

The American Church Standing at a Critical Juncture: What We Can Learn from Joel and Jeremiah in the Midst of National Crisis

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Today the church in America stands at a critical juncture. In 1995, in his book *The Coming Revival*, Bill Bright, one of our premier spiritual fathers, called 2 million Americans to fast and pray for 40 days because of the dire state of our nation and our great need for revival. He warned:

God does not tolerate sin. The Bible and history make this painfully clear. I believe God has given ancient Israel as an example of what will happen to the United States if we do not experience revival. He will continue to discipline us with all kinds of problems until we repent or until we are destroyed, as was ancient Israel because of her sin of disobedience.

Sept. 11 came and went. Katrina followed suit. The church's moral and spiritual decay continues as entire institutions are unclear on the divinity of Christ and the cross' atoning efficacy but clear on the ordination of homosexuals and the protection of a woman's right to choose. A global financial and health crisis still exists as a global pandemic has all the nations on edge. Yet have we connected our hearts to the crisis? Our keen leadership insights, prophetic decrees of relief and makeshift rebuilding strategies will not suffice

devoid of a culture of repentance and prayer.

In the meantime, the number of unbelieving and unchurched Americans is on the rise. George Barna, in his 2007 article, "Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million in the U.S.," demonstrates that the number of unbelieving and unchurched Americans has risen sharply. Thom Rainer, in his 1997 work, *The Bridger Generation*, reveals a more drastic picture among those born after 1984, maintaining that only 4% of this demographic are engaged in the church. This is particularly sobering considering the United States of America has the fifth-largest population of youth under the age of 15.

We are long past the hour of authoring books on our latest unique insight on how to grow our churches by a few hundred, while our people are plundered by debt, sexual immorality, doctrinal error, adultery, covetousness and divorce. Many today are hoping our current legislative and judicial reforms will be enough for a Third Great Awakening, but an individual and corporate history in God must be cultivated that can bear the weight of rogue nations with nuclear capabilities, flus and pandemics, water shortages, biological threats, terrorist attacks, virtual perversion, an entrenched humanism, a global financial crisis, natural disasters and the confrontation with the holy one who sees all, hears all and calls all nations to account.

Humans will face many things, yet one of the most difficult to face is one's present crisis. Rarely do we discern its meaning, and less often do we respond correctly. The Bible is filled with examples of how God's people lacked discernment and tried everything else but humility, repentance and turning to God in prayer. This is not what God intends. He has left for us a clear pathway in these distressing times and dedicated the entire book of Joel to the subject.

Israel's Crisis

In the book of Joel, we find Israel in the midst of a national crisis. A locust plague has swept through the land, and in a matter of days, the agricultural engine of the financial system is shattered. The crops are destroyed, the trees stripped, and next year's seed is in danger. Drought is compounding the problem as fires spread and herds of cattle perish.

At ground zero, the prophet Joel draws the nation's attention to the urgency of the hour through one simple question: "Has anything like this happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?" (Joel 1:2). It is as though he cries, "Connect your hearts to the crisis! Stop pacifying the pain with your keen leadership insights and rebuilding strategies and look at the crisis." "Has not the food been cut off before our eyes?" (Joel 1:16) Joel asks. He exhorts every class of society has to wake up to their situation and wail over the loss. The people must sober up; the crisis is just beginning.

Joel's Call to Corporate Repentance, Prayer, and Fasting

In verse 14, Joel gives the only answer to the crisis. At the forefront of the relief and recovery effort must be a call to corporate repentance through gatherings of prayer and fasting. A corporate disaster calls for a corporate response. Shut everything down and bring the nation together for prayer and fasting.

Isn't pulling the entire nation together an extreme measure? Not when considering what's ahead. "Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and like devastation from the Almighty it comes" (Joel 1:15). It is the Lord who has done this! The Deuteronomic curses are operating in the land.

When God's judgments are evident among the people of God, what is the proper response? At the formation of the nation of Israel, God set forth a clear path for returning to the Lord that would turn His judgments into blessings. Moses in

Deuteronomy 28-30 instituted this path, Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14 solidified it and the prophets, including Joel, called the people to it in seasons of compromise and crisis. Hosea declared it to northern Israel. "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap mercy; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, until He comes and rains righteousness on you" (Hos. 10:12). The prophetic call is to sincere repentance and seeking the Lord in prayer and fasting. If the people of God respond this way, He will come with His blessings. If they do not, a fearful expectation of judgment remains.

Thus, their response is a matter of life or death. The financial and health crisis of Joel's day is but a precursor to a more devastating judgment. And so the people of Joel's day were at a crucial juncture in history, standing between two crises. One was upon them, and a second has been decreed. They had to discern the season correctly and respond biblically.

The Call to Hear and to Tell

The window of opportunity between the crises is crucial. The word comes to Joel to plead with the both the elders and the people of Israel to "give ear" to the word of the Lord and to "tell" their children about it, let their children tell their children, and their children another generation" (Joel 1:2-3). The prophet calls them to actively engage with God to correctly interpret the first crisis so they can respond appropriately and avert the second crisis. They must move from abstract discussions to action, seizing the prophetic moment.

In humility, the religious leaders must agree with God's assessment of the crisis and teach their children the proper response. Why? Because, if they do not interpret the season rightly, instruct their children correctly, and respond biblically, a more devastating judgment is but a few decades away.

In Deuteronomy 28:32–42, the Lord warned the children of Israel that if the locust plague, a financial and health calamity, did not turn the people, He would send a military conflict to shake them out of their sinful state, a calamity that would cleanse the land of its idolatry and bloodshed. The land would rest from its defilement, and the people, in shame, would finally abandon their idolatry in a foreign land.

If the elders do not interpret the season rightly and warn their children, the children will reap the consequences of the coming destruction. If elders do not heed the word of the Lord in Joel's day, then their children and grandchildren will face Nebuchadnezzar in their day.

The elders must discern the season rightly and transmit the correct prophetic interpretation to the next generation. Their descendants' lives depend upon it. The call of Joel comes as an urgent plea to rightly reflect on the course of events and respond in the way which God requires. If they do not, their children will not have the proper interpretive framework to interpret the coming day of the Lord. Their ears will be closed to the sound of the alarm, and Jeremiah will sound like another eccentric prophet out of touch with the goodness of God.

The Warning of Josiah's Reign

Shortly after Joel's message, the ideal Judean king, Josiah, comes to power in 640 B.C. Eight years later, this young king seeks the God of his father David and, in 628 B.C., begins tearing the high places down. Yet a young prophet in 627 B.C., Jeremiah, stands up in the congregation and announces a coming judgment upon Judah. "O my soul, my soul! I am pained in my very heart!" he cries. "My heart makes a noise in me. I cannot hold my peace, because you have heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war" (Jer. 4:19b).

How out of place Jeremiah must have sounded in the midst of

the positive prognosticators of the day. The financial shaking of the locust plague in Joel's day had faded, and a pro-Yahweh king was in power. Wasn't King Josiah seeking the God of his father David? Wasn't he God's man? Weren't religious and social reforms being legislated throughout the Judah? Weren't the high places coming down?

Revival would reach its zenith over the next five years with the discovery of the Law, the restoration of true worship and the removal of idolatrous priests. Political, religious and social reforms were widespread as the ideal king sat on David's throne. However, one major problem remained. No culture of repentance and prayer had been established in light of the crisis Joel—and now, Jeremiah—prophesied.

The elders during Josiah's reign missed the prophetic window for forming a culture of corporate repentance and prayer. Thus, Josiah's legislative efforts at reform did not transform the majority of God's people at a heart level. By the time Jeremiah arrived on the scene, it was too late. The revival fizzled out days after Josiah's death, and within three months, the people, now under King Jehoiakim, returned to idolatry. Within four years, the Babylonians began their 20-year invasion.

If Anyone Has Ears to Hear

The invitation to "hear" is critical. It offers the opportunity to respond correctly at a key juncture of history and create a culture of corporate repentance and prayer to turn crisis into blessing. We see this principle in Jesus' warning some 40 years before Titus' invasion. We also see it when the early churches in Asia Minor receive an invitation to prepare themselves for a season of trial, some decades before it comes. Seven times in the Gospels we hear Jesus cry, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matt. 11:15; 13:43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; 8:18; Luke 14:35), and seven times in the book of Revelation, Jesus exhorts, "He who has an ear, let him hear

what the Spirit says" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

A culture of repentance, prayer and fasting in our congregations is not optional. It is not an addendum to our rebuilding strategies. The refusal to live a life of repentance and prayer leads to lack of discernment. The lack of discernment leaves the body of Christ unable to understand the dealings of God with His people and nations and, thus, unable to respond rightly to crisis.

In times of crisis great leaders have taken courage to call God's people to sober reflection and repentance through prayer and fasting. More often are the less noble historic responses of church leaders who simply did nothing or worse, healed the wound of God's people by proclaiming, "peace, peace," when there was no peace.

John Wesley, after a March 8, 1750, earthquake, in a sermon entitled "The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes," gave the following exhortation:

"Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it. ... O that [God's] fear might this moment fall upon all you ... constraining every one of you to cry out, "My flesh trembles for fear of thee; and I am afraid of thy judgments!" (Ps. 109:10). What but national repentance can prevent national destruction? he asked. Fear God ... and bring forth fruits meet for repentance; break off our sins this moment.

On April 18, 1906, an earthquake destroyed San Francisco, leaving nearly 3,000 dead and 300,000 homeless. Frank Bartleman, a father of the Pentecostal revival, called Los Angeles to repent through prayer and fasting by dispersing his famous pamphlet, *The Last Call*. "I found the earthquake had opened many hearts," Bartleman wrote in *How Pentecost Came to America*, and felt it "was surely the voice of God to the people on the Pacific coast," because of the widespread

conviction he witnessed. Meanwhile, “nearly every pulpit in the land was working overtime to prove that God had nothing to do with earthquakes and thus allay the fears of the people.” Bartleman recognized that “the Spirit was striving to knock at hearts with conviction, through this judgment” and was indignant that “preachers should be used of Satan to drown out [God’s] voice.” In spite of these false preachers, hundreds had been gathering at 312 Azusa Street. The Holy Spirit was poured out, and the Pentecostal revival was born.

A dear prophetic friend of mine stated recently in the face of the current global pandemic:

A recipe for true awakening is upon us. One of the greatest gods in America is shut down—sports and entertainment. Schools are being closed, which is forcing needed relational proximity for marriages and families. Large church and conference events are being cancelled, allowing house-to-house gatherings to explode like the book of Acts. The stock market is plummeting, exposing the greed and fear of lost humanity. Prayer and a recognized need for God and His healing and protection [have] never been greater. Has anyone else been on their knees full of joy, thanksgiving and faith, just marveling at our Father. So many of us have been crying out for revival and wakening. Let’s not miss this season of true visitation.

Unfortunately, his voice has been like a lone cry in the wilderness.

Wesley and Bartleman were right. God’s answer for America’s crises is the same as in every generation. We have a clear road map set forth in the book of Joel, and God is asking for a specific response. We must hear the Lord’s report in the crisis and return to Him by establishing a culture of repentance and prayer among the next generation while the crucial window remains open. If we do, God will open the

windows of heaven and send the fire of His precious Holy Spirit again to the church in America. If we rely upon legislative change and political reform while failing to form a culture of repentance and prayer, I fear our short window of legislative, social and judicial reforms will close, the voice of the prophet will rise and sound like folly to an unrepentant and prayerless generation, and the day of the Lord will come like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap.

Oh, leader of God's people, when is the last time you preached on the necessity of repentance and bearing the fruits of repentance? When is the last time you led regular daily and weekly corporate prayer meetings with your congregation? When is the last time you heard the sound of the alarm in your own soul and trembled before the Almighty in prayer and fasting over your sins and the sins of the people?

This current crisis may be our gift to embrace the fear of the Lord and return to the Him in repentance and prayer. My hope is for a season of true reflection, sincere repentance and an intentional seeking of the Lord's mercy in prayer and fasting for every Christian church, family and believer in America. It is time to rend our hearts, cast off our sins and seek the Lord in regular corporate prayer and fasting until He comes in a Third Great Awakening. I only hope and pray there's still time and that the voice of a young Jeremiah is not already in the land.