

The Solemn Assembly

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It was an autumn day in New England when I stood at the grave of Azahel Nettleton a man greatly used of God as a human instrument of revival during the second Great Awakening. I stood in front of that brown mossy tombstone and as I reflected upon his mighty ministry I sensed the awful solemnity of a holy God. I believe the one factor missing in the American church today is the absence of the awful solemnity of God. God in authority, God in his sovereignty, God himself manifesting his presence. We must ask ourselves why? Why has God withdrawn his presence from the American church in our day? Why does our once great nation lie in such wickedness and such great abomination and call evil good and good evil? Why has the church lost her power? Why has she lost her authority? Where is the holy fire emanating from our pulpits in our land today? Why has the flame gone out? The answer to these whys lies in the fact that we as a people of God have grieved the heart of God through our own personal and corporate sins.

Listen to the words of the great Puritan divine, John Owen, as he described England in his day. "When a sinful church or people have passed the utmost bounds of divine patience and forbearance, they fall into such abominable crying sins and provocations as shall render the utmost vengeance beneath their desserts." So Josephus affirms of this generation after they had rejected and slain the Lord Christ, "That they fell into such a hell of provoking abominations that if the Romans had not come and destroyed them, God would've sent fire and brimstone upon them from heaven as he did on Sodom."

I believe the current crisis in the church in America is that the glory has departed. There is no felt presence of God among us. Our situation is similar to the people of God as described in Ezekiel chapter 8, "And he brought me to the door of the court; and when I looked, behold a hole in the wall. Then said he unto me, Son of man, dig now in the wall: and when I had digged in the wall, behold a door. And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they do here. So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The Lord seeth us not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth."

That friends, is the sad picture of the church in American today elated with her personal and corporate sins and hiding behind a thick cloud of incense saying, "The Lord seeth us not." But the eyes of the Lord do see the hearts of men, nothing is hid from his eye. The church sleeps a sleep of death.

Listen to the wise comments of another Puritan, Thomas Brooks, "When a man is in a deep lethargy if you pinch him with pincers or prick him with needles, he feels it not. If you scorch him, he cries not. If you threaten him, he fears not. Or if you speak to him fair, he regards it not. And now, this is the condition of such that are in a spiritual lethargy. Let the judgments of God be denounced and let the terrors of the law be preached, they tremble not. Let the flames of hellfire flash upon their souls, they regard it not for they are sermon-proof and judgment-proof and hell-proof."

Listen friends, the only remedy for a people of God who have departed from the heart of God is that they return to God in a time of Solemn Assembly. A Solemn Assembly is needed when there is a general decline of spirituality in the land, when wickedness is commonplace and when there is little distinction between the church and pagan society. When God has withdrawn his presence from among his people it is time to call the people of God back to him in urgency. Now is the time in America for the churches in our land to sit in sackcloth and ashes and to weep before the porch and the altar as seen in the book of Job.

Listen to this striking passage from Joel chapter 1 and verses 10-15, "The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted: the new wine is dried up, the oil languisheth. Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen; howl, O ye vinedressers, for the wheat and for the barley; because the harvest of the field is perished. The vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men. Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests: howl, ye ministers of the altar: come, lie all night in sackcloth, ye ministers of my God: for the meat offering and the drink offering is withholden from the house of your God. Sanctify ye a fast, call a Solemn Assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry unto the Lord, Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come."

America, a once Christian nation is now ripe for destruction from the Almighty and it shall soon come. The great burden of this should be on the church in America to fast and pray and weep over the sins of the land. But she cannot because of her own pitiful condition. The church itself needs to be roused and awakened from her slumber. Before she can pray for her country, she must first pray for herself to repent of her personal and corporate sins and plead mercy unto God in true repentance and humility and brokenness before the Ancient of Days whom we have so greatly offended with our multiplied sins.

If God would return to his church in revival and flood our sanctuaries with his presence, then the teenagers would flock to the house of God and have a real encounter with God.

In a time of true spiritual awakening thousands of teenagers could be swept into the Kingdom of God and saved.

So we see first this great need of a Solemn Assembly to call upon the Lord to forgive us our sins and then to heal our land. The need is great indeed at this late hour before the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The hour is late, the day is at hand. It will either be total ruin and destruction for America or great national revival will occur which will strengthen and revitalize the church and infuse it with apostolic vitality and thousands upon thousands will be converted and swept into the Kingdom of God. Oh friends, pray for the latter that God will send a mighty outpouring of his Spirit upon our land to revive his people and show forth his glory to defend his holy name.

Now that we are in need of this Solemn Assembly and understand the great desperation of it, let us examine the nature of a Solemn Assembly. Just what is it? It's a time of weeping and fasting and humbling ourselves before an offended Creator. It's a time of brokenness over our sins, a time of confessing our sins and forsaking our sins corporately in the house of God. It's a serious and solemn time, night after night, where the people of God sit in the sanctuary of God and in humiliation humble themselves under God and seek cleansing from him and forgiveness of sins. It's a time where the people of God get right with God, where the leaders of the people lead this assembly and weep over the withdrawn presence of God because of the sins of the people of God. It is a time where a cry is made unto God.

The best way I can describe the solemn scene is to recommend a serious reading of Psalm 80. Psalm 80 is a plea to God for restoration of the people of God. Allow me to read this Psalm and then comment upon it in regard to the nature of a Solemn Assembly. Here now is Psalm 80, pay close attention to the petitions in it made unto God.

“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth. Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh stir up thy strength, and come and save us. Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine ; and we shall be saved. O Lord God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people? Thou feedest them with the bread of tears; and givest them tears to drink in great measure. Thou makest us a strife unto our neighbours: and our enemies laugh among themselves. Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved. Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root , and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river. Why hast thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it. Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; And the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down: they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance. Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself. So will not we go back from thee:

quicken us, and we will call upon thy name. Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts, cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.”

Now friends, let us apply this 80th Psalm to the Solemn Assembly and how to seek God in a desperate time of prayer. Notice first that this Psalm is a prayer for the ear of God, “Give ear O Shepherd of Israel.” Our prayers must rise up to the throne room of the Almighty and gain his attention, they must stir him.

Secondly, it is a prayer that acknowledges a high and lofty God. Our time of Solemn Assembly will be futile if we continue to maintain a low view of God, to have a God that we have shrunk down to *our* size and placed on a human level, God is the one dwellest between the cherubims.

Thirdly, it is a prayer for backsliders to be turned back to God, turned back in a right relationship with him. Notice the text “turn us again.” When the people of God have grieved the heart of God with their sins of pride, arrogance and self-reliance and presumptuous sins, it is time to seek God and beg for mercy. All we can do is beg for mercy, ask God for the grace and repentance to turn us again.

Notice the people spoken of in the Psalm acknowledge their need to be turned again. Until you admit and acknowledge your sins and agree with God about what *he* says about them, call them what *he* calls them, when you get serious with God and confess your sins he will get serious with you friend.

Notice the fourth thing, it is a prayer of asking God to turn back from his anger toward his estranged people. A shut up heaven is a result of unrepentant sinning people, without true repentance our prayers even anger him. “O Lord God of Hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people?”

Now notice the fifth thing, it is a prayer of reminding God what he has done in former times, “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt, thou hast cast out the heathen and planted it.” This is reminiscent of the prayer of Moses before God upon Mount Sinai when the people of Israel had sinned grievously against the Lord with the golden calf. Moses intercedes on their behalf lest an angry God destroys them. Moses reminded God of how he had delivered his people from Egypt and now his very name would become a reproach to the enemies of God if he chose to destroy them after he had so miraculously delivered them.

The sixth thing to make note of this in this Psalm, is the fact that it is a prayer recognizing the remedial judgments of God upon his estranged people, “Why hast thou broken down her hedges so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her?” The judgments increase in severity if the people do not repent.

And finally, it is a prayer for God himself to look down from the heavens and see his people in their distress calling out to him to the one who can save them, “Return we beseech thee O God of hosts, look down from heaven and behold and visit this vine.”

In a time of Solemn Assembly where the people of God are honest with God about their sins, when they turn from their wickedness and confess their sins to him, when they humble themselves and in brokenness and contriteness seek his face and plead with him to look down and come down, then that is the kind of prayer that reaches the heart of God.

But our desperation must match our perspiration in this time of seeking God in repentance. We must be transparent and acknowledge the fact that we have grieved his presence away from among us then and only then can we pray for our nation that God will bless this great nation of ours once again. But first the people of God must re-enter a right relationship with God for Amos 3:3 states, “Can two walk together unless they be agreed?” We cannot go our own way and expect God to follow, we must realign ourselves back to him.

A time of Solemn Assembly can certainly be such a time for such a time as this. Brother Pastor, what is the reason that you are not in sackcloth and ashes in your sanctuary right now? Why are you not leading your people in nights of desperate prayer in a time of Solemn Assembly? Do you not need revival or are you afraid that if God sent revival to your church it might change the dynamic of your status quo?

Friends, let us seek God in a serious time of prayer and fasting for this is the most critical hour in the history of our nation. If we the people of God do not turn back to God, we will not witness revival in our day, our nation will be destroyed, our way of life eliminated. The pathway to revival is lined with the prayers of the people of God crying out to him in desperation to show himself strong. Let me ask you a question, are you willing to realign yourself to the heart of God? If not then, don't complain about things if you're not willing to do anything about it.

Let me pray.

Oh Great God, we as a nation have sinned against thee. Heavenly Father, we as your people have sinned against thee. Oh Lord of Glory, hear our prayer, look down and come down. Give ear to us once again. Come down in your Manifest Presence once again. Stir us O God to lay hold of you in nights of desperate prayer. We plead with you, O Lord God of Glory, to come again and pour out your Spirit upon our land. Send a mighty revival, a spiritual awakening that will grip this nation with eternity and the God of that eternity. Move as you've done in former times. O Lord, come save the teenagers of this land, this lost generation of church-ed teenagers who've never seen a real vital encounter with the Living God. Come, O Great King, and with a mighty outpouring of your Holy Spirit let them sit in Your Presence and be melted down under the awful solemnity of a Holy God to where their hearts are broken up and hearts of stone are made hearts of flesh. Offer your Great Glory. Do it again. We pray this, O Lord, hear our prayer. Look down and come down once again. Amen.