

THE PROPHECY OF JONAH

Chapter 3

Family Camp – August 21, 1997

Jonah chapter 3 has to be one of the greatest chapters in all of Scripture because of the demonstration that we have here of the mighty power of God manifested in Nineveh through the preaching of the Gospel. One writer has said,

Nowhere do we read in the Bible or outside of it that one message from a servant of God was used of God to so great an extent. For the whole city of Nineveh believed God! Nothing remotely approximating this has ever taken place in the history of revivals (Feinberg, p. 35).

Chapter 3 begins in almost the same way as chapter 1 with the addition of the words, “the second time.” We know nothing of the period of time that passed between the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3, but I believe we can be sure that it was relatively short. God had been urgent about Jonah’s mission in chapter 1, and He showed that same urgency in chapter 3. The will of God was the same. The need in the city of Nineveh was the same. The great change in chapter 3 was in Jonah. God had worked in his heart. He had taken Jonah through experiences which no man had ever had, before or since. He had been a testimony to the grace of God before he had been cast into the sea, but now he was much more a testimony to that grace. He had been a man who had wanted to forget about God, to forget about the people of God, and to forget about the Gospel of the grace of God. It is startling to see a prophet of God so removed from God in his heart, and then to see how God brought him back, not just geographically, but spiritually. This is not a different call. The call was the same. The difference was in the prophet of God. The purpose of God toward Nineveh had not changed. The need of the Ninevites had not changed. No had the message changed. God’s original call had been that Jonah should go and cry against Nineveh because of her wickedness. What the Lord said here at the beginning of chapter 3 was that Jonah was to preach the message that God had ordered that he should preach.

Jonah’s message would not have been more acceptable in Nineveh than it was anyplace else. But he was not to be concerned about making the message pleasing to the people of Nineveh. It was foolishness and always has been foolishness to those who are perishing in their sins, but as Paul told the Corinthians many years later, it is to those who are called, “the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). The message has never changed. It does not need to be “dressed up” by a lot of additional ways to make it acceptable to people. The simple God of the grace of God in Christ Jesus is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16).

It cannot be emphasized to strongly in our day that it is the simple preaching of the Gospel which God uses. There is no indication that Jonah had a team of workers who preceded him into Nineveh. Nothing is said of any musicians who “performed” before the preaching began. As far as the record is concerned, Jonah went there by himself. He had not rented an auditorium or a stadium. He simply entered the city and began preaching the message which is given in its abbreviated form in verse 4, “Ye forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” This was the main substance of his message. He went to a city which was already under the judgment of God. It was like our Lord explained years later to Nicodemus when He said,

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:18).

The preacher of the Gospel must always be moved with a great urgency in his heart. No one knows what a day may bring forth (Prov. 27:1). We are not promised tomorrow. But in the case of Nineveh the Lord revealed to them through Jonah that they had only “forty days” left before Nineveh would be destroyed. The word “overthrown” in verse 4 is the same word that the Lord used in Genesis 19 for the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. So it would mean that there would be nothing left of this city, nor of its people, nor

even of their animals. See verses 7 and 8. What a difference it would make upon the hearts of people if those of us who have the Gospel message would preach with the same urgency that Jonah did, knowing the certainty and the imminency of the judgment of God. The Ninevites

In 1:3 Jonah “rose up” and began his journey, not to Nineveh, but to Tarshish. Here in chapter 4, verse 3, he “arose, and went unto Nineveh.” At last Jonah was doing what the Lord originally had told him to do.

The reference to Nineveh being “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey” has been explained in more than one way. Some say that it would have taken three days to walk around the city because it was sixty miles in circumference. Others say that it means that it would take three days to go through all the streets of the city. I am inclined to believe that it has to do with the circumference of the city. One historian (Diodorus Siculus tells us up to that time there was no city that was comparable in its greatness to Nineveh. It was larger than Babylon. A wall a hundred feet tall surrounded the city. The wall was thick enough for three chariots to ride abreast on it. On the wall were 1500 towers. The city was truly magnificent! It must have been an overwhelming experience for Jonah, a lone man, to enter such a place to proclaim a message of impending judgment.

Verse 4 tells us that Jonah “began to enter into the city a day’s journey.” He did not go in to get settled first in one of their inns, but upon arrival he began his preaching. And to go “a day’s journey” means that the first day he walked from one side of the city to the other proclaiming his message. Here we see Jonah the preacher. He did not make up his own message. He did not try to embellish it with words which would make it more acceptable to the people. Obviously he would have said more in his preaching than just what we have in verse 4, but this was that which attracted the attention of the people.

Now when we talk about the miracles that God performed in Jonah’s lifetime, nothing could possibly compare with what Jonah experienced in Nineveh. There was an immediate and favorable response from the people. They “believed God.” This is an interesting statement, isn’t it? You would think that we would read that the people *believe Jonah!* But that is not what Jonah recorded for us. And it evidently means that Jonah impressed the people that heard him that he did not come with his own message, but he had come to them with the Word of God.. They believed that Jonah had been sent to them from God. They believed that what Jonah had come to tell them was the truth, and that there was no possibility that they had more than forty days!

But let us not give the credit to Jonah, nor to the people of Nineveh. We know from the words of our Lord Jesus Christ that, as He said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44). So what we are told in verse 5 is a testimony to the power of God and to the power of the Gospel message. God draws people through His Word, through the Gospel of Christ. It is not the personality of the preacher that makes the difference. Nor is it the gift, or the gifts, of the preacher. It is the message that God uses to draw people to Himself and to His Son. Nobody has ever come to Christ “on his own.” It is always the result of the irresistible grace of God.

And so we see that as a result of what God was doing through the preaching of Jonah, the people “proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least,” to express their faith and their repentance because of their sins. And all of this was done before the message ever got to the king.

But when the message got to the king, the king took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. What a picture of a city under conviction. As I have already mentioned, nothing like this had ever been seen before, and nothing like it has ever taken place since. People have been skeptical about the story of Jonah and the whale; why wouldn’t we all be even more inclined to reject what we read about here in chapter 3? This is truly amazing.

Many years ago I ceased being impressed with the reports that come out of evangelistic campaigns. The reports are always greater than what has actually taken place. In fact, I have heard that the leading evangelist in our day has said that he is thankful if 10% of the professions of faith are genuine. What Jonah saw was not 10%, nor 25%, nor 50%, nor 75%, *but 100%*! I have a title that we can very justly give to the city of Nineveh. You all know that Portland is called “the city of roses.” Other cities around our country have their names. The only title that could fittingly describe Nineveh is that it was “the elect city!” No such title could even be given to the city of Jerusalem. Portland is not an elect city, never has been, and never will be. No other city that has ever existed deserves this title. The Lord told Paul about Corinth that He had “much people” in Corinth, but the Lord did not say that *all* Corinthians were his people. Listen to what the Lord told Paul:

9 Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace:

10 For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city (Acts 18:9-10).

However, with Nineveh, they all were the chosen people of God. It is truly amazing, wouldn't you say?

But let me point this out which makes what happened in Nineveh even more dumbfounding. Do you think that anyone who knew the Lord in those days would possibly have conceived that such a thing was possible? We can tell even from Jonah's behavior in Jonah 1, and again in Jonah 4, that he had not been praying that God would save even *some* of the Ninevites. With their cruel wickedness people were surely praying that God would protect them from the Ninevites, but no one could possibly have imagined what the will of God was for that city.

But there are many other illustrations in Scripture of miraculous works that God did in the hearts of people which were totally unexpected by those who knew the Lord. What about Saul of Tarsus? Do you think that anyone was praying that he might be saved? People were praying that God would spare them from what Saul was doing in persecuting the church, but I doubt if anyone were praying for his salvation. What about Matthew, the publican? What about Zacchaeus the publican? Or what about Nicodemus? Do you think that any one of the spies who went into the land was thinking that there might be a Rahab there in whose heart God was already working?

Who would you consider among people who are living today as “the most unlikely candidate for heaven”? Ungodliness is sweeping over our land with a force which to us is uncontrollable. Who are we praying for? The Bible is full of stories in which we see the grace of God winning the hearts of people you would never expect to be saved. The story of what happened in Nineveh is a story which shows us how mighty is God, and how even the most wicked of cities is turned to righteousness if this is the will of God.

Now look at verses 7 through 9 and what they tell us about what the king did.

It shows the way of man. We like to make our proclamations, don't we? We feel that to get people to do what we want them to do, or what they need to do, we need a proclamation. Read what the king proclaimed according to verses 7 through 9.

It is good to read that there was such a proclamation, but, you know, when God is at work, no proclamation is needed. The people were already repenting before the king ever heard Jonah's message. But one thing the proclamation does is to show us how convinced the king was of the truth of Jonah's message, and that he firmly believed that the only way their city would be spared was for the people to turn once and for all from their evil ways and “from the violence that is in their hands.” The king was not talking about a gradual change, but an immediate and permanent change in the hearts and lives of the people.

But let me ask this question: *Where does repentance come from?* Is this man's part in salvation? Are we to praise the people of Nineveh because they had the sense to repent after they heard the preaching of Jonah? Many people feel that way. We are inclined to praise Jonah because he preached the Word of God, and then we are inclined to praise the Ninevites because they repented of their sins and believed the Word of God. But is this what we should do? *Where does repentance come from?*

The Apostle Paul gave us the answer to that question in his second epistle to Timothy. This is what he said about preaching the Gospel and the repentance which is such a necessary part of true faith:

- 24 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,
 25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;
 26 And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Another passage which tells us where repentance come from is found in Acts 5, verses 29 through 31, where Peter was responding to the authorities who had told him and the other apostles that they were to quit preaching the Gospel. This is what Peter said:

- 29 Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.
 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.
 31 Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:29-31).

When Peter was explaining to his brethren about his ministry to the Gentiles in the home of Cornelius, this was the response that the brethren gave to Peter:

- When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life (Acts 11:18).

The same is true of faith; it is a gift from God. Cf. Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 12:2.

Jonah preached the message, but it was God Who used it to accomplish His purposes in Nineveh. The king made his proclamation, but it was God Who put repentance into the hearts of the Ninevites. And it was God Who gave them the faith that they exercised in response to Jonah's preaching. So "to God be the glory; great things He hath done. As Jonah said while he was still in the belly of the whale: "Salvation is of the Lord." And we can add, "from start to finish." Remember Isa. 55:10-11,

- 10 For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:
 11 So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Verse 10 gives us God's response. (Read.)

This does not mean that God changed. It has always been His way that when people truly repent of their sins, He forgives and cleanses and forgets. God worked in the hearts of the people of Nineveh, gave them repentance, and then reward them by sparing their lives as though it were something which they had done. In the last chapter we will get into an estimate of the population of the city of Nineveh, but let me anticipate that by saying that the estimates run from 600,000 to 1,000,000. Probably the lower number is more accurate. But think of it! There were hundreds of thousands of Ninevites who through the preaching of the Word of God by one man, were drawn into the kingdom of God. Jonah's Savior became their Savior, and their Savior is our Savior.

What lessons can we learn from this third chapter of Jonah?

We learn about the amazing grace of God to the Ninevites, as well as to Jonah.

We learn the importance and the great effectiveness of the simple preaching of the Gospel of God's grace.

We learn about the mighty power of God Who turned a whole city to Himself, and to His Son. Cf. Acts 4:12.

So let us not be pulled in to man's ways. The Spirit of God despises our drums and our music which is brought in from the world, our glorification of men. Let the world go its way, but let us learn the ways of the Lord which are so evident here in the book of Jonah, and let us do His will for His glory. Then watch to see how He works. It is our responsibility to preach the Word; the Lord determines when and how His Word will be used.