

THE SOLEMN ASSEMBLY

By Richard Owen Roberts

Forgotten Means of God's Grace; Hope for the Survival of America

"Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD... 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity." Joel 1:14, 2:12-13

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The Sad Fact

Most professing Christians have never heard of a Solemn Assembly. Of the relatively small number who have, a substantial portion consider it as merely an Old Testament practice of no particular relevance today.

The Biblical Background

There are not less than twelve revival movements in the Old Testament. While each of these revivals is very different from the others, there are at least four factors preceding each revival which they all hold in common.

1. A *Tragic Declension*. Every revival of the Old Testament is preceded by a period of moral and spiritual decline among the people of God. As illustrations of this problem, consider that preceding the revival of Exodus 32-33, the decline included the building of the golden calf and its worship, while the revival under David was preceded by a period of more than six decades in which the Ark of the Covenant of God was out of its rightful place in Jerusalem.

2. A *Righteous Judgment From God*. Without any exception, Old Testament revivals have always been preceded by some kind of a righteous judgment from God. While some of these judgments are immediate and final, resulting in deaths among the wicked, others are gracious and remedial, resulting in brokenness, prayer, repentance and extraordinary seeking of God's face.

3. *The Raising Up of An Immensely Burdened Leader or Leaders*. This fact can be illustrated by a simple listing of the Old Testament revivals themselves:

- a) The Revival under Moses - Exodus 32ff.
- b) The Revival under Samuel - 1 Samuel 7 (with chapters 1-6 providing the background).
- c) The Revival under David - 2 Samuel 6, 7.
- d) The Revival under Asa - 2 Chronicles 14-16.
- e) The Revival under Jehoshaphat - 2 Chronicles 17-20.
- f) The Revival under Jehoida - 2 Chronicles 23-24.
- g) The Revival under Hezekiah - 2 Chronicles 29-32.
- h) The Revival under Josiah - 2 Chronicles 34-35.
- i) The Revival under Zerubbabel - Ezra 1-6.
- j) The Revival under Ezra - Ezra 7-10.
- k) The Revival under Nehemiah - Nehemiah 1-13.
- l) The Revival under Joel - Joel 1-2:27.

Obviously, in each case God Himself raised up a leader who was under the heavy burden of the moral and spiritual needs of his people. The words of Moses in Exodus 32:32 forcefully emphasize this: "But now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin - if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou hast written."

4. *Some Extraordinary Action.* While this action varies from revival to revival, the most common action taken was that of a Solemn Assembly. Again, note the record in the revivals themselves:

a) Exodus 33:7-11 - Moses took the tent and pitched it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp. He called it the place of meeting and required everyone who sought the Lord to go outside the camp, away from the place of sin, to the tabernacle to meet the Lord.

b) 1 Samuel 7:5, 6 - Samuel required all of Israel to gather at Mizpah in a Solemn Assembly where he prayed for them and they fasted and confessed their sins.

c) 2 Samuel 6:14 and 1 Chronicles 13-18 - After a bad start in sinning against the Lord by moving the Ark of the Covenant on a new cart (the Philistine method), David and the people moved it according to the Word of the Lord and in joyful humiliation, he danced before the Lord with all his might in a linen ephod - having laid aside his crown and royal robes, he acted as common man among common men. While no mention is made of a Solemn Assembly in the Second Samuel account, it is detailed in the parallel passage in First Chronicles.

d) 2 Chronicles 15:9-15 - Asa called a Solemn Assembly in Jerusalem where the people entered into a covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their hearts and with all their souls.

e) 2 Chronicles 20:3-13ff - Jehoshaphat called a Solemn Assembly throughout all Judah and Jerusalem and the people fasted and sought the Lord.

f) 2 Chronicles 23:16 - Jehoiada, in a Solemn Assembly, made a covenant between himself and all the people and the king that they should be the Lord's people. They then proceeded to cleanse the land of the evil.

g) 2 Chronicles 29:5ff - Hezekiah and the leaders established a decree which was very extensively circulated requiring all the people to gather for a Solemn Assembly and the celebration of the Passover. An entire fourteen days were devoted to seeking the Lord and worshipping Him.

h) 2 Chronicles 3:31-33 - Josiah gathered the people together in a Solemn Assembly, and they entered into a covenant with the Lord to walk in all his ways and to perform all the words of the covenant written in the Book.

i) Ezra 6:16-22 - Zerubbabel led the people in a Solemn Assembly and seven day celebration of the Passover in which they separated themselves from the impurity of the nations and pledged themselves to seek the Lord God of Israel.

j) Ezra 8:21-23; 9:5-15 - Ezra proclaimed a fast at the River Ahava that they might all humble themselves and seek the Lord. They later engaged in public humiliation and putting away of sin in the form of a Solemn Assembly.

k) Nehemiah 8:1ff - A Solemn Assembly was held in front of the Water Gate where the Book of the Law of Moses was read by the hour and an agreement was made in writing to put away sin and to seek the Lord with all their hearts.

l) Joel 1:13; 2:12-17, etc. - Joel called a Solemn Assembly in which all the people were required to be in attendance and where all were required to return to the Lord with all their hearts, with fasting, weeping and mourning, and where they were required to rend their hearts and not their garments.

Consider the situation at the time of the Solemn Assembly called by the Prophet Joel. The people, as was common, were guilty of flagrant sin which had not been confessed and put away. God visited them

with a remedial judgment - a plague of locusts of such proportion that nothing like it had happened before: "What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; and what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten; and what the creeping locust has left, the stripping locust has eaten." In addition to the terrible plague of insects, a fierce drought had afflicted the land. The Drunkards wailed because they had no new wine to drink, the priests mourned because the grain offering and the libations were cut off from the House of the Lord, the fields were ruined and the land itself mourned, the vinedressers wailed, and the beasts groaned while the herds of cattle wandered aimlessly because there was no pasture for them. The people themselves wailed like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.

The Prophet issued orders: "Gird yourselves with sackcloth, and lament, O priests; Wail, O ministers of the altar! Come, spend the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God... Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the House of the Lord your God and cry out to the Lord... Blow a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm on My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble... Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to Me with all you heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the Lord your God... Blow a trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the nursing infants. Let the bridegroom come out of his room and the bride out of her bridal chamber. Let the priest, the Lord's ministers, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, 'Spare Thy people, O Lord, and do not make Thine inheritance a reproach, a byword among the nations.'"

Promises were offered as encouragement: "Then the Lord will be zealous for His land, and will have pity on His people. And the Lord will answer and say to His people, 'Behold I am going to send you grain, new wine and oil, and you will be satisfied in full with them; and I will never again make you a reproach among the nations. But I will remove the northern army from you [the horrendous swarm of locusts], and I will drive it into a parched and desolate land, and its vanguard into the western sea, and its rear guard into the western sea. And its stench [of rotting carcasses] will arise and its foul smell will come up..."

And in response to the corporate repentance of the people through the use of the divinely ordained means of the Solemn Assembly, the land rejoiced and was made glad. The pastures of the wilderness turned green. The trees and the vines bore fruit. And the fruit borne was not ordinary but extraordinary for God moved the rainy seasons closer together, and caused the sun to shine upon the earth, so that the threshing floors were full and the vats overflowing. So great was the blessing bestowed by the God who delights in a broken and contrite people that He made up to them the years that were lost to the mighty army of locusts. The people had plenty and were satisfied and praised the name of the Lord who had dealt wondrously with them. They knew that God was in their midst, that He only was God, and that there was none other!

Unfortunately, some professed Christians will be disinclined to seriously think of a Solemn Assembly because the illustrations above are all Old Testament. They would do well to weigh the entire season of preparation prior to Pentecost in the light of the Solemn Assembly and see that those days in the upper Room were indeed a Solemn Assembly if ever in the history of the world one was held.

Historical Foundations

Not only were Solemn Assemblies a very common aspect in the revivals of the Bible, but they were a very important part of the life of believers in America during all its early years. For verification of this one has only to consult the Sprague Collection of Early American Pamphlets at the Weidener Library at Harvard University. There will be found a large number of sermons that were preached at the Fast Days and Solemn Assemblies which were frequently called and earnestly attended by American believers prior to the general decline of true Christianity which characterizes twentieth-century America.

Our Fathers believed God was offended by sin. They themselves were deeply troubled both by the existence of personal sin in their own lives and by the presence of unconfessed corporate sins in the churches and in the nation. They regarded natural calamities as manifestations of the displeasure of God Almighty against sin and allowed such events as earthquakes, fires, volcanoes, epidemics, floods, and droughts to prompt them to special seeking of God's face in fasting, prayer, and corporate repentance. They also sought the Lord in Solemn Assemblies in connection with wars, murders, rapes, etc., believing such outbursts of wickedness to be directly related to the general decline of moral and spiritual life in the churches.

Misuse of the Solemn Assembly

Like any other God-ordained means of grace, the Solemn Assembly has the potential of being corrupted. The very severe denunciations of Isaiah 1:10-15 clearly indicate God's contempt for Solemn Assemblies that have lost their heart and have become mere form and ritual: "Bring your worthless offerings no longer, their incense is an abomination to Me. New moons and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies - I cannot endure iniquity and the Solemn Assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts. They have become a burden to Me, I am weary of bearing them..."

But we must not think professed American Christians have abandoned the Solemn Assembly because of its perpetual misuse and abuse. More accurately, as God has been degraded to a being scarcely a half inch bigger than man, humans have assumed gigantic proportions in their own eyes. In consequence of this professed Christians have felt at liberty to neglect major portions of Scripture and to be virtually untaught in and unaffected by the long history of the Christian Church. The Solemn Assembly has simply fallen into oblivion at the hands of a people too arrogant to know that their own corporate sins - especially those heart sins of pride, unbelief, and rebellion - have created a nation ripe for destruction.

Getting the Foundation in Place

One's view of the Solemn Assembly will be affected to a large degree by his understanding of the righteous judgments of God. As noted above, all Old Testament revivals have been preceded by some form of a righteous judgment. It must be understood that these righteous judgments are the result of unconfessed corporate sins. When the people of God sin against Him and do not repent, He judges them. While some of these judgments may be called final and consist of death and destruction, the more standard form of judgment is both remedial and gracious and consists of withdrawal of certain evidences of His manifest presence and merciful favors. In the absence of God's manifest presence there is always an immediate and extensive increase in iniquity. This may be compared to the effect upon a city of the police force going on strike. It is the visible manifestation of law and order in the form of policemen, police cars, etc., that keeps crime somewhat restrained. When the police are on strike, when they are known to be corrupt themselves, or when it is known that arrests are meaningless because of the laxity of judges, a community must anticipate a tragic increase in crime. Just so, when God withdraws evidences of His manifest presence from a people, there is always a horrendous increase in iniquity and decline in spirituality.

That there has been a very great increase of immorality and decrease of true biblical spirituality in America in recent years is a fact beyond controversy. Why has this very great change occurred? Is it because the devil is more powerful than he used to be or because God is older and not nearly as able to defend Himself, His people and His church against wickedness? Obviously not. It is because God has judged America with the remedial judgment of withdrawal of certain manifestations of His gracious presence and mercy.

As soon as it becomes evident that immorality is on the increase and spirituality is on the decline, the biblically sound and spiritually lively Church will not foolishly blame the world but will immediately recognize its own complicity. The Church must first repent, for the righteous judgment was not against the world but against the Church. Therefore, in times of spiritual declension and moral decadence, the

great duty of every Christian is both to discover those sins which have caused the judgment and to put them away by that method which God Himself has chosen. The method God has chosen is the Solemn Assembly. Corporate sin must be dealt with by corporate repentance according to divinely ordained methods.

Practical Suggestions

1. A Solemn Assembly is to be a time when all normal daily work is set aside. This is clearly the instruction of Leviticus 23:34-36, Numbers 29:35 and Deuteronomy 16:8. While the overwhelming teaching of Scripture is in favor of hard work, it is absolutely clear that all work must be subjugated to spiritual concerns. Just as man is to labor six days, and six days only, and then rest on the seventh, so also man is to labor in times of spiritual and moral advance; but he is to set aside this normal daily work in order to seek the face of God during times of righteous judgment.

2. A Solemn Assembly is a time when the entire body of people affected by the righteous judgment is required to be in attendance. This is clear in the several passages on Old Testament revivals noted above, but nowhere more clear than in Joel where even the honeymooners had their honeymoon revoked, and the mother with an infant at her breast was required to be present (Joel 2:16). Part of the corporate sin that must be put away is that spirit of rebellion that exists in many professed Christians that causes them to believe that no spiritual leader can order them about. Such wicked sinners would do well to observe the severity of the denunciations against rebellion and stubbornness recorded in I Samuel 15:23.

3. A Solemn Assembly is a time of fasting. Rather than wondering concerning the physical significance of fasting, professed Christians would do well to face squarely the immediate spiritual importance. On a normal basis we realize that the care of our bodies is a proper responsibility we assume before God. The care of ourselves is part of our normal service to God. But there are issues vastly more important than the care of our bodies. In fasting, a believing people acknowledge to God that the urgent concerns of the spiritual take precedence over the normal concerns of the physical. In short, fasting is an outward means of demonstrating that humility before God which acknowledges that the discovery of all those sins that have provoked His judgment and putting away of them in an orderly corporate manner is of vastly greater consequence than the feeding of the body. There are times when the bodies of believers must be brought into subjection so that the overwhelming necessities of the spiritual may receive their due attention.

4. A Solemn Assembly is a time for sacrifice. Numerous Old Testament passages dealing with the Solemn Assembly make this clear (including Numbers 10:10 and 15:3). One of the greatest blessings God has given to mankind is the gift of time. What sacrifice could be more significant than the sacrifice of time in order to participate fully in God's commanded method of reversing a righteous judgment against a church or nation?

5. A Solemn Assembly is of protracted duration. While most professed Christians may content themselves with hour-long "worship" services, the call to a Solemn Assembly is a call to a greatly elongated meeting. In many of the passages where Solemn Assemblies are described, the assembly met for days on end - even as long as seven or fourteen days. On other occasions, however, it would appear that a full day was sufficient. In 2 Chronicles 7:8-9 it is noted that the feast was observed for seven days and then on the eighth day a Solemn Assembly was observed. It was at this Solemn Assembly that God said, "If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (verse 14). No Solemn Assembly would be worth the name that did not allow at least an entire day for the great tasks of humiliation, prayer, repentance and seeking God's face.

6. A Solemn Assembly is a season of earnest prayer. Churches in general allot altogether too little time for prayer. Enough time may be taken to present requests to God but precious little time is

given corporately for God to present requests to men. But not only should much time be given to prayer at a Solemn Assembly, much time in prayer should be given in preparation for a Solemn Assembly. If the Solemn Assembly is to be held throughout the day on Saturday, the people of a church would do well to give considerable time to prayer throughout each day of the preceding week in preparation for the day itself.

7. A Solemn Assembly is a mandatory occasion for corporate repentance. In preparation for this, a catalogue of sins to be corporately confessed and put away should be prepared in advance. Some churches have solicited the involvement of the entire congregation in this catalogue. Various entities within the fellowship have been asked to prepare lists of the offenses against both God and man that they know the church has never corporately put away. The leaders have then gone over these lists and compiled them into a catalogue. The intent is not to manufacture wrongs but to seriously investigate any and all matters that might have contributed to the righteous judgment.

8. A Solemn Assembly is an opportunity for Spirit-anointed preaching of the searching truths of Scripture to deeply touch afresh the lives of God's people. In Solemn Assemblies where only a single day is devoted, it is not uncommon to have at least one or possibly two such sermons specifically aimed at the issues of the day and assisting the people in fulfillment of the responsibilities and grasping the opportunities the day presents.

9. A Solemn Assembly is a most wonderful opportunity for children to see their parents and elders demonstrating Christianity at its deepest corporate levels. Since the entire family is summoned, the youth and older children have a very special privilege of being deeply touched by the solemnities of the day. In some churches, outside baby-sitters have been hired to look after infants and the smallest children so that parents can devote their full attention to the work of the day.

10. A Solemn Assembly gives God an opportunity to respond to His people at a level He cannot possibly do when they are living in neglect of His Word or in direct violation of His commandments. Historically, God has responded to Solemn Assemblies by sending fresh waves of blessings into both the personal and corporate lives of believers and on some occasions even, glorious revivals have resulted. One of the most amazing instances of this is the Revival of the General Assembly in the Church of Scotland in 1596.

Illustrations

John Davidson of Prestonpans, Scotland, became burdened for the welfare of his beloved Church and gave expressions of concern at the Synod of Fife in 1593 and the Assembly of 1594. His Presbytery of Haddington joined with him in petitioning the General Assembly of the Church to set aside time for a Solemn Assembly at the annual meeting of 1596. The Assembly met at St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, in March. A very thorough catalogue of sins was prepared which covered the misdeeds of every class of persons from the King on down to the meanest subjects. More space was given to the sins of ministers than to the wickedness of all other classes put together. The Solemn Assembly occurred on the Tuesday of the second week of the General Assembly and some 400 men, mostly ministers, participated. Davidson preached on Ezekiel 13 and 34 and dealt with the lying prophets and the shepherds who feed themselves and not their flocks. He then exhorted his brethren to enter into private meditation and confession and it was then that the Holy Spirit of God came down and the ancient Cathedral Church resounded with the sobs and cries of hundreds of ministers humbling themselves before God on the dirt floor. A public pledge of fresh surrender to God Almighty was called for and all but one of the men present joined in waving their hands as evidence of binding commitment. This spirit of corporate repentance was carried into all the Presbyteries and the revival of 1596 followed.

But Solemn Assemblies must not be thought of merely as vestiges of the past. Recently the First Baptist church of Pagosa Springs, Colorado, was grievously affected by a divisive spirit. Two of the censorious persons, a husband and wife, were removed from membership because of their continued

trouble-making activities. Rather than church discipline bringing them to repentance of their wickedness, these persons led the way in filing three lawsuits against the church, claiming that the two of them plus eleven of their friends and relatives were the true First Baptist Church of that community. The first suit was for all the church property and bank accounts. The second suit was for seventeen million dollars in damages: four million each for the husband and wife, four million each for their two daughters, plus an additional million in family damages against the pastor, Grant Adkisson. The third suit was a temporary injunction against the church, seeking to prevent the members from the use of their own building and finances. After much prayer and consultation the congregation determined to obey the Word of God in the resolution of the matter and called a Solemn Assembly. For three weeks prior to the day of Assembly extensive prayer was uttered. The fourth to second days prior to the Solemn Assembly were devoted to general prayer and fasting. The day immediately preceding the Assembly was given to round-the-clock prayer with fasting. Virtually the entire congregation met for the Solemn Assembly itself and spent nine hours together in prayer, fasting, and corporate repentance. Three days after the Solemn Assembly the four members of the family that had brought the suits against the church were all killed in the crash of a private airplane. As a direct result of divine intervention, the damages suit was dismissed, the temporary injunction was settled in favor of the church, the suit for the church property and bank accounts was dropped, and God Himself crowned the faithfulness of the dear people of that congregation with a season of most blessed nearness.

God's work, done in God's way, still triumphs!

Encouragement

Historically, unheeded remedial judgments have turned into final judgments. America, as a nation, is ripe for destruction. The Evangelical Movement in this country is characterized by an arrogance that is almost beyond belief. The neglect of prayer, the involvement in Philistine methodology, the moral evils, and the doctrinal corruptions that characterize the Movement are sufficient to cause Sodomites to wonder at God's justice in destroying their city while sparing the United States.

If the youth of the nation are to live out their lives in a land of freedom and opportunity, they will do so because their parents had grace sufficient to humble themselves, pray, repent of their sins, and seek God's face in Solemn Assemblies.

Obedience is still better than sacrifice. Joel's call requires prompt response, "Consecrate a fast, proclaim a Solemn Assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the House of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord."

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