

SOLEMN ASSEMBLIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE

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Our Heavenly Father has always wanted the Saints to enter His presence, and He has desired to dwell among them. Unfortunately, God's covenant people have historically strayed from Him and gone after other gods in Egypt or Babylon (the things of the world). In light of this condition among the Saints today, there is currently consideration of the need for the Lord's people to meet in solemn assembly, and I have been invited by leaders of the Conference and pastors within the Restoration to write on the subject of solemn assemblies. Most of us would agree that there is a great need in the church for us to do this. However, there are many differing ideas and statements made about what a solemn assembly is and what the purpose of a gathering like that would be. In reviewing scripture, there are a few points and thoughts to consider in helping us to have a better understanding of solemn assemblies.

What is a solemn assembly?

In simple terms, a solemn assembly is the gathering of the Lord's people in humility and contrition to confess and repent of their sins, to soften their hearts, and to renew their faith and obedience toward God. A solemn assembly of the Lord's people is not a focus on what we are doing—but on laying everything down before the Lord. Solemn assemblies historically have been called to draw the people's attention back to their God and to repent from severe moral and spiritual decline. Because the Lord's people have, over a period of time, strayed from Him and will not call upon His holy name, God moves upon prophets and individuals by the Holy Ghost to address the people that they must needs repent or be destroyed. This warning is usually in the midst of God's judgments that were already coming upon them—when they would be more likely to listen. Solemn assemblies are an acknowledgement of sins to be collectively confessed and forsaken with the intent to repent from all matters that have contributed to the righteous judgment of God. Every Sacrament of the Lord's Supper should be a “solemn assembly” for the branch as well as the church as a whole. This is one reason why it was agreed that the whole church would set aside the first Sunday of each month for this Sacrament to humbly repent and remember the Lord Jesus Christ together.

Purpose for a solemn assembly

The Lord's admonition given to the Church in June of 1833 in Section 92:1d-f rings very loud and clear to our ears today. They had been disobedient and found themselves in difficulties in the land of Zion. The Lord specifically gives the reason for His desire that they call a solemn assembly when He says: *“But, behold, verily I say unto you, There are many who have been ordained among you, whom I have called, but few of them are chosen: they who are not chosen have sinned a very grievous sin, in that they are walking in darkness at noonday; and for this cause, I gave unto you a commandment, that you should call your solemn assembly; that your fastings and mournings might come up into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, which is, by interpretation, the Creator of the first day, the beginning and the end.”* The words “fastings and mournings” can be interpreted to us as humility and prayers of repentance. Notice the strong warning that they had “sinned a very grievous sin”—hence the need for a “solemn” or serious and focused assembly to collectively repent as a people before the Lord. We, too, can honestly say that we are “walking in darkness at noonday” because in the midst of the fullness of the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we know not what to do because of disobedience and carelessness. This is a grievous sin.

King Jehoshaphat of Judah:

An example of people gathering in solemn assembly is found in 2 Chronicles 20: 1-18. King Jehoshaphat faced an overwhelming invading enemy coming to battle against Judah. The first thing we are told is that Jehoshaphat *“feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.”* It

started with Jehoshaphat humbling himself and asking the people to do the same. Part of what fasting does is to bring us into humility. In the face of this crisis and possible destruction, all of the people of Judah softened their hearts and gathered themselves together to pray and ask for help of the Lord.

Then Jehoshaphat offers a beautiful prayer on behalf of Judah where he owns God as being their God and both lists and praises the divine attributes of Almighty God. He then continues in his prayer to recall publicly in front of the people of Judah the promises and covenants God had made to their fathers—including part of the dedication prayer that Solomon had prayed when the Temple was dedicated to the Lord. The king brought to the remembrance of the people the covenant that they had made to God, as well as God's promises in return to them. Jehoshaphat prays: *"If when evil cometh upon us, as the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we stand before this house, and in thy presence, (for thy name is in this house,) and cry unto thee in our affliction, then thou wilt hear and help."*

Then Jehoshaphat in the depths of honesty and humility states the true condition of Judah and their need for the Lord when he says, *"for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do, but our eyes are upon thee."* It is interesting to note that ALL of Judah stood humbly before the Lord (including their wives and little children) as this prayer of supplication was being offered. In Joel 2:16 we see that even the bridegroom and bride had their honeymoon cancelled and the mother with an infant at her breast was gathered for solemn assembly. Nothing was to be put ahead of repenting and seeking out the Lord.

The Lord accepted the sincere and humble petition of Jehoshaphat on behalf of Judah, for the Spirit of the Lord rested upon the Levite, Jahaziel, in the midst of the congregation and the Lord spoke to Judah and said: *"Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat, Thus saith the Lord unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow go ye down against them....ye shall not go to fight in this day; set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem; fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the Lord will be with you."* We are then told that King Jehoshaphat and all of Judah bowed their heads and faces to the ground and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord, worshipping the Lord. We know that God saved Judah as the multiple enemies that were against them turned upon each other and destroyed each other without Judah engaging in any fighting. Truly the battle was the Lords.

King Solomon and humility

We have recorded that, at the time of King Solomon, he prepared all of Israel for seven days, and that on the eighth day they gathered in solemn assembly. And the Lord appeared unto Solomon and told him that He had heard the king's prayer, and had chosen the place for the sacrifice of the Lord's people. God went on to covenant with Israel that if there be a drought or locusts or pestilence among the people, the promise was: *"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."* (See 2 Chronicles 7:8-14)

The first direction to all who called themselves by His name was to "humble themselves." In reading James 4: 6-10 we are told, *"God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble."* The motivation of having a solemn assembly is not about gathering to "get" something from God, nor telling God in any way what to do. Rather, it is just the opposite; it is turning to Him in repentance that He might bestow His grace upon a people who have come to realize that they have nowhere else to turn and who need the Lord. In humility, pray and seek His face, and repent of individual and collective wickedness. Then He has promised to hear from heaven and forgive. Only then will He heal the land.

Isaiah records a solemn assembly not accepted by God

What would happen if the church today attempted to come before the Lord while still in a rebellious spirit without being sufficiently humble and penitent? We have an example in Isaiah 1:10-15. Israel did not know who its God was and had provoked the Holy One of Israel by continuing an “empty worship” with the feasts and other rituals, “having a form of godliness,” but continuing to live in the spirit of rebellion without humility and repentance. As a result, they were under righteous judgments of desolation, burned cities, invasion by foreign occupants, and are likened unto the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Notice that in the whole list of worshipful activities they are performing there is no mention of a “sin offering.” This example of a solemn assembly is worship which desires the good will and blessing of the Lord, which celebrates and rejoices and seeks to embrace the benefits of the Lord's covenant, but which involves no repentance, no confession of sin, and no adjustment of lifestyle on the part of the worshippers. God asks Israel: *“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? Saith the Lord;”* God rejected their solemn assembly in his courts when he said, *“Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with, it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood.”* Isaiah later records, that as a result of this kind of rebellious spirit in their solemn assembly, Israel was ultimately led into captivity and scattered among the nations—even to this day.

Latter Day instruction on preparations for solemn assembly

The Lord gave instruction to Latter Day Israel in December 1832 as found in Doctrine & Covenants 85:16-20. The priesthood was to prepare themselves in a process outlined in verse 16. They were told to ponder this commandment in their hearts: *“to call upon me while I am near; draw near unto me, and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me; ask and ye shall receive; knock and it shall be opened unto you; that whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name it shall be given unto you that is expedient for you. And if ye ask anything that is not expedient for you, it shall turn unto your condemnation.”* This outlines a process of drawing near unto God as initiated by Him when He is near, and leading to us finding Him, receiving of Him, and the opening of the door of His direction to us.

God goes on to tell us that the voice that we hear in preparation is as the voice of one crying in the wilderness because we are not yet able to see Him and that His voice is Spirit. Then we are given an encouraging instruction and promise: *“And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you, and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things. Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him: for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will.”* We must always remember that we can approach the Lord in humility and make preparation to receive, but it is always God's to give in his own time and way—and not ours to take.

Then in verse 19 the Lord begins to address specifically what should happen in preparation of calling a solemn assembly when he tells us to: *“cast away your idle thoughts and your excess of laughter far from you; tarry ye, tarry ye in this place, and call a solemn assembly, even of those who are the first laborers in this last kingdom; and let those whom they have warned in their traveling, call on the Lord, and ponder the warning in their hearts which they have received....”* This gathering is solemn in that it is serious in the conditions that they found themselves in and that all eyes must be single to His glory, and nothing else.

Then the Lord gives a commandment to these same laborers in verse 20 that they are to: *“assemble yourselves together, and organize yourselves, and prepare yourselves, and sanctify yourselves; yea,*

purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me, that I may make you clean;” Purifying our hearts focuses on the purity in our motivation of coming before God because we love Him with all of our heart, mind and strength. The first great commandment spoken by the Master was: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* God, throughout all ages, has called people through the prophets to repent of their sins and return back to Him. The root of all sin is rebellion against God because we do not love Him with all of our hearts. In each case, if the people humbled themselves and repented, they were promised great and marvelous blessings. God has been reminding us with urgency of what great things have been foretold by the prophets that are now being fulfilled, and that we must be obedient to His holy law because we love Him. Both the prophets and the law that He seeks us to keep are based on our love of God with all our heart, soul, and mind—which collectively we have not done. The experience on the Mount of Transfiguration witnessed by Peter, James, and John where they saw Jesus transfigured before them with Moses (representing the law) and Elias (representing the prophets) is important. Moses and Elias stood on either side of Jesus with the voice from the excellent glory saying: *“this is my beloved Son, hear ye Him.”* This visual experience did not go unnoticed by the three apostles. It is in the love, power, and glory of the Son of God that the law and prophets come together in perfect unity.

For us to cleanse our hands and feet is to repent of actions done by our works and travel. Israel’s failed solemn assembly in Isaiah was because they did not *“wash ye, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil and learn to do well”* (Isaiah 1:16-17.) Only when we put our evil away and learn to do well are we assured that Jesus Christ will testify to the Father that we are clean from this wicked generation and that He may fulfill the great and last promise made unto the church.

As we continue to examine Section 85 the Lord speaks to us about increasing our collective faith by helping to prepare each other. This, of course, would require sufficient humility to first admit that we need help and that we are willing to be taught by each other under the influence of the Holy Ghost, which brings wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge being used correctly as directed by the Spirit. *“Therefore, verily I say unto you, my friends, Call your solemn assembly, as I have commanded you; and as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning even by study, and also by faith.”* Some learning is by study of the three standard books of the church, and other learning comes by faith through personal experience with the Holy Ghost and being taught from on high. Both are mentioned as important and needed in learning the ways of the Lord.

For a second time we are told the same instruction as in verse 20 with added points on homes. *“Organize yourselves, prepare every needful thing, and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God;”* We are also told a second time with added information to: *“...cease from all your light speeches, from all laughter, from all your lustful desires, from all your pride and light-mindedness, and from all your wicked doings.”* It is a necessity that these things are found not only in the House of the Lord, but in our personal homes and families. This preparation must needs take place before a solemn assembly can be effective.

The Lord, in verse 38, details very personal things for preparation in our individual lives and the lives of our families that are essential: *“See that ye love one another; cease to be covetous, learn to impart one to another as the gospel requires; cease to be idle; cease to be unclean; cease to find fault one with another, cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated; and above all things, clothe ourselves with the bonds of*

charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace; pray always, that you may not faint until I come; behold, and lo, I will come quickly and receive you unto myself. Amen.” There is no substitute for personal preparation and adjustment prior to a corporate experience with the Lord.

There are many other examples in scripture to study out relating to various similar solemn assemblies. Just to list a few to review are: Moses consecrates Israel in Exodus 19:3-19; Hezekiah restores worship of God in 2 Chronicles 29:1-20; Ezra the priest in Ezra 9:1-15; and the Prophet Joel in Joel 1:5-14 and 2:2-16 which specifically refers to the last days.

We are living in a time where we, like Jehoshaphat and Judah, can cry: *“for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do, but our eyes are upon thee.”* If we are honest with ourselves, we do not know what to do today. We are witnessing the prophecies of the Lord coming to pass before our eyes. Examples of the judgments of God include: desolating sickness that has come upon the land (Coronavirus), pestilence (locusts in Africa & Middle East, Asian murder hornets), burned out cities by wild fires in California and Australia, tempests (tornadoes in the South), earthquakes in diverse places (Utah, Idaho, Oklahoma, & Kansas), waves heaving themselves beyond their bounds (hurricanes & rising oceans), asteroids falling from the sky as if the stars from heaven were falling, wars and rumors of wars, and we are scattered as Israel was through our own choices of disobedience, rebellion, and carelessness. Do we not face a multitude of enemies and judgments like that of Judah?

Perhaps, because of the disruption to our otherwise self-directed lives, we are currently more willing to ask the Lord for help. We have great need to humble ourselves before the Lord and repent of our sins. How would we respond if the Lord heard our supplications and forgave us and spoke? Would we accept what Judah was told to go down to battle but not to fight? Can we “stand still and see the salvation of the Lord?” Would we be humble enough to accept His direction—especially if it is not what we expect? The world desperately needs an ensign (standard) among the nations—even Zion. We must humble ourselves before the Almighty God who created the Heavens and the Earth and all things that in them are. This is the “Angel Message” of this last dispensation of time. None of us knows the answers—but God will perform His “strange act.” Pray in humility and weep for Zion, and turn from wickedness and carelessness. God will forgive if we are humble, repentant, and full of love for Him in our hearts.