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# HOW TO RETURN TO THE LORD WITH YOUR WHOLE HEART



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"Gird 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. Consecrate 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. Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD [is] at hand; It shall come as destruction from the Almighty. Is not the food cut off before our eyes, Joy and gladness from the house of our God?" (Joel 1:13-16)

"Now, therefore,' says the LORD, 'Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.' So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He [is] gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. Who knows [if] He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him-- A grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation,

★ **In Christ we will find forgiveness of sin, but we cannot live with Him and willfully sin thinking that we will be blessed and filled with joy.**



Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, Weep between the porch and the altar; Let them say, 'Spare Your people, O LORD, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where [is] their God?"' (Joel 2:12-17)

At times it seems that when we here these kind of commands we are not altogether sure which steps to take in order to return to the Lord with our whole heart. However, these steps can be found in God's Word. To be sure, if we do not take God and His Word seriously and apply it our lives we will turn to selfish desires, idolatry, and sin as God's people did in the time of the prophet Joel who prophesied that because of their uninhibited lifestyle they would face consequences that would show the world that God's judgment was on them.

We don't know much about the prophet Joel other than that he was a prophet and the son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1). More than likely he lived in Jerusalem because his listeners were from the southern kingdom. Nevertheless, in his short book he sent out a clear warning and pointed out those things that reveal God's judgment, practical ways to return to God with our whole heart, and the freedom and blessing that follow.

✦ **We have been clearly warned if we willfully sin there no longer remains a sacrifice for us.**

► **WHEN SACRIFICE, JOY AND GLADNESS ARE MISSING FROM THE HOUSE OF GOD, THIS IS A SURE SIGN OF GOD'S IMPENDING JUDGMENT AND IT IS TIME TO SOUND AN ALARM!**

"Gird 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. Consecrate 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. Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD [is] at hand; It shall come as destruction from the Almighty. Is not the food cut off before our eyes, Joy and gladness from the house of our God?" (Joel 1:13-16)

In those days God's people were no longer bringing the grain and drink offerings to God's house. Joy was no longer in their midst for a very simple reason – God had sent a partial judgment and enemies who destroyed all that they had. A plague of grasshoppers came as a warning of God's greater judgment that awaited if they didn't seriously heed His voice and turn from their sin. "What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten." (Joel 1:4)

Therefore, because their crops were destroyed they were no longer able to bring sacrifices to the house of God, which was the usual practice

among the Israelites. The grain and drink offerings, for example were periodically brought to the Lord, by which the people hoped to gain forgiveness for their sins and renewed fellowship with Him.

When we read the entire Bible we often find that without sacrifice to God it is impossible to please Him; which is why God the Father had to sacrifice his only begotten son so our sins could be forgiven and our fellowship with Him renewed. In the Old Testament forgiveness and reconciliation were accomplished by various sacrifices. The grain and drink offerings were symbolically given to God as the first fruits for God to use according to His will.

So, we clearly see that enemies of the Israelites destroyed everything and consequently sacrifices were no longer being brought, there was no longer joy among them and the people were sorrowful because of the destruction all around them. "Is not the food cut off before our eyes, Joy and gladness from the house of our God?" (Joel 1:16)

In simple terms, God brought distress on His people because they failed take His words seriously and turned from Him. They could not longer give of themselves as they needed; their sins caused their blessings of every kind to be taken from them.

It isn't any different for us today, because the God of the Old Testament did not change his stance against sin and disobedience in the New Testament. In neither testament did he encourage us to sin and live in perversion. However, in the New Testament we read that in order to be redeemed and saved there had to be greater and

more precious sacrifice, which is why Jesus had to die for us, so we could be reconciled to God. The writer of Hebrews says, "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, But a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and [sacrifices] for sin You had no pleasure." (Hebrews 10:4-6)

Therefore, we are redeemed by a much greater and more precious sacrifice than the sacrifices of the Old Testament. In Christ we will find forgiveness of sin, but we cannot live with Him and willfully sin thinking that we will be blessed and filled with joy. We must be even more careful because we have been clearly warned if we willfully sin there no longer remains a sacrifice for us. "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and

★ **When we live according to the flesh and in sin; when we live in disobedience to God we cannot bring the sacrifice of praise as we ought**



insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. And again, 'The LORD will judge His people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:26-31)

What took place in Judah's kingdom will also happen to all believers who do not have a relationship with God, who do not have spiritual discipline, who do not take God's commands and principles seriously; whose senses are not exercised for discerning good and evil, and who use God's goodness and mercy to justify their perverse, fleshly, and unrighteous life while thinking that they will inherit God's blessing.

These types of Christians no longer have joy in their life because they are under God's judgment because of their sin and disobedience to God's Word. When we live according to the flesh and in sin; when we live in disobedience to God we cannot bring the sacrifice of praise as we ought because it is very hard to be living in sin, without a relationship with Jesus, while at the same time singing and praying. It is interesting that in the book of Revelation it mentions the elders "each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Revelation 5:8)

✦ **It is time to sound the alarm, as the prophet Joel said, because it is better to sound it now than to ignore the signs and wait.**

Where have the prayers of the saints of today's churches disappeared? Where are the sacrifices of praise? Where have true joy, gladness, and strength gone? I believe they have disappeared into a sea of disobedience and sin of every kind. This is why it is time to sound the alarm, as the prophet Joel said, because it is better to sound it now than to ignore the signs and wait. "Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD [is] at hand; It shall come as destruction from the Almighty." (Joel 1:15)

"The day of the Lord" is usual vocabulary for the Old Testament and always speaks of a special judgment, whether in the near future (as it was in the book of Joel, with the grasshoppers) or in the last days when God will destroy the earth. All in all, it is clear to us that without God destruction and troubles are certain and all who do not accept Him will be answerable to Him.

Historically speaking, we are living in the times when believers have turned from Jesus; they are chasing after the world and their lusts. Joy, strength and gladness are missing from among God's people. It is time, like never before, to awaken from our slumber, sound the alarm in His house, and return to the Lord with our whole hearts so He can renew us, bring back the joy, and strength as in the former years.

► **2. WE RETURN TO THE LORD WITH OUR WHOLE HEART IN A PRACTICAL WAY, WITH FASTING, WEeping, AND MOURNING.**

"Now, therefore," says the LORD, "Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.' So rend your heart, and not your

garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He [is] gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. Who knows [if] He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him-- A grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, Weep between the porch and the altar; Let them say, 'Spare Your people, O LORD, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where [is] their God?"' (Joel 2:12-17)

Joel tells the people that there is a specific and practical way to return to God with our whole heart, and that is to call for a sacred fast, which leads to repentance and turning from sin.

Fasting, in that time, was a specific period of time set aside when the entire nation did not consume food, and therefore they would often return to the Lord in humility and regret, leaving behind their sin while crying out in prayer seeking God's face. They often fasted and prayed in times of trouble in order to center their focus on God, as fasting revealed the condition of their heart.

For example, when the Israelites lost nearly 40,000 people during a battle with the children of Benjamin, the Word says that because of this loss they fasted. "Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the LORD, and fasted that day until even, and offered

burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD." (Judges 20:26) After this fast God gave them victory and the children of Benjamin lost the battle.

When Elijah prophesied to King Ahab that his home would be destroyed Ahab humbled himself and sought the Lord with fasting and prayer. Because of this act God did not allow evil to come on his house in his lifetime. "So it was, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house.'" (1 Kings 21:27-29)

Ezra also knew of the power of fasting; instead of seeking shelter from the king on the way from Babylon to Palestine, he sought shelter from God, and God answered his prayer. "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and

✦ **It is time, like never before, to awaken from our slumber, sound the alarm in His house, and return to the Lord with our whole hearts so He can renew us, bring back the joy, and strength as in the former years.**



our little ones and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, 'The hand of our God [is] upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath [are] against all those who forsake Him.' So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer." (Ezra 8:21-23)

Even pagans and kings knew that fasting, crying out, and repentance are practical ways to turn to God; because it is impossible to passively turn to God with full bellies and sitting in front of the television. God always requires of us active duty. Without action we cannot have forgiveness from sin and His blessing.

For example, when the city of Nineveh believed God and called for a fast, even their king turned and commanded a fast for all. "So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered [himself] with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused [it] to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do

not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell [if] God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it." (Jonah 3:5-10)

Even Jesus fasted for forty days and nights in the desert in order to return to Galilee refreshed and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Today many of us wish to be filled with the Holy Spirit but without fasting, prayer, turning from sin, and seeking Him actively with our whole heart. However, the Holy Spirit will not come on those who do not actively seek Him purely and sincerely. "...being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry. Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region." (Luke 4:2, 14)

Therefore, fasting, weeping and mourning, leaving behind our sins, disobedience, and works of the flesh, are practical and biblical ways to return to God with our whole heart; because when we do our hearts will be softened toward the Lord. Joel called all the people to one place to pray and mourn and say, "Spare Your people, O LORD, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where [is] their God?'" (Joel 2:17)

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▶ **3. WHEN WE RETURN TO GOD WITH OUR WHOLE HEART GOD PROMISES HIS SALVATION, FREEDOM, AND A FRESH OUTPOURING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT!**

“Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, And pity His people.” (Joel 2:18)

This verse was a turning point in Joel’s prophesy in which God promised his blessing, forgiveness, and hope; but only under the condition that the people begin living as God desired for them to live; renouncing their sin because whenever there is repentance new hope and strength is found to go forward.

When the Israelites fasted, when they turned from their sin and their old way of life, God answered them by sending His refreshing and blessing. “The LORD will answer and say to His people, ‘Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, And you will be satisfied by them; I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations. But I will remove far from you the northern [army], And will drive him away into a barren and desolate land, With his face toward the eastern sea And his back toward the western sea; His stench will come up, And his foul odor will rise, Because he has done monstrous things.’ Fear not, O land; Be glad and rejoice, For the LORD has done marvelous things! Do not be afraid, you beasts of the field; For the open pastures are springing up, And the tree bears its fruit; The fig tree and the vine yield their strength. Be glad then, you children of Zion, And rejoice in the LORD your God; For He has given you the former rain faithfully, And He will cause the rain to come

down for you-- The former rain, And the latter rain in the first [month]. The threshing floors shall be full of wheat, And the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil. ‘So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, The crawling locust, The consuming locust, And the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, And praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; And My people shall never be put to shame. Then you shall know that I [am] in the midst of Israel: I [am] the LORD your God And there is no other. My people shall never be put to shame.” (Joel 2:19-27)

In other words, God promised to restore that which the enemy had destroyed because of our sin, to banish evil, unclean, and deceiving spirits from us; to free us from depression and the force of the enemy; to give to us all we need at the right time, and that we will nevermore be shamed because our sin in Him is forgiven; but this is not all, He also promised to pour out new strength of the Holy Spirit.

“And it shall come to pass afterward That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions. And also on [My] menservants and on [My] maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those

★ **The Holy Spirit will not come on those who do not actively seek Him purely and sincerely.**



days. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass [That] whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, As the LORD has said, Among the remnant whom the LORD calls.” (Joel 2:28-32)

The Apostle Peter, in his sermon, quoted this verse when speaking about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which was prophesied by the prophet Joel and which took place on the day of Pentecost. While in the past the Holy Spirit descended, in most part, on kings, prophets, and judges; Joel saw in the future that the Holy Spirit would descend on every believer, which He does today; but it is important to note, in all this, the word “afterward”. We must, then, ask ourselves “after what” will the Holy Spirit descend?

I am deeply convinced that He descends on us as a gift of God, but only when we seek Him with our whole heart, turn from sin and iniquity, and place ourselves in a position to

receive Him through prayer and fasting. When the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost, He descended in a time of persevering prayer, not in a time when people were shopping, watching television, or playing sports. You see, then, that this is a simple “secret” that many preachers circumvent. There is one condition in order to receive this gift, although it is a gift, we must position ourselves to receive it. When we are well positioned to receive this gift most certainly the Holy Spirit will overtake us. We will receive the promise of the Father and we will no longer need to fear His judgment, which will soon come to all, because we are called by His name.

“And it shall come to pass [That] whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance...” (Joel 2:32)

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