

Session 5 The Fivefold Action Plan God Wants from Us

Please refer to the teaching notes for this message.

INTRODUCTION

Session notes number six, “The Fivefold Action Plan.” Let’s just read the passage straight through. But before I do that, I first want to give a statement of introduction to this section of Scripture: the theological framework behind a sacred assembly. A sacred assembly is where people gather for a day or two, fast and pray, and focus on the Lord. That’s a solemn or sacred assembly. Both terms are used in the Bible. The theological background is the fact that God is in covenant with His people. That’s really the underlying theme of the whole book here, the book of Joel. What we see is the effects of a broken covenant. That’s why there’s an agricultural crisis, the locust plague, and a military invasion, because God takes covenant so seriously. When God makes covenant with a people, the consequences of blessing are greatly increased, but the consequences of judgment are greatly increased if the covenant is broken. You don’t really understand the severity of judgment and negativity, nor the great extent of blessing and prosperity, until you understand how seriously God takes the covenant. When God makes a covenant, He commits Himself in a deep way. When we make a covenant back to God, personally or as a whole nation did, the nation of Israel, the Lord requires a deep commitment in return. He says, “I will crown this covenant with great blessing, but I will disturb the people who make a covenant with Me and don’t keep it. I want them to know how seriously I keep the covenant.” There are the negative consequences and the positive blessings. Without understanding that in the book of Joel, you can’t really get the main storyline going on. It’s about the relationship God has with His people based on covenant. I just wanted to give that background to this book here. Let’s read Joel 1:8 and then verses 13-14 to get the overall flow of it. Then we’ll break it down verse by verse.

“LAMENT LIKE A VIRGIN GIRDED WITH SACKCLOTH FOR THE HUSBAND OF HER YOUTH”

Joel says, “Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth” (Joel 1:8). What a graphic picture! It describes the woman who’s betrothed to be married, and her husband dies. He says, “Lament and be grieved at that level. Because the broken covenant and the negative consequences of it are that weighty and it’s appropriate to grieve at that level if you understood the reality of what’s in front of you.”

He goes on and talks about how to restore the covenant and how to get it right with the Lord. Verse 13: “Gird yourselves and lament, you priests” (Joel 1:13). He talks to the professional clergy, the spiritual leaders of the nation. “Wail, you who minister before the altar” (ibid). That altar is in the temple, in Solomon’s temple. “Come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister before the Lord.”

WHEN GOD SUSPENDS THE COVENANT BLESSINGS, HE WANTS YOU TO LISTEN

Then he makes an interesting statement that we wouldn’t normally appreciate; but in Joel’s day it was really a weighty concept. He said, “For the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God” (Joel 1:13). The grain offering and the drink offering were offered twice a day. They were part of the sacrificial system, where the priests offered animals and different kinds of grain offerings, food offerings to the Lord. They would offer them to the Lord twice a day as an expression of the covenant. When the locust plague came, the food was destroyed so that they couldn’t offer the grain and the drink offering because there were no materials to offer it. These were expressions of the covenant. The reason this is so serious is because if God would allow the covenant expressions to be suspended, if God allowed the crisis to get to that degree that the covenant worship system was suspended, the nation of Israel was meant to understand that the blessings were

being suspended as well. God is saying, “I’m suspending the communion table and the ministers.” In other words, “All the priests will be fired.” In our context, that means no baptism, no communion, no worship service, no prayer room. It’s all bankrupt; it’s all gone.

THE LORD DOESN’T WANT YOUR WORSHIP UNTIL YOU RETURN WITH ALL YOUR HEART

The meaning was, if God would allow a crisis to hit the nation that would interrupt the worship program that He established, then God was very disturbed and very serious about the nation’s attention, because the covenant blessings were suspended as well. When He said, “The grain and drink offerings are withheld,” God isn’t supplying what He requires for the worship system to continue. Because the Lord doesn’t want your worship right now until you return with all your heart. That was a huge statement. The Lord was saying, “I won’t supply the worship system which releases the blessing until you come with all of your heart. I’m even shutting the lights off. I’m shutting the system down; I’m closing the buildings down. I don’t want you to gather and go on with the worship festivities if your heart isn’t connected with Me.”

In Malachi 1, the prophet Malachi said in essence the same thing. The Lord is speaking through the prophet Malachi. He says, “I wish that someone would go in and shut the doors of the worship house rather than have you worship Me with this kind of facade. I would rather someone shut the doors, lock it, and shut the system down rather than that you should carry on with a pretense of worship” (Mal. 1:10, paraphrased). The Lord is saying He doesn’t want it that way.

“CONSECRATE A FAST, CALL A SOLEMN ASSEMBLY”

“Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly” (Joel 1:14)—or a solemn assembly. “Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord.” That would have been the temple of Solomon, which was a very large worship complex in the city of Jerusalem. One of the great wonders of the ancient world was the temple of Solomon, which was called the house of the Lord.

THE CALL TO LAMENT THE VIOLATION OF THE COVENANT

Verse 8, Roman numeral I. The call to lament. The call is to get in touch with the reality of the seriousness of the situation, and to get in touch with it to such a degree that you respond to it in an appropriate way, which would be lamenting, sorrow, and anguish. He says, “If you don’t have sorrow and anguish, you’re not grasping the gravity of what’s at stake. The covenant has been violated, and nearly suspended; the blessings are suspended, at least.” God was committed to the covenant, but in that generation they were all but living outside of the covenant. Judgment was coming to wake up the nation, so that some of them would wake up then, but also so that the next generations would live in the light of this discipline. They wouldn’t want to make that mistake again. Sometimes the judgment and discipline of God in one hour is actually preserving the people in the decade to come, and even in the generation to come. It’s teaching them the seriousness of the covenant so that they won’t take it so lightly in the months and years ahead.

He says, “Gird yourself like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth” (Joel 1:13). “Gird yourself and lament.”

Paragraph A. Joel is calling the nation to come before the Lord, again, to lament; to get in touch with the grief and the pain in light of the crisis, the crisis of the broken covenant and the crisis of the judgment. It’s increasing and getting more severe as the weeks and months pass. He’s calling them to wholeheartedness. He wants them to understand the severity of what’s happening.

JOEL SAW THE SEVERITY OF THE CURRENT AS WELL AS THE COMING CRISIS

Paragraph B. Joel saw the severity of the current as well as the coming crisis. He wanted them to see it. Joel saw it, but they didn't see it; they were nonchalant. He says, "Do you not understand? It's not business as usual right now."

They were just going about their days: "Well, times are hard, the locust plague has hit..."

Joel says, "Stop. Don't just stop the locust plague with natural ways, like trying to bolster up the agricultural problem and fix it. Stop. Get in touch with the big picture. Do you know what's happening? God's heart is grieved. God's heart is even angry. God is zealous to correct it. Stop. Do you understand how weighty and how serious an hour we're living in from God's point of view? God isn't pleased right now, and things will get worse." That's what He's telling them to do.

JOEL URGES THE PEOPLE TO COME WITH LAMENTATION UNTO WHOLEHEARTEDNESS

Paragraph C. It's Joel's urgent call that the people of God make it a top priority to respond to God, to come with lamentation unto wholeheartedness; that they would feel the weightiness of the situation, and then it would motivate them and spur them on to wholeheartedness. What pain and pressure cause—not always, but this is the Lord's desire for that community; the Devil has another motive and another desire—God's desire is that the pressure would cause the people to stop and ask deep questions about their life. When the pressure is there, when it's so hard, when they're facing discouragement, they begin to stop and ask questions: "Is anything wrong in my walk with God? What's my life about? What's eternity about? What's God about?" Pressure creates a situation where people ask questions. God knows that. He allows pressure for that reason. Other people respond to pressure in another way; they just get bitter and more determined to sin. But some people actually draw back and ask questions. That's what Isaiah meant in Isaiah 26:9 when he said, "The judgments of God teach righteousness to a nation" (Is. 26:9, paraphrased). It means it stops people from business as usual. They take a step back and ask deep question about their life and God and the meaning of their life and what they're doing. In that process of asking questions, they turn their heart to the Lord or recommit themselves to a new level of righteousness.

Another thing the pressure does is that it removes some of the opportunity for sin. Some of the pressures, the judgments of the Lord, are God's way of saying, "You can't turn off the things that are causing you to sin, so I'll turn the lights off for you so you can't go there. I will help you, because you can't make the decision yourself. I will create a circumstance in which you can't walk that sin out. I will shut the door, so to speak, cut off the opportunity, to help you make sense of what your life is about.

"I WILL HEDGE UP YOUR WAY WITH THORNS, AND WALL HER IN"

In Hosea 2:6-7, God told Israel through Hosea the prophet, "I will hedge you in with thorns" (Hos. 2:6, paraphrased)—with circumstances; "I will hem you in with thorns. If you go to the right, ouch. If you go to the left, ouch. You get hemmed in." He says, "So you will seek Me and return to Me" (v. 7, paraphrased). So the man can't stop his immorality, and he can't stop the other things he does; the Lord says, "I will hem you in to make it really hard to do it." You don't want the Lord to hem you in. When He hems you in, it's to cause you to turn, because He loves you, but He hems you in with thorns and that doesn't feel good. The point of pressure from God's point of view is to get us to ask deep questions, number one, and to hem us in. He's helping us make choices we should have made without being hemmed in.

THERE WAS NO CLASS OF SOCIETY EXEMPT FROM THE PLAGUE OF GOD’S JUDGMENT

Paragraph E. If you read throughout the whole of Joel 1, there’s no class of society exempt from the plague. The righteous and the wicked, everyone was under the pressures that came on the city and nation. According to verse 5, the drunkards couldn’t get their alcohol. They sobered up, and a lot of them came to sound mind when they sobered up; and a lot of them didn’t, undoubtedly. Verse 8, the young couples were troubled. Verse 13, the priests, the spiritual leaders; verse 11, the farmers or agricultural leaders; verse 3, the elders, the political or governing leaders of the nation—not just the spiritual leaders, but the political; all were troubled. We find in Joel 2:16 that all the children were troubled. Everyone was affected by this crisis and pressure that touched the city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah.

THE CRISIS BUILDS SLOWLY, BUT STEADILY, TO AN EYE-GRABBING CRESCENDO

Paragraph F. Joel gives a graphic picture of the current crisis, but remember, the current crisis is building. It’s going to turn into a greater crisis. It’s accurate to say the current, increasing crisis will become a worse crisis, but it takes years for the crisis to build. It builds slowly, but steadily, to a negative crescendo to get the attention of the nation. That’s the track our nation is on right now. We have been in crisis for some time; different people could pick different dates where it began. For a few decades we have been in crisis. The crisis is mounting up; the noose is getting tighter and tighter. Many in the Church are compromising more and more. Others are becoming deep and asking questions. Many in society are becoming more careless, but others are becoming more concerned. They’re asking deeper questions. Let me tell you, the crisis is going to increase and increase in drought, agriculture, finance, political confusion, military conflicts. They’re building. They’re building slowly. There are reprieves. The Lord draws back and says, “America, I’m trying to give you a chance to respond.”

There are people responding all around. While the pressure is building, at the same time, there’s another storyline. People are becoming more committed to the Lord; people are getting saved. The Spirit of God is moving in greater ways. Both dimensions of this vast drama are happening right now, even simultaneously across our nation.

TAKE OFF THE WEDDING DRESS AND PUT ON SACKCLOTH

In paragraph F, Joel likens the crisis to a bride who is engaged, who is betrothed. In our context, it might be the engaged bride or even the bride on her wedding day in an extreme situation. In ancient Israel, they were betrothed maybe a year before they actually had the wedding ceremony and the consummation of their marriage vows. They would be betrothed or legally married; we would call that engagement. He’s telling them, “You have your wedding dress all ready to put on that day. You’ve had the ceremony, you’re right there having it or about to have it. Take off the wedding dress and put on sackcloth.” What a horrible picture. The woman is preparing for the day of her wedding. She lays aside the wedding dress because the crisis so greatly is hitting the land that it’s equal to the crisis of her losing her husband suddenly on the day of her wedding, or in the days or weeks before. As the drama is building in her young heart to get married, he says, “Suddenly, you suffer bereavement—the sudden loss of your husband; that’s the kind of level of gravity of what’s happening in your nation. You’re spiritually not in touch with it; you don’t have enough spiritual discernment to see the gravity of what’s really happening in the Spirit.” God is disturbed; His patience is allowing time to pass, but He’s disturbed.

A SLOWLY-MOUNTING INCREASE OF DARKNESS AND GLORY

I want to say it boldly. God is disturbed what's happening in America. It's not OK, what's going on. It's getting worse and worse; yes, there are those in the Church who are getting more and more on fire, but a collision of two kingdoms is coming together. Many in the Church are going in the wrong direction. People in covenant with God are getting looser and more in agreement with the ungodliness in our culture. The Lord is going to speak louder and louder and louder through judgments, as well as He speaks louder to those who are saying yes through the release of His Spirit.

WHEN A PERSON, WHEN A NATION, IS IN COVENANT, THE STAKES ARE SO MUCH HIGHER
Paragraph H. It took some weeks for these four waves of locusts to pass. Some would even say longer. A wave of locusts came in verse 4, then a second wave, then a third wave, then a fourth wave. Each time, the crisis became more troubling. There was the locust invasion, then drought, then the Lord withheld the rain, then the fires came, then economic crisis struck, and there followed a depression in society.

Then Joel says, "Before long, there will be a military invasion."

The people are saying, "We can't bear this."

He says, "I urge you, stand before God and get right with Him, because you're in covenant with Him, and therefore the stakes are higher." Whenever the blessing is higher, whenever the relationship with God is higher, the blessings are higher, but so are the consequences for being unfaithful to the covenant. They're higher as well.

IT'S SO SIMPLE, ANYONE CAN DO IT, BUT TOO SIMPLE FOR MOST

Roman numeral II. What God wants is so simple. It's so different than what man is seeking. Man is seeking to fix society through different economic means or political arrangements. It's good to do that, actually; but that can't be the primary thing we do. What God wants is so simple. It's so simple, anyone can do it, but it's so simple that so few do.

THE LEPROUS ENEMY COMMANDER AND HIS STRANGE MEANS OF HEALING

The story of Naaman is a classic story. Naaman, paragraph B, was the commander of the king of Syria. The Syrians were enemies of Israel. This was an enemy commander. He attacked Israel. Yet this very powerful general became a leper. Then in paragraph one, 2 Kings 5, they sent for the prophet Elisha. A Jewish prophet and a Syrian military leader—that's a bad combination. Elisha said, "OK. I have the word of the Lord for you. The Lord wants to show you mercy. Go wash in the Jordan River seven times."

This man becomes so angry. He says, "What? That's all? Just go take a bath seven times in the Jordan River? No way. I want some dramatic miracle service."

Elisha says, "No, just go jump in the river seven times and your leprosy will leave."

He says, "No, that's absolutely ridiculous." Not to mention, to a Syrian commander, the Jordan River was the river of the enemy. He says, "No, why can't I go to my own river?"

The Lord says, "No."

They went and said, “Naaman, why are you so upset? If Elisha would have asked you to do something great or difficult, give a million dollars and make some great sacrifice, you would have done it. He’s asking you to do something so simple. Why will you not do it?”

The answer is that it’s too simple. “Go jump in a Jewish river? How can that help anything?”

What God is asking us to do is so simple. He’s saying, “Body of Christ, call a meeting. Gather the people who love Jesus in the area. Spend a day. Have them repent, have them worship. Have them ask Me for mercy. That’s it. That’s what I ask.” Anyone can do that, but almost no one does. The Lord says, “That’s all I want you to do. Yes, those other things, fix the economy, those things, work on those. Those are secondary measures. What you need is My favor. You get My favor by doing it My way. I’ll heal the land.”

“THEN WILL I HEAR FROM HEAVEN, AND FORGIVE THEIR SINS, AND HEAL THEIR LAND”

Paragraph C. Turn to 2 Chronicles 7. This is what God spoke to Solomon 400 years before Joel. He spoke this word. Let’s read this. In 2 Chronicles 7:12, the Lord appeared to Solomon. This is where Joel got his doctrine of the solemn assembly—right here. God appeared to Solomon. Where did we get this idea of gathering together to cry out with fasting and prayer? The Lord appeared to Solomon, 400 years before Joel was even on the scene. The Lord said to Solomon, “I have heard your prayer. I want to tell you some things” (2 Chron. 7:12, paraphrased). He says in verse 13, “When I shut up the heavens that there is no rain”—meaning drought: “if I cause drought to come to Israel, or I command the locust to devour the land, or I send a pestilence among you, if I do these things and you all gather together; if My people who are called by My name will repent, and pray, and gather together, I will heal the land. I’ll heal the economy; I’ll heal the agriculture; I’ll drive the locust away. I’ll cause the pestilence to leave the nation” (2 Chron. 7:13-14, paraphrased).

MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE AWAKENING TO THE NECESSITY OF SACRED ASSEMBLIES

This is where Joel got this originally, directly from the Lord. It’s so simple that anyone can do it. The Lord is awakening more and more people around the nation and more ministries in the last ten or twenty years to really take hold of this. I tell you, the Lord has used our own Lou Engle so powerfully in stirring up the holy imagination of people across America by solemn assemblies. I’ve talked to leaders who have never had one ever. They thought, “We never even thought about it until we went to one of Lou’s gatherings. Now it seems like that’s something we should have been doing a long time ago.” I’m so grateful for God raising up Lou and others all through the lands who are calling the people together. It doesn’t have to be a massive rally of 50,000 people; it could be ten people gathering in a home, to spend a day in fasting and prayer, crying out for their city, neighborhood, or region. Sometimes there’s a crisis in a neighborhood; there’s a crisis of civil unrest or there’s strife among the people. There are many types of crisis. Ten believers from two or three churches could gather together in a person’s home for a day of fasting and prayer. God will answer those kinds of things. It doesn’t have to be a national solemn assembly every time. It can be a neighborhood solemn assembly.

THE SIMPLICITY OF REPENTING AND RECEIVING THE MERCY OF GOD

Paragraph D. God gives Joel this fivefold plan. What He wants is so plain, just as He told Naaman: “Go dip in the river seven times.”

Naaman said, “I would give you a million dollars, but to dip in a river would only take me a few minutes. That’s dumb, though! I don’t want to bother with it. It’s ridiculous.”

The Lord says, “Gather together; don’t eat lunch that day. Tell Me what I tell you to tell Me and repent of your sin. That’s all I’m asking.” You don’t need a great education, you don’t need money, and you don’t even need food. You don’t need anything. Just sit in a room and tell God what He tells you to tell Him and repent of the things you know are grieving the Spirit and ask Him for mercy. God will heal neighborhoods, cities, and nations. It’s remarkable.

GOD’S FIVEFOLD PLAN FOR AVERTING OR REVERSING A CRISIS

Let’s turn to page fifty-seven. The fivefold plan. Roman numeral III, number one: Consecrate a fast. Number two, call a sacred assembly. Number three, gather the elders. Number four, gather all the inhabitants. Number five, cry out to the Lord. That’s it. That’s the fivefold plan. There it is. Anyone can do it, anyone can participate in it. God has a five-step program. I know that’s a crass term, but there are five simple things. You say, “That’s not a program.” Well, you know what I mean. It’s a very simple solution to a crisis for a nation, whether it’s an agricultural crisis, an economic crisis, a weather crisis, a military crisis, pestilence. This is what the nation is supposed to do.

I wonder how many people have gathered in light of our economic crisis, that’s getting worse and worse, by the way, no matter what they’re telling you on the news. It’s getting far more complicated and desperate. I wonder how many people are gathering and asking God for mercy. God says, “If you do, I will actually help you. Not just you and your neighborhood; I will help the whole city and region. I want someone to ask Me. Stop and look to Me and say, ‘We’re in a crisis. Help us.’”

The Lord says, “I will help if you ask Me.”

STEP NUMBER 1: CONSECRATE A FAST AND SET ASIDE A TIME

Paragraph B. Consecrate a fast. First, you set apart specific periods of time. You pick a day; tomorrow we’re in Sacramento. September 4 we’re gathering—mostly people from California. Some months ago, Lou picked a day. You pick a day; you get a time to gather. They don’t have to be national or even statewide. They can be neighborhood-wide or smaller. Gather together a few friends; pick a day and set that day aside. Consecrate it. To *consecrate* it means to make it sacred. In other words, it’s not optional. It’s not like you won’t do it if the day goes well. You set the day aside and you commit it to the Lord and you see those hours, whether it’s six hours, twelve hours, twenty-four hours, two or three days or whatever it is, and consecrate it. It’s no longer optional; it’s time where you’re going to focus on your relationship with God and God’s purpose for that geographic area. It’s critical that a day is picked and that that day is held important. A lot of fasts don’t come because no one actually does step one. Again, you could do it with a few friends, a few students, in a neighborhood.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING: THE BEAUTY OF THE TENDERIZED HEART

Fasting doesn’t earn us anything; fasting positions us for our hearts to be touched. When our heart is moved, a moved heart moves God. God is moved, and He inspires us to come and spend time before Him. We come and spend time before Him. He moves on us first. We fast, and when we fast, it positions us to receive more inspiration from the Lord. Our hearts are tenderized. Not always on the day of the fast; I’ve found that the day I’m fasting, often I feel worse. It’s typically only after the fast is over that I feel the tenderizing. Every now and then it’s in the fast, but mostly it’s not. At first that confused me, because I thought the fast was supposed to help me. As I put fasting in my life on a regular basis, I found the tenderizing of my heart began to increase over months and years of staying with it. I didn’t often have the big event during the fast; typically it didn’t

come till it was over. I experienced tenderness and this new resolve to go deeper with the Lord. The fast positions us to connect with God in a greater way. The moved heart is what God looks at. It's the moved heart. That's what fasting does.

STEP NUMBER 2: CALL A SACRED ASSEMBLY

Page fifty-eight. Step number two. You've set apart a day, you've called a fast. Now call a sacred assembly. It's not just that you set apart a day and call the fast and make the fast important; now you gather people to it. That's a different thing. Picking the date is important, and so is determining to do it. Now you're going to try and rally others, whether you're rallying ten or ten thousand. Now you're going to go into the next category of activity. You're going to call a sacred assembly. God wants communities. He wants groups of people coming together to pursue Him. Private devotion is very important, but private devotion isn't enough to answer a national crisis. Granted, one devoted man and one devoted woman is important. Things will happen in their own life and they can affect a nation; one person can, for sure. But God is a Father and He wants a family. He wants this to be a family dynamic. He wants to affect change in a corporate context through the whole family. He requires corporate gatherings for prayer.

Number one, the assembly means to gather together in one place. He wants a place where you gather. In that day, it was the temple. One of the side benefits of gathering together with other people is that you end up with like-minded people. You might give the call and only a small number show up, but you have like-minded believers and that's an encouragement. The Lord even knows that's a side benefit of it: that the ones who are pressing into God together find each other in a geographic area when a fast is called like this.

THE BLESSING COMMANDED WHEN BELIEVERS GATHER

Paragraph three. He says this in Psalm 133, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell together in unity!... For there the Lord command[s] the blessing" (Ps. 133:1, 3). There's a commanded blessing. Think about that phrase. There's a commanded blessing, a blessing that God commands from heaven that can't be stopped. Beloved, no devil can stop a commanded blessing. When God commands it, nothing can resist it. When God sees a group of people in unity together, in unity with Him, that's the place of the commanded blessing. There's so much more we can do together in prayer than we can apart, although individual prayer is very important and effective. Because God is a Father and He relates to the earth through His family, He's not only dealing with the individual, the radical one-off devoted person; He wants devoted communities of believers. He wants clusters of people coming together that are pressing in together, and that moves His heart. There's a unique blessing when they do it together.

THE GREATEST PLACE OF BLESSING IS THE PLACE WHERE WE REGULARLY MEET

Paragraph four. This is an important one. The greatest place of blessing in a geographic area is when the people of God come together in a unified response of wholeheartedness and do it repeatedly. Wherever there are clusters of people, whether it's ten, a hundred, a thousand, whatever the number is, when they're gathering regularly in unity, in wholeheartedness, but *regularly* is the key word, that's the place of optimum blessing. Many of you are students and you'll be starting families in the years to come. You'll be in other parts of the earth, and I want to urge you to do this. Wherever you go, build communities that do the Joel 2 type of activities. Wherever you go, work to motivate people to gather for fasting and prayer, wherever you are. Of course, people are building houses of prayer everywhere, but be a part of a community that prays, fasts, and presses into God. That's the safest place in the earth, and that's the place where the greatest blessing will be.

I determined that years ago as a young pastor, in my twenties, when I was just starting out. I said, “I will have a community of believers, a local church. We will have regular seasons of fasting and prayer as a regular part of our spiritual diet, because I don’t want to be a part of church that doesn’t do this.” When I was in my early twenties, we would have days of fasting and prayer. Not many people came; we were all young adults, but we did it. All through the years, I’ve maintained it. My point isn’t that I’ve maintained it; my point is that I had the vision and I want you to have this vision. I want to be with people who pray and fast on a regular basis together. Whatever geographic area I’m in, I want to be with people who do this. The place of blessing and safety in the future, the greatest blessing and safety will be in a context of unified people who do this. They don’t even have to be in the same ministry. Wherever you go, wherever God plants you, look around and say, “Lord, where is fasting and prayer going? How can I strengthen it and how can I get more people involved in it?” That’s a wise thing to raise your family in, that kind of context.

CONVEYING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LATENESS AND PERIL OF THIS HOUR

Number seven, it’s a sacred assembly. It’s sacred in the sense that it’s dedicated. A sacred assembly speaks of its importance to God. If the gathering, the assembly, the gathering time, the actual time you gather together, is important to God, it needs to be important to us. Some are so casual about sacred assemblies. “Well, it’s a prayer meeting; I’ll stop in when I have a chance.” In our context, it’s a little different to apply that, because we never stop prayer meetings. We have fasting teams every day; it gets a little confusing. If you take every day all day, you don’t have the strength to do it twenty-four hours a day, to do it day in and day out. I’m talking in a different context than this, that God calls sacred times. We do have times that are even set apart from the day-in and day-out of keeping the fire going on the altar. When the time is called, it’s important that it’s viewed as sacred or important; not as casual, not as optional. That’s critical.

It takes a certain kind of Bible teaching to produce that kind of response in people. Meaning, you will need to be the kind of people who understand the Bible enough to say it to people where it makes sense to them to come to a sacred gathering. A lot of folks say, “I love Jesus, but why would I go to a sacred gathering? There’s nothing wrong going on. Everything seems good.” They don’t understand what the Bible says about the hour we live in and they’re not spiritually discerning. I’m happy that they’re happy, but they’re missing out on a huge dimension of what’s going on in the Spirit. My point is, without proper teaching, without leaders who will do it—I’m talking about groups of ten, twenty, and thirty. You don’t need to have a big ministry; be a leader who calls people to this. Be a leader who teaches people the relevance of this with those things in place. Then people will view the gathering as sacred, because until they see it as sacred, it’s just optional, and they’ll do it if they want to do it. If there’s not something else fun going on, they’ll drop in.

The Lord told Joel, “Tell them it must be a sacred gathering. It must be very, very important to them.” I believe the Holy Spirit is awakening the Church to the revelation of the sacredness of these gatherings. Again, in our context, it’s a little hard to apply because we have twenty-four seven prayer. Everyone commits to x amount of hours every day. Those hours are sacred to us; we call it a sacred trust. Put the IHOP-KC weekly routine aside for a minute. Think about what setting you might be in, in the future. The gathering has been called; it’s a solemn assembly, a sacred assembly, and you want to teach and lead in such a way that people view that gathering as sacred. That’s the point I want to make clear here.

IT TAKES TIME, MONEY, EFFORT, COURAGE, AND RESOLVE TO MOBILIZE OTHERS

Paragraph eight. I’m talking about Lou again here; I wrote these notes some years ago. I was so touched; this was before Lou even moved here. The energy Lou spent traveling across the nation, stirring up people to gather

in fasting and prayer—it takes time, money, effort, courage, and resolve. It’s wearisome to mobilize and rally people to go to prayer meetings. My point is in telling you that is, don’t be thrown off if it’s wearisome, because it is. Don’t be dismayed if it’s hard and costly, because it is. That’s part of the call. When He said, “Gather the people,” it meant invest the time, the money, the energy, the risk, and the labor in it. Invest in it.

Again, as I’ve seen Lou do that over the years, I say, “My goodness, what a blessing to our nation.” There are other ministries all around that have been doing this for years, and many more that are getting the idea. Understand this: In the days ahead, when you’re the one calling the solemn assembly, it’s not like you’ll put a flyer out and everyone will show up. You’ll have to go rally, recruit, teach, awaken them to the reality of how necessary it is. It takes work to get people to show up to prayer meetings. As young leaders, you’re saying, “OK, I buy into that; I’ll do that.”

Paragraph nine. Over the years of my pastoring, the church I pastored here in Kansas City for seventeen years, we had about a hundred people on the full-time staff, both on the pastoral staff and in the school. We would call fasting days, three days for three weeks. We had a number of those over the years. People would come to me and make the observation, “You have a hundred full-time salaried pastors, leaders and workers, and they’re not doing any work for three weeks?” Because we would come for hours a day in the prayer room, they said, “Three weeks, times a hundred salaries, that’s thousands and thousands of dollars. You’re throwing it away.”

I said, “It’s costly to have solemn assemblies. It actually costs money like that.” And I said, “But it’s worth it to me.”

Some of the leaders would ask, “How can you justify this?”

I said, “Because God appeared to Solomon and said, ‘Solomon, when there’s trouble in the land, gather before Me and cry out and I’ll heal the land, or I’ll heal the church, or I’ll heal the neighborhood, or I’ll heal the city, or I’ll heal the family, or I’ll heal the relationship. I will heal if you’ll gather, humble yourself and cry out.’”

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE TO SHOW UP TO A SOLEMN ASSEMBLY?

In Genesis 18:32, the question is, “How many people have to show up?” Abraham had an encounter with the Lord and the Lord said, “I will destroy Sodom.” This was one of the most wicked cities in history. Abraham said, “If I get fifty people, will You spare the whole city? If only fifty show up at the prayer room?” God says, “I’ll do it for fifty. The entire city would be spared if fifty people were engaged in the solemn assembly.” It’s more than a one-day meeting; He meant fifty righteous ones who would adhere to their walk with God and press into it together.

Abraham worked it down. God said yes to fifty. Abraham said, “How about forty-five?”

God said, “I’ll do it for forty-five.”

“How about forty?”

God said, “Yea, I will spare the whole city for forty who come to the prayer room.”

Abraham said, “Hey, I’m on a roll; how about thirty?”

God said, “Yes.”

“Twenty?”

“I will spare the whole city for twenty.”

Abraham said, “Oh Lord, this is the last time, I promise. How about ten?”

God said, “I will spare the whole region if ten press in” (Gen. 18:32).

“TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN, MUCH SHALL BE REQUIRED”

How many people do we need to press into God for the judgment that’s on America to be lifted instead of increase? It’s already on America. Someone says, “Is judgment coming?”

I say, “It has been on us for some decades. God in His patience is trying to wake us up.” Again, the noose is getting tighter and tighter; the pressure is increasing. I don’t know what the number is; I know in Sodom it was only ten. Of course, the cities were small back then. I don’t know what God will require from America, because of our several hundred years of blessed history. God will require more because Sodom was a city of great perversion. Yet even a small response would move God’s mercy. As Jesus says in Luke 12, “To whom much is given, much shall be required” (Lk. 12:48). To a nation like America that has been given these hundreds of years of blessing, the Lord says, “No, I want more than ten. I’ve given you more reason to have more people than that responding to My heart.” I don’t know what the number is. We can never know the number, but I know one thing, we will keep pressing people to gather and cry out to God, because I know that’s the answer.

THE MOST DIFFICULT PEOPLE TO GATHER ARE THE LEADERS

Paragraph D. Joel said, “Gather the elders” (Joel 1:13). God honors the authority structure. I’ve found through the years, number one, that the most difficult people to gather are the leaders. It’s because they’re the busiest. It’s not just because they don’t care, the elders of the church as we know it. The elders were the elders of the city, which would be the political leaders as well as the spiritual leaders of the city. They were more the political leaders of the city who were supposed to be spiritual. He said, “I want them involved.” Again, that’s a hard group to gather because of the very fact that they’re elders; they have a lot of responsibility and a lot of people pulling on their time. He said, “Go and get them. Go to the elders. Work on getting them.”

Paragraph two, it takes persuasion, relationship-building, time, effort, and money to gather elders. It’s not easy to gather elders. Do it anyway.

THE COST OF A SACRED ASSEMBLY

Paragraph E. Then gather all the people. That’s expensive as well. As I was saying a few moments ago about our little setting in our little church world, it was expensive for people on our staff to come for twenty-one days, and even for other people in our congregation. Our congregation consisted of a few thousand people. A lot of people would gather for two or three days; we even had a few twenty-one day fasts. They lost money by taking time off to do it. It was expensive as a community, collectively. You never really could quite do it, but it would be interesting to figure out how much money people actually lost by drawing back three weeks of work in the way they were doing it and when they were doing it. They were a bit spacey; they weren’t doing it so well. I

would like to measure that. Then I would like to take the same group of people, and ten years later see how the Lord answered back, even in the economic arena. I assure you that the Lord pays back and multiplies it. He just has a little time delay, that's all.

THOSE WHO HAVE REVELATION WILL SEEK HIS FACE WITH DILIGENCE

In order to gather the people, you have to have prophetic preaching. You have to preach about the good *and* the terrible things that God has planned. You can't do just the good or just the terrible. You have to have the right diet or the people won't see any reason to gather. People don't just gather because the leaders say gather; they say, "Why?" There has to be a theological framework in place in their understanding or they won't even gather. It takes planning even to gather the people. It doesn't just happen in a vacuum, because envisioned people gather; instructed people gather. People with revelation that there's a revival and there's a crisis and they're both unfolding now, people of insight, those are the ones who gather. It takes time to get that in them.

STEP NUMBER 5: CRYING OUT TO GOD

Then step five: this sounds almost redundant to mention. Cry out to God. I've found through years of going to prayer meetings that when you get a bunch of leaders together in a prayer room, one of the last things that happens is prayer. I've watched this over the years at all kinds of different gatherings where the pastors gather and pray. I'm talking about thirty years of watching it. They come, they talk, they exhort, they testify, they bless each other. The Lord says, "When you gather, pray. Be quiet. Stop. You have an hour; you have two hours. Don't take over x amount of time. Pray." That's not a small thing, step five. Actually mandate the prayer. There's a determination to actually pray when they get up there.

I remember the early days of IHOP-KC. We put in the policies, because before we did, people would take the microphone and want to share something. We had to stop it because everyone wanted to share. If we had let it go on, there would be no praying at IHOP-KC. One after the other, they had something they wanted to say, an exhortation. The Lord says, "Pray at IHOP-KC. Don't preach on the microphone; pray. Talk to Me. Talk to each other in the other room; talk to Me in this room." So when you call prayer meetings in the days to come, actually make sure the majority of the time is prayer or worship and not explaining about prayer. Actually do the prayer.

THE FOURFOLD PREPARATION OF THE FIVEFOLD PLAN

Fourfold preparation, number one. We have the five-fold plan; now I'll give you the four things to prepare in order to walk out the plan. God says in Joel 1:13, "Gird yourselves." To "gird yourself" means to make preparation in the practical areas so that you can actually go to the prayer meeting and be focused. There are many practical things that have to happen in order to have a prayer life, or even to go to the prayer meetings.

Paragraph A. Change your schedule. Organize things; get things set up to where, when you're there, you can be there. It takes time to gird yourself. Someone says, "Let's have a twenty-one day fast. Let's do it next week. The Lord is on it." I've had a few men over the years who have said that.

I say, "No, you can't call a twenty-one day fast next week."

"Why not?"

“Because people can’t prepare themselves. You can call it and be excited about it, but it takes more time to get prepared to go for a twenty-one day fast. You can call it, but nothing will happen in it.” You have to get things ready in your schedule; some relational dynamics; there are other things that need to be in place, practical issues that need to be addressed if you’re going to have a day or week of prayer. Gird yourself.

“REND YOUR HEART, AND NOT YOUR GARMENTS”: CONNECTING WITH GOD’S HEART

Let’s go to paragraph B. The call to lament. He says, “Lament; get a heart connection.”

How can you command someone to be sorry? The man says, “I don’t feel sorry.”

“In the name of Jesus, feel sorry!”

You can’t make a man feel sorry, but Joel is saying something more fundamental than that. He says, “Work on getting the heart connection with God, with the reality of what God is thinking, a heart connection with what’s really going to happen if we don’t get right with God and a heart connection of what’s going to happen with the people. Train the people and tell the people to quiet themselves for a minute and think on it. When they get in touch with it, they’ll see the gravity of the situation.” It takes time for that to happen. It doesn’t happen in a vacuum; it happens with intentionally doing it.

LYING IN SACKCLOTH: THE CALL TO HUMILITY AND LAYING DOWN PRESTIGE

Paragraph C. Lie in sackcloth. He says, “Lie in sackcloth” (Joel 1:13). To lie in sackcloth was a call to humility. Paragraph one: Sackcloth was made of goat’s hair. It was very uncomfortable. He’s talking to the priests. They had beautiful garments that God ordained. Those garments spoke of their status, honor, and prestige. God wasn’t calling them to be uncomfortable; that wasn’t the point. Some groups through the years have thought the sackcloth means, “Be miserable.” That’s not what Joel is really saying here. He’s saying, “Lay down your priestly robes of honor, prestige, titles. Lay down your position, and everyone is equal before God together.” That’s what he’s saying.

Paragraph two. To be on equal ground before the throne, take off your priestly robes. Lay your ecclesiastical church titles down. Lay your degrees down; lay your wealth down. Everyone comes together without status and position. That’s what he’s saying to them. Some have misinterpreted the sackcloth thing. They think sackcloth is really good because you’re miserable. “I’ll get sackcloth with nails in it, and I’ll stand all day. For three days! I’ll show God how much I’ll suffer.”

God says, “No, I’m not telling you to go on an endurance contest. I actually want to talk to you. I want you to talk to Me. I don’t want you to embark on a physical endurance contest of how much you can suffer; I just want your titles and your status laid down; that’s what I’m after.”

THE RADICALNESS AND EXTREMENESS OF THE TIME SPENT WITH GOD

Preparation four: all night. He says, “Come, lie all night” (Joel 1:13). The most radical thing is the night watch. He told them this: “Lie all night.” He meant it. He meant do it radically and extremely. It’s inconvenient. They didn’t do it day in and day out. It wasn’t an occupation like our true night watch occupation. He’s saying, “Take significant effort. It’s a hassle, but do you understand what’s happening? This thing deserves more than a drop-in for an hour at a prayer meeting. Do you understand? Your nation is in a crisis, your covenant with God is

violated, the blessings are jeopardized and trouble is coming.” Beloved, this thing is worthy of something extreme. That’s what he’s telling them. Amen.

