

SOUND THE ALARM

CALL A SACRED ASSEMBLY

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[NOTE: The following call was written and distributed on March 17, 2003, as the United States stood on the verge of war in Iraq. The need for a Sacred Assembly has not diminished over the past years. As you read, allow God to speak to you about the need for us to return to Him.]

Spiritual Readiness

Brothers and Sisters, we are at a critical time in our nation's history when God could very easily release His judgment on our nation for our sin and wickedness. Consider the following thoughts.

1. **God has established a limit to the amount of sin He will tolerate before He brings judgment and wrath in response.¹**

They always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last (1 Thess. 2:16).

"The sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Gen. 15:16).

"Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!" (Matt. 23:32).

According to Scripture, God has established a legal limit to sin. In one sense, God has a bowl to hold our sin that has a given measure. We cannot know exactly what that measure or limit is, nor do we know how close we may be to crossing that limit. When the sin of a nation or a people reaches that limit, God's wrath takes the place of His mercy. The only remedy is for a people to confess (agree with God about) their sin, and repent—turn from their sinful ways to God and His ways. When God forgives sin, He removes it

from our account and keeps us at a distance from the limit to our sins. As God's people, we need to stand before God, confess our sins, turn from our wicked ways, and pray for mercy. The spiritual healing of the United States is waiting on the repentance of God's people:

"If my people, who are called by my name, will 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" (2 Chron. 7:14).

2. The measure of judgment we use is the measure of judgment we will receive. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:1-5).

Essentially Jesus was not saying, "Don't judge at all." Rather, He was saying, "Be careful how you judge." We must be spiritually right with God if we are to be effective in removing "the speck" from another's eye. As our nation prepares to execute a measure of judgment on evil in our world, we need to be prepared to undergo the same scrutiny by a God who is holy, pure, and righteous. Are the people of the United States guilty of sins that would justify God's bringing judgment on us as a nation? God's examination is not based on what we believe is right and wrong, but what God has established as right and wrong. America is not spiritually prepared to withstand His holy examination. God says, "I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them. Then they will know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 7:27).

3. Only those who are right with God are prepared for a time of God's judgment. Here is the word God sent to Ezekiel:

"If a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its men and their animals, even if these three men—Noah, Daniel and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD" (Ezek. 14:13-14).

We must be careful that we don't trust in deceptive words that permit us to hold on to our sin and still try to claim the righteousness of Christ as our cover. Israel did something similar in the days of Jeremiah. They trusted in the fact that they were God's people and had the Temple of the Lord in their midst. God said:

"Look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

"Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe" — safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD" (Jer. 7:8-11).

When God's people had made His house a "den of robbers," He brought His judgment on the nation at the hands of a Babylonian king in 586/7 BC. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem centuries later, He prophesied the destruction that would come at the hands of a Roman army in AD 70. He brought the same accusation against God's people in His day:

"My house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a "den of robbers." (Matt 21:13)

Essentially, a den of robbers is where God's people live lives of sin all week long and then come before the Lord and say, "We're safe. We're God's people." A "den of robbers" in our day would be a church where God's people live and act like the rest of the lost world all week long and then come to church on Sunday and say, "I'm okay. I'm going to heaven when I die. I prayed the prayer. I joined the church." As we examine the lives of church members, I fear that most of our churches look more like a den of robbers than a house of prayer.

God's people must confess and repent (turn away) from our sin, if we are to receive the cleansing Christ has provided through His own shed blood. Only through repentance can we stand before God clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

4. **As God's people, we have a choice: We can either see the pending danger and return to the Lord before He brings judgment, or we can wait until after the disasters to cry out for mercy and repent.**

Throughout Scripture from beginning to end, God's people have had a tendency to depart from Him. Consequently, God prescribed regular times for His people to renew their covenant relationship with Him (Lev. 23). These times for renewing a right relationship with God were called sacred assemblies (or solemn assemblies, holy convocations). In the Old Testament we see two approaches to the use of sacred assemblies. One comes before the disaster and the other comes after the disaster.

Before. When King Jehoshaphat saw a vast army coming against the nation, he called for a fast and a time to seek help from the Lord (2 Chron. 20:1-30). God responded and saved the people. When Jonah preached a message of coming destruction, a wicked and pagan city and king repented, and God withheld the disaster (Jonah 3). When King Josiah heard God's Word read, he tore his robes in anguish realizing how much his nation had offended God by violating His commands. When Josiah humbled himself before the Lord and then guided the people to repent, God spared that generation from destruction (2 Chron. 34:14-35:19).

After. In 586/7 BC, God used a wicked king of Babylon to execute judgment on Jerusalem and Judah, and Nebuchadnezzar carried God's people into exile in Babylon for 70 years. After experiencing such great judgment, Ezra and Nehemiah guided the people to stand before God in repentance so God would heal and restore the land (Neh. 8–10)—and God did!

Call a Sacred Assembly

In the Book of Joel, God's people had experienced great destruction from swarms of locusts. As a spiritual leader, Joel knew the remedy was to call God's people to return to Him in a sacred assembly. When the people responded, God heard, forgave, and restored the land (Joel 1–3). Now is the time to call God's people in the United States and in our churches to repentance.

"Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'" (Ezek. 33:11).

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand (Joel 2:1).

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.

Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty (Joel 1:14-15).

"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. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:13-17).

If you sense, as I do, that God's people must cry out to the Lord at a time such as this and seek His mercies, call the people you lead to a time of sacred or solemn assembly—a holy convocation. If you sense a need for help in guiding God's people to repent in a time of crisis like we face, I've prepared the following suggestions to assist you. Most of the following is abbreviated and adapted from my book *Come to the Lord's Table: A Sacred Assembly for the Church*. This book is a three- or four-week study to guide God's people in returning to Him in preparation for Communion or the Lord's Supper. But we may not have that much time to return to the Lord. Consequently, I'm providing the following suggestions to assist you in guiding an emergency sacred assembly to prepare the church for the crisis we are facing.

Background for Sacred Assemblies

In 1989 Richard Owen Roberts of Wheaton, Illinois, introduced me and other leaders in my denomination to the biblical pattern for corporate repentance—the solemn assembly (or "sacred" assembly in the New International Version).² We began to study sacred assemblies in Scripture to see their connections to revival. Sacred assemblies were occasions for God's people collectively to worship Him, to repent of personal and corporate sin, to remember His special blessings on them, and to anticipate future blessings. The prescribed sacred assemblies (or holy convocations) for Israel included the Sabbath (Lev. 23:3) and seven other days of sacred assembly: the first (Passover) and seventh days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:4-8), the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost, Lev. 23:15-21), the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25), the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:26-32), and the first and eighth days of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:33-36).

Sacred assemblies were times for God's people to confess and repent of their sins. They were times to renew the covenant relationship with the Lord and return to Him in faithful love and obedience. They were times for worship and sacrifice, feasting and fasting. Even with these regular opportunities to renew fellowship with God, His people tended to depart from Him and from obedience to His commands. Spiritual leaders knew that the sacred assembly was a time for corporate repentance in the face of God's righteous judgments (see Joel 1–2). A number of national revivals in the Old Testament occurred in response to a sacred assembly.

The term "sacred assembly" is not used in the New Testament. However, Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Last Supper on one of God's prescribed sacred assemblies—the Feast of Passover. The first disciples were celebrating a sacred assembly when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. The church of our day also needs regular opportunities for individuals and the church to renew their relationships with the Lord—to remember and renew the New Covenant relationship they have with Him. In light of the current crisis, we need to bring God's people together for an emergency sacred assembly to hurry back to the Lord.

Examples.

The following are some examples of sacred assemblies in Scripture:

- Jacob assembles his family, Genesis 35:1-15
- Moses consecrates Israel, Exodus 19:10-19
- Joshua seeks the Lord following defeat at Ai, Joshua 7
- Samuel guides Israel to return to the Lord, 1 Samuel 7:2-13
- King Solomon and Israel celebrate Tabernacles and dedicate the temple, 2 Chronicles 5–7
- King Asa guides an assembly, 2 Chronicles 15:1-15
- King Jehoshaphat calls a fast, 2 Chronicles 20:1-30
- King Hezekiah celebrates the Passover, 2 Chronicles 30
- King Josiah renews the Covenant, 2 Chronicles 34:14-33
- Revival under Ezra and Nehemiah, Nehemiah 8–10
- Nineveh repents after the message from Jonah, Jonah 3

Multiple Leaders.

Multiple leaders were characteristic in Old Testament revivals. I'd recommend you enlist other staff, elders, deacons, or other spiritually sensitive persons to assist you in planning and guiding the sacred assembly. If this is all new to you, you will find yourself walking by faith—and that is a good way to walk. Trust the Lord to guide you.

Who should come?

In the Old Testament sacred assemblies, they invited all who could understand. Older children, youth, and adults would certainly be included. Even younger children can benefit by seeing adults taking their faith and relationships with Christ and His church seriously. Call people to come for an open-ended period of time. You may want to hire some childcare workers for babies and preschoolers so every adult member can participate in the service. Or you may provide space in the back of your meeting room for parents to care for children and still be able to hear and participate.

Fasting.

Fasting was commonly a part of the call to an emergency sacred assembly. The focus was perhaps three-fold: (1) deny self to seek the Lord, (2) don't waste time eating when more important matters must be dealt with, and (3) emphasize the seriousness of the time. Encourage fasting the day of the sacred assembly for those who are physically able to fast.

Pray.

Seek the Lord's directions as you plan for and conduct a sacred assembly. Enlist intercessors to pray for you as you prepare.

Service Elements.

Scripture does not provide a specific agenda for a sacred assembly, so ask the Lord to guide you in preparing for this service. Below I've suggested some elements that might be part of a sacred assembly. Customize a service for your church or group — you have great latitude in what the service is like. Include the elements you sense would be most helpful. Choose from the following elements to design your service or plan your own activities as God guides you.

- **Music and Singing:** If you use music at all, sing hymns or provide special music related to God's holiness, God's provision for our sin, forgiveness and cleansing, repentance and so forth.
- **Scripture Reading:** Read Scriptures related to the same topics. Include others that may call for members to deal seriously with specific sins. Consider responsive readings of Scriptures also.
- **Message:** If you choose to preach, use a brief message on the nature and importance of repentance or on the place of a sacred assembly in returning to the Lord. Keep in mind that the focus of this service is on response to the Lord, not just teaching and learning. Use the message to call for response and reserve most of your time for responding to the Lord.
- **Guided Responses.** I've prepared some overhead transparency masters for you to use as needed during the sacred assembly. You have permission to reformat them for a PowerPoint presentation. The final page may be reproduced for people to take home and use to consecrate their home. If you use these guides, take time to guide responses through prayer or interaction with others after each segment. Knowledge is not the goal; responding to the Lord is the goal. Use them all or select those that you know will be most helpful for your people.
- **Prayer:** Provide for a variety of prayer experiences interspersed with Scripture reading or times for public response.
 - Provide soft music for a time of silent prayer and meditation.
 - Break into smaller groups of 4 to 8 (preferably members of the same sex). Invite members in each group to ask the question, "How may we pray for your spiritual needs?" Then have one or two in the group pray for each request.
 - Provide opportunity for people to come and share a need or confess a sin and pray with a pastor, a minister, elder, deacon, ministry team member, or intercessor. If appropriate, share some of these needs with the congregation and invite some members to come and surround the person with prayer.
- **Public Confession:** The general guideline for public confession of sin is to confess the sin as broadly as the offense. Reserve public confession for sin that has

become publicly known or sin that is against the church or many of the members. I recommend that the pastor personally screen each person's desire for public confession and make sure it is appropriate. Those receiving people for prayer should agree on a procedure to follow regarding public confession. Following a public confession of sin, guide the congregation to express their forgiveness, invite the person to pray aloud and ask God for forgiveness, invite some members to gather around him or her and pray for mercy and victory, or in some other way respond to the request for forgiveness.

- **Reconciling Relationships:** Review the list of sins that may cause an offense. Then encourage members to go to each other to ask forgiveness or to be reconciled over offenses God has identified. Provide soft music. Ask those who are not sensing a need to reconcile to pray for their fellow church members who are needing to forgive and be reconciled. Don't rush this time. You may want to share guidelines similar to these:
 - If you are the offender, acknowledge your sin and say, "Please forgive me." Don't give excuses or try to justify your actions. Don't imply or make accusations about wrong on the other person's part. That is their responsibility.
 - If you sense a broken relationship exists and don't know what is wrong, say, "I sense that there may be a broken relationship between us, but I'm not sure I know why. Help me understand what I need to do to be reconciled with you."
 - If you miss getting to reconcile with anyone, contact him or her after the service.
- **Testimonies:** Invite individual testimonies about ways God has been working in lives during the service including experience of God's love and grace, a spiritual breakthrough, a victory over a besetting sin, reconciled relationships, confession of newfound faith in Christ, and so forth.
- **Invitation to Receive Christ:** Often in history, people have been converted during a time of sacred assembly. With the uncertainty in our land and the threats being made, some may sense a new or special urgency to reconcile with God. Extend an invitation for those who want to place their faith in Christ and provide a place with counselors who can assist those who respond.

- **Open-ended Closing:** As you close the service, invite members to continue responding to the Lord as long as needed. They may want to remain for prayer, continue seeking to reconcile relationships, or to seek out prayer with one of the leaders.

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1. I'm indebted to Richard Owen Roberts for the concept of the legal limits of sin. See his pamphlet on the topic at: <http://www.collegeofrevival.org/pamphlets/>

2. For additional helps on Solemn Assemblies see the following message by Richard Owen Roberts:

<http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=2710>