

Session 6 The Fivefold Action Plan God Wants from Us

⁸Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth...¹³Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; for the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.¹⁴Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. (Joel 1:8, 13-14)

I. LAMENT IN VIEW OF THE MOUNTING CRISIS

- A. Joel called the nation to come before the Lord in wholeheartedness. He described the anguish to those who experience God's judgments.
- ⁸Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth...¹³Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar... (Joel 1:8, 13)***
- B. Joel saw the severity of the coming devastation.
- C. Joel's urgent call in this passage is for the people of God to make it top priority to respond to God concerning the coming crisis.
- D. We must respond to God with our whole heart today. God calls us to solemn assemblies because He delights in mercy (Mic. 7:18). He defines mercy differently than many others. Mercy is not about giving us everything we want and allowing us to continue in bondage to our selfishness.
- E. Joel told them that no class of society would be exempt from the plague and its aftermath. Next Joel shocked his listeners into sobriety.
- F. Joel gave a graphic picture of the coming crisis. It was so terrible that it could be likened to a bride in sackcloth on her wedding day.
1. The picture is of a virgin bride whose groom dies before the marriage is consummated. Imagine the anguish of a bride who loses her husband right after their wedding ceremony.
 2. In her sorrow, she takes off her wedding dress and clothes herself in sackcloth, a garment of mourning. This is the depth of sorrow with which Joel urged Israel to cry out to God.
- G. A bride in sackcloth is a contradiction of terms, because a bride never wears sackcloth, a garment of mourning, on her wedding day. Such would be the agony of the community if they did not heed Joel's warning. If a bride was convinced that her husband was going to die on their wedding day, then she would be mourning and fully focused on the crisis before her.
- H. After the four waves of locusts had passed, then they faced the aftermath of starvation, death, and disease. It was at this time that the crisis seemed to be in the past tense, yet Joel prophesied that the crisis was not nearly over. It was about to increase to a new level of intensity. Something was coming that was more severe than a locust invasion (Joel 1:4-12) with a drought (Joel 1:16-20) and fires (Joel 1:19-20). He pointed to a coming Babylonian military invasion (Joel 2:1-9).

- I. The end-time Day of the Lord will be far more severe than the Babylonian invasion.
- J. There is more information in the Scripture about the generation in which the Lord returns than any other generation in history.
- K. There are over 150 chapters in the Bible that focus on the end times. Compare this to the four gospels that total 89 chapters. The gospels give us a record of Jesus' ministry related to His first coming, when He redeemed us from our sins. The 150 chapters on the end times reveal His ministry related to His return to rule all nations.

II. WHAT GOD WANTS IS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT MAN SEEKS

- A. God asks things of His people that are so simple, yet many refuse to embrace them.
- B. The story of Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army who had leprosy, is an example of this.

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but a leper. (2 Kgs. 5:1)

- 1. The Syrian army made many raids on Israel and, on one occasion, they brought back a young Israelite girl who became the servant of Naaman's wife. This young girl told Naaman about the prophet Elisha, who could heal him of leprosy. Desperate for his healing, Naaman went to Israel. Reaching Elisha's house, he stood outside the door. Yet instead of coming out to greet Naaman himself, Elisha sent a servant with a message.
¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean." (2 Kgs. 5:10)
- 2. This infuriated Naaman, who had anticipated a greeting from Elisha and an immediate manifestation of God's healing power. He couldn't imagine such an unusual way of getting healed as dipping seven times in a river that belonged to Israel, Syria's enemy. The plan was so simple that it was offensive. Naaman's pride was aroused when he was called to wash in the Jordan, a "Jewish" river. Naaman turned away in rage.
¹³His servants came near and spoke to him, and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'" (2 Kgs. 5:13)
- 3. Naaman dipped in the Jordan River seven times and his leprosy was instantly healed.

- C. God's answer is often so simple that it is offensive, and this is true of God's plan for how a nation is to respond to Him when in crisis. It is the only plan that works. Joel received this plan from Solomon, who received it from the audible voice of God nearly 400 years earlier.

***¹²The LORD appeared to Solomon by night, and said to him: "I have heard your prayer...
¹³When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, ¹⁴if My people who are called by My name will humble***

themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chr. 7:12-14)

- D. The fivefold plan given by God through Joel is so clear, yet it remains much neglected today.
- E. This divine plan is foreign to the thinking of many believers; it requires a radical new paradigm. However, this is what God requires of us and we cannot improve it.
- F. Joel prophesied that Israel could minimize the devastation by responding in the way God desired. They were still in the early days of the full crisis; starvation had not reached the worst level and disease was not yet widespread.
- G. God was giving the people the opportunity to minimize His judgments related to the locust plague and the coming crisis that would be caused by the Babylonian military invasion.
- H. Joel 1 is intended to show the model of how to respond to the Lord in calamity. Joel taught the people how to minimize these disasters.
- I. By responding correctly, they would develop a history in God and a corporate testimony to draw on in the coming day of military trouble, as described in Joel 2:1-9.
- J. We are to recognize a pattern in Joel 1-2. We will see a progression of His judgments in the book of Joel.
- K. There is often a domino effect in the aftermath of an earthquake or storm, with many related conditions causing terrible suffering. God desires to gain the attention of a nation through the intense conditions that follow a crisis.
- L. We can minimize the crisis and its domino effect by crying out to God. We can reduce or completely cancel some of the destruction through wholehearted fasting and prayer. Sometimes the aftermath of a calamity is worse than the calamity itself, through shortages of food, water, and electricity or other sources of fuel.
- M. In a calamity, we must not assume that the crisis is over because one wave of trouble has passed. The crisis is not God's ultimate aim—His aim is that His people would have relationship with Him and that the oppressed would be delivered.
- N. We must seek our safety in national crises through our wholeheartedness with God. Fasting and prayer is not a magic formula, like waving a magic wand at God. It is not the actual act of fasting and prayer that moves the heart of God. It is the wholeheartedness.
- O. Fasting and prayer are expressions of wholeheartedness. Fasting tenderizes our hearts. As our hearts are moved, we touch God's heart. Fasting and prayer intensify our agreement with God. These expressions of wholeheartedness enrich our heart-connect with God's heart.
- P. Intimacy with His people is what God is after.

III. THE FIVE-PART ACTION PLAN

¹⁴Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. (Joel 1:14)

- A. God has a five-step program of how He wants us to respond to Him in the midst of crisis. This God-given action plan is one that anyone can do, regardless of education, ministry experience, gifts, or economics. It is the response that God requires from us.
- B. Step one: ***Consecrate a fast***. We must set apart specific periods of time for corporate fasting. Fasting increases our capacity to live wholehearted before God (Joel 2:12-13).
1. Fasting positions us to receive more from God. We do not fast to move God, but that God would move our heart by His Spirit. Then, God is moved by our tenderized heart.
 2. When we fast, we refuse to medicate the holy wound of longing for more of God. Thus, spiritual hunger and desperation grow within us. In this way, fasting increases our capacity to receive more from God and enhances our ability to give ourselves to God.
 3. The essence of fasting is to position our cold heart before God's fire, asking Him to set us ablaze with love for Him.
 4. Fasting is not optional if we want to experience the fullness of the grace of God. We cannot face the coming crisis without wholeheartedness enhanced by fasting.
 5. The grace for fasting is available to everyone. We begin by simply asking the Lord for grace to fast and that He would give us the desire to fast.
- C. Step two: ***Call a sacred assembly***. The Lord wants communities to come together to pursue Him in prayer. Private devotion is essential, but it is not enough to answer a national crisis. God requires corporate gatherings for prayer.
1. ***Assembly*** means a gathering in one place together. In Joel's day they gathered into the temple, the house of the Lord. The Father releases His power in context to His family.
 2. God calls us to gather, knowing that we are strengthened by like-minded believers.
 3. God commanded a greater blessing when His people come together in unity.
***¹Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity...
³For there the LORD commanded the blessing. (Ps. 133:1, 3)***
 4. The place of greatest blessing for a geographic area is found as God's people come together with a unified response of wholeheartedness, repeatedly, over a period of time.
 5. Even the most anointed individual intercessors could not stop the coming judgment. God wants corporate intercession offered by people living wholeheartedly before Him.

¹⁴**“Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness,” says the Lord GOD. (Ezek. 14:14)**

¹**Then the LORD said to me, “Even if Moses and Samuel stood before Me, My mind would not be favorable toward this people.” (Jer. 15:1)**

6. The Holy Spirit is raising up groups of people all over the earth who are committed to wholeheartedness, expressed in fasting with prayer and energized by intimacy with God.
7. **Sacred** in this context means “dedicated” or “set apart” to God. *The sacred assembly* speaks of its importance to God. Because God calls it sacred, it is to be important to us. What is of high priority to God must not be casual or optional to us. When the assembly is sacred, there are very few excuses for neglecting it. The Spirit is awakening the Church to the revelation of the sacredness of these assemblies.
8. It takes great effort to organize sacred assemblies. On September 2, 2000, when Lou Engle called a national solemn assembly in Washington DC, 400,000 people came. He invested much time and effort in traveling to mobilize leaders and rally the people.
9. God requires solemn assemblies, knowing they are expensive financially. The church I pastored before the International House of Prayer started had more than a hundred people on staff. We had various solemn assemblies; sometimes they were called for three days and sometimes for three weeks. Some people objected to the amount of work that our paid staff did *not do* over a three-week period, while continuing to receive their salaries.
10. Even a small number of devoted believers can cry out to God, resulting in His judgments being withheld from the land (Gen. 18:20-33).

³²**He said, “I will not destroy it [Sodom] for the sake of ten.” (Gen. 18:32)**

- D. Step three: **Gather the elders**. God honors the authority that He has given to the leaders of His people. Joel is saying, “Go cast the vision to other spiritual leaders (elders) and rally them.”
 1. I have found that the most difficult people to rally are those in positions of leadership, because they are so busy. Most have many responsibilities and full schedules.
 2. It takes much vision-casting and relational building—along with a lot of time, effort, and money—to gather the elders of a city or nation.
 3. The Lord told Joel to cast the vision and expend the energy necessary to convince them.
- E. Step four: **Gather all of the inhabitants** of the land into the house of the Lord.
- F. Step five: **Cry out to God** together. *To cry out* means that we come into agreement with what God has promised for our geographic area. We are to *pray* in the prayer meetings. I have been to many meetings where there were preaching, testimonies, and praise reports, but not much prayer.

IV. THE FOURFOLD PREPARATION FOR GOD'S ACTION PLAN

A. Preparation #1: The call to gird ourselves, to make preparation in practical areas.

¹³***Gird yourselves and lament, you priests... (Joel 1:13)***

1. The call to gird ourselves is a call to action to remove things that hinder prayer. Joel summoned the priests to make things ready in the practical areas of their lives so that they could pray with less distraction. He was saying, "Change your schedule! Settle practical issues in your life that will hinder your prayer focus during the solemn assembly!"
2. To gird themselves is to make the necessary practical preparations in their lives to follow through, after agreeing to embrace the call to corporate prayer.
3. We gird ourselves for endurance, even if it means not seeing quick answers to our prayers.
4. Jesus used this same language in His earthly ministry.

³⁵***"Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning..." (Lk. 12:35)***

5. We have to rearrange our lives in a sober way, to consider the cost. To do this we must say "no" to many things because it takes time to cultivate the spirit of prayer in our lives.

B. Preparation #2: The call to lament, to have a heart-connect with God in the tragic situation.

¹³***Lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar... (Joel 1:13)***

1. The call to lament and wail speaks of a heart-connect with God and the people who will suffer in the crisis. Joel called them to feel the pain of the current crisis and the coming crisis. We are to have compassion for those under judgment—to identify with them.
2. An angel warned John that the end-time message has an element of sweetness to it, yet it would make his heart sick when he digested its full meaning and implications.
¹⁰***I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter. (Rev. 10:10)***
3. The coming military invasion would be far worse than the locust plague.
4. The Spirit will release deep compassion for the human suffering that will come in a time of judgment. God's people are not to be disconnected from the distress of others.
5. God's people will experience God's grief, as well as His compassion, for the pain that results from judgment.
6. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn" (Mt. 5:4). This includes a desperation to enter into the things of God in a greater measure with urgency and sobriety.

C. Preparation #3: To lie in sackcloth is to call the leaders to humility.

¹³*You priests...come lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God... (Joel 1:13)*

¹⁴*“If My people...will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face...” (2 Chr. 7:14)*

³*Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’s anger. (Zeph. 2:3)*

1. Joel tells the spiritual leadership to lie down in sackcloth.
 - a. We humble ourselves in the presence of God for the purpose of prayer.
 - b. Sackcloth was made of goat’s hair.
 - c. The priest’s attire was a beautiful garment, as ordained by God in Exodus 28; it was a garment of status, honor, and prestige.
 - d. The call to dress in sackcloth was not a call to discomfort, but to lay down their privileged and prestigious position.
2. Everyone is on equal ground before the throne. Joel was essentially saying, “Take off your priestly robes; lay down your ecclesiastical titles, your positions, and degrees.” All are equal before God, without any special honor or status, regardless of any leadership roles. It was a call for everyone to come together before the Lord in humility.

D. Preparation #4: All night—extreme and radical

¹³*Lament, you priests...come lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to God... (Joel 1:13)*

1. To come and lie all night before the Lord takes significant effort. Yet, this is the Lord’s mandate to leaders. Joel is not merely preaching his personal ministry preferences. It was from God. He was not presenting this as an option. He was crying out: “You have to act!”
 2. Some in the Church will do anything except pray and lie all night before God.
- E. Imagine the difficulty of having to answer this five-part mandate and proclaim it to a frantic earth, believers and unbelievers alike, in the hour of crisis. Imagine a news reporter asking you what needs to be done after a great crisis. You respond, “Yes, we help the people immediately and extravagantly, but we must all call God’s people to pray and fast for God’s mercy.
- F. In time of crisis, the welfare of many is in the balance of the prayer ministries in the region. We cannot afford to do anything less than fully obey God. We must do it for our own sakes, and we must do it for the sake of our children and grandchildren.