Joseph, but he was a witness of his glory. He stood before Pharaoh and blessed him. And when we come across him among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, the one record of him is connected with these last days: "By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff." A blesser and a worshipper! All the vicissitudes, the trials, the bereavements past, the pilgrim, who has encountered so many bitter experiences, is yet happy. He knows God and his heart overflows with gratitude and praise. How convincing that God can restore the years that the locust has eaten!

Away From God

4. "*The years that the locust hath eaten*" sometimes take another form. They are years

spent away from God *in the pursuit of worldly pleasure and self-gratification*. How empty it leaves the heart, especially if Christ has been once known. The wail of Naomi on her return from the land of Moab has often gone up since: "I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty." Yes, the novel and the newspaper are no substitutes for the Bible; the play and the dance cannot replace communion with God; the friendship of the world is a poor exchange for the companionship of Christ. Yet how many have tried it. Professing Christians have virtually given up their profession and launched out on an unknown sea, without chart or compass. Is it any wonder the fields are bare? Is it any wonder there are years that the locust has eaten?

God allowed the locusts to come as a judgment upon His people of old when they had departed from Him. Has He had to deal like that with you because of your waywardness and wandering? Naomi had to confess, "*The Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me*" (Ruth 1:21). Yet God restored the years for Naomi! The last chapter of Ruth tells us that when Obed is born, the women declare, "There is a son born to Naomi," "for thy daughter-in-law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him."

"A lady was spending the summer in Switzerland. One day, as she climbed the mountainside, she came to a shepherd's fold. There sat the shepherd. Around him lay his flock. Near at hand, on a pile of straw, lay a single sheep. It seemed to be in suffering. Scanning it closely, the lady saw that its leg was broken. 'How did it happen?' she asked. To her amazement, the shepherd answered, 'Madam, I broke that sheep's leg.'

"A look of pain swept over the visitor's face. Seeing it, the shepherd went on: 'Madam, of all the sheep in my flock, this one was most wayward. It never would obey my voice. It never would follow in the pathway in which I was leading the flock. *It wandered to the verge of many a perilous cliff and dizzy abyss*. And not only was it disobedient itself, but it was ever leading the other sheep of my flock astray. I had before had experience with sheep of this kind. So I broke its leg. The first day I went to it with food it tried to bite me. I let it lie alone for a couple of days. Then I went back to it. And now, it not only took the food, but licked my hand and showed every sign of submission and even affection. And now let me tell you something. When this sheep is well, as it soon will be, it will be the model sheep of my flock. No sheep will hear my voice so quickly. None will follow so closely at my side. Instead of leading its mates astray, it will now be an example and a guide for the wayward ones, leading them with itself, in the path of obedience to my call."

Has God been dealing with you in a way somewhat similar to the shepherd with his sheep? It is because He loved you. That is why He would not leave you alone. He missed your face. He wants again to enjoy your company. And so He broke the link that was binding you to the world and its frivolities. And now, if you will only be true to Him and trust Him, He can restore the years that the locust has eaten. You will never know, perhaps, how He preserved you in your wanderings—how He followed *you*, though you had refused to follow *Him*. Those years spent away from Him and out of communion have been wasted years. Your soul was neglected and remained unnourished; spiritual joys were unknown to you; your energies were not spent in His service; your whole life received an impress of the vain world for which you lived. You lived and moved and had your being, not for God, or even for the highest part of you, but for your lower self. Happy indeed if you are beginning to find this out, if your eye is

resting now upon a brighter object and you are beginning to say:

*"Jesus, Thou art enough
The mind and heart to fill."*

St. Augustine

St. Augustine could look back upon the years that the locust had eaten. But how wonderfully God restored them to him. "He wrote one hundred and eighteen books, sermons, letters, tracts, notes on different parts of the Bible, and they have all been bound together in twenty immense volumes. He had not always been holy. When he became a young man, he fell into open and abominable sin, and he also turned away from the true faith. ... His mother, Monica, never ceased to pray for him. ... As for Augustine himself, he always hoped that some day or other he should repent, and he used to pray, 'Lord, make me holy, but not now.'" How good of God not to take him at his word, and to be better to him than he ever imagined. One day, after hearing of some of the saints of earlier times, he rose from his chair and went into the garden in great agony of mind and threw himself on the ground. While in this position, "he heard a sweet voice as of a child that cried, '*Take up and read! take up and read!*' He looked around and saw a copy of Paul's epistles lying on the grass. He took up the book and opened at this verse: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.' From this moment he was changed, and then he thought it would be for the glory of God if he gave a history of his former life." "Thus he speaks of himself: 'I wish,' he says, 'to call to remembrance my past vileness and the corruptions of my soul, not because I love *them*, but that I may love Thee, O my God. I do this for the love of Thy love, calling to mind my most evil ways, that, when I feel the bitterness of my own sin, then I may also feel how sweet Thou art.'"

Thus God made the sinner into a saint. Is there anyone reading these lines who has had the first part of Augustine's experience — a life wasted with sin? Specters gaunt and grim rise up to greet you as you review the past. He who restored the years for St. Augustine can do this for you. The same God lives still. Even if sins as thick as locusts have disfigured your past life, He can restore the years that the locust has eaten. And thus it will not be with you as it was with Lord Byron, who wrote at the close of his days:

*"My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker and the grief
Are mine alone."*

Finally, how few there are into whose life the locusts have not come at some time or other. You may have had to spend years in pain and weariness, a burden to yourself and to others. Or constant failure may have dogged your efforts as to some pursuit in life in which you have striven for success. Your expenditure of toil and, it may be, of treasure has brought you no reward. Or you may be one who has to look back over years of doubt and barren speculation. You cast off your first faith, and since then you have followed one "will o' the wisp" after another only to find yourself in deeper darkness. One view after another has had to be

abandoned, and there is nothing left for it now except an utter blank or a return to simple faith in the Bible and to a refuge in the atoning work of Christ. How cruelly the locusts of unbelief have wasted the years — years of useless thought in which you have wandered in a hopeless maze, where you have arrived at nothing and, indeed, are less assured of anything than when you set out. In all these cases, and others too numerous to mention, the promise holds good, "*I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.*"

Do not ask, *Can God do it?* or even, *How will He do it?* Trust Him. At a supreme moment for the nearest followers of Christ, when He was about to be put to death and everything *seemed* to be giving way beneath their feet, the word He gave to them was, "*Have faith in God.*" The restoration of the years may not *necessarily* mean restoration of the thing you have lost or been deprived of, though it may. But in any case it will mean something more — some added and larger blessing. The context, in the passage we have quoted from, implies this. Here is the description of the restoration of the years for Israel: "*Ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you.*"

God seldom, if ever, restores in the exact form what has been lost, whether such loss has occurred through our unfaithfulness or because He has seen fit to lay it upon us. He always bestows something better. He will never restore the Eden that was. He will make the whole earth an Eden — "the desert shall blossom as the rose." And so in your case. You must leave the *manner* of the restoration of the years to Him. The way to ensure *it* is the important matter, and that is indicated in this same second chapter of Joel. "Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to Me with all your heart ... and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: *for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth Him of the evil.* Who knoweth if He will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind Him." "*And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.*"

One word in conclusion. We do not attempt here to adjust the balance between grace and truth. What has been said may raise in some minds the old question: Shall we do evil that good may come? May we not waste the years if God will restore them? Such questions suggest their own answer for those who know anything of having wasted the years, either for themselves or others, and of God's restoring mercy. They would never advise anyone to try it. There surely never lived a farmer who would invite the locusts to come, with the thought of obtaining a better harvest after. We only desire to fix your attention upon one of the most precious of all the promises, that, however the locusts may have robbed us, whether through our own fault or through the fault of others, God can do for people now, if they repent, what He will do for Israel in a future day when they repent: "*I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.*"

How many years? We are not told. Only this: "I will restore ... the years." If not in time, yet eternity will be long enough.