



Mission to the Community

March 7, 2010

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

JONAH 1:1-3; 3:1-9

PRINTED TEXT:

JONAH 1:1-3; 3:1-9

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

—Jonah 3:5

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

JONAH 1:1-3; 3:1-9 (NIV)

1¹ The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." ³ But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

3¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

INTRODUCTION**A. RED AND YELLOW**

“Jesus loves the little children, All the children of the world; Red and yellow, black and white, They are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world” (attributed to C. H. Woolston). These words of a children’s chorus are easy to remember, and many fondly recall singing them. To hear a new generation sing the same chorus is often accompanied by nostalgic feelings. The purpose of the chorus is to remove racial prejudice, even among the people of God. Some have criticized the chorus for having the opposite effect: that the words themselves call attention to the differences.

Differences do tend to divide, and dissimilarities may present themselves in terms of age, income, education, race, religion, cultural customs, and athletic abilities—in other words, just anything that is different. Sociologists affirm that it is normal for people to cluster with others who are similar in some way.

It is wrong to allow differences to grow into petty attitudes of jealousy, pride, or hostility. It is wrong to look down on those who are different. It is wrong to be envious of those who have “more” or to feel superior because others have “less.” Wars have been and are being fought because of such dissimilarities. The fact that people are made in the image of God is conveniently ignored. Even when this is acknowledged, various reasons still are used to justify hostilities.

The great tragedy is when some express disdain about taking God’s Word to others because they are “not one of us.” Jonah is often cited as an example of this kind of a reluctance. The Lord commissioned him to preach a message of repentance to a foreign nation, and Jonah became “the runaway prophet.” We see a certain similarity in the apostle Peter, who had to be convinced by visions and a rebuke that the message of Christ was also for Gentiles (Acts 10:34, 35; Galatians 2:11, 12).

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

Solomon, the wise king of Israel, died about 930 BC. He was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, who immediately demonstrated that his wisdom was inferior to that of his father. The result was that Israel divided into two nations: Judah as the southern nation and Israel as the northern one.

The two nations had times of mutual hostility and friendship as well as oppression from other nations. Oppression changed to prosperity when Uzziah (also called Azariah) became king over Judah. At the same time Jeroboam II was king in Israel. Both nations expanded their territories so that the combined dominion was about the same as in the days of Solomon. The outward wealth of Israel in the days of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC) fulfilled a prophecy that was made by Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25. This helps to date the approximate time of Jonah’s ministry. The educated guesses for his trip to Nineveh range between 790 and 760 BC.

The traditional view is that Jonah himself wrote the book that bears his name. The book tells of the journeys of Jonah, and it also serves as a self-indictment of his attitudes and actions. By writing the book he demonstrated a repentance similar to what his preaching prompted for the entire city of Nineveh. It is interesting that the book of Jonah is still read each fall on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. It is read in the afternoon service to emphasize the theme of repentance.

The book of Jonah provides a journal of jealousy, jeopardy, joy, and judging. The book is the fifth book in the Minor Prophets, which are the last 12 books of the Old Testament. It is different from the others in that it is primarily a narrative. (A more typical approach is to blend prophetic

utterances with sections of history or personal experiences.) Jonah is the only prophet among the Minor Prophets who rebelled against God and then recorded a factual account of his actions.

I. COMMISSION AVOIDED (JONAH 1:1–3)

A. DESIGNATING THE MESSENGER (v. 1)

1. The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:

The opening phrase of the book, *the word of the Lord*, offers the standard formula that prophets often use when they proclaim or write their messages from the Lord. Jonah's identification as the *son of Amittai* reflects the custom of providing the name of the father as a means of more precise identification. The extra identification is not as essential in this case, for Jonah is the only person in the Bible with that name. The word *Jonah* means "dove."

The reference to Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25 reveals that Gath Hopher is his hometown. This is one of the cities of the tribe of Zebulun (Joshua 19:13). It is located just a few miles north of Nazareth in northern Israel. It is not known if Jonah is in his hometown when he receives the word of the Lord.

B. DELIVERING THE MESSAGE (v. 2)

2. "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

Nineveh is both a *great city* and an ancient city, having been built shortly after the great flood (Genesis 10:11, 12). The book of Jonah describes the greatness or importance of this city three times (Jonah 1:2; 3:2, 3). It is located in what is now Iraq, across from modern Mosul on the eastern side of the Tigris River. The journey to Nineveh from Israel's capital of Samaria is about 600 miles. Nineveh is well fortified with inner and outer walls, and it is one of the major

cities of the Assyrians. It became the capital of the empire in approximately 700 BC.

The *wickedness* of Nineveh is not hidden from God; thus Jonah's task is to proclaim *against* the city. Under ordinary circumstances, a prophet who represents the God of Israel will have no effect on the residents of a foreign city. The people of Nineveh, however, experience some events in the eighth century BC that may make them more receptive to Jonah's message. Two severe plagues (765 and 759 BC), military defeats, several weak kings, and a total solar eclipse on June 15, 763 BC (the darkness is considered negatively by these superstitious people)—any or all of these may prepare the way for the arrival of the prophet of God.

C. DISOBEDIENCE OF THE MESSENGER (v. 3)

3. But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

The first two words of this verse reveal that Jonah is about to become a reluctant, rebellious, runaway prophet. The Lord has said, "Go east," *but Jonah* deliberately selects *Tarshish*, a destination that is as much as 2,000 miles the other way.

Ships of Tarshish are mentioned several times in the Old Testament (example: Ezekiel 27:25). It is therefore a city of commerce, a good place to try to hide. The location of Tarshish has not been identified precisely. Conjectures include an area of southern Turkey near Tarsus, a place on the island of Sardinia (west of Italy), and a town named Tartessus on the eastern coast of

Spain. The last may be the best choice, for it is the farthest away.

Jonah's attempt to escape *from the Lord* is futile. It is assumed that he is aware of the thought given in Psalm 139:7–10—that wherever one goes, to the heavens or the depths, God is there. In his rebellion against God, however, Jonah overlooks what he knows. He is like some people whose conduct away from home is inconsistent with a professed faith in God. Selective obedience to God is not the way that leads to eternal life.

Jonah pays the normal *fare* for such a trip. Most interpret this to mean that he is purchasing a trip to Tarshish. Another view is that he rents a boat and its crew in order to leave as quickly as possible.

II. COMMISSION EMBRACED (JONAH 3:1–3)

A. SECOND CHANCE FOR JONAH (v. 1)

1. Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

The intervening verses (not in today's text) give the familiar account of Jonah's being swallowed by the great fish that *the Lord* prepares for that purpose. It is likely that the interior is dark, smelly, and dismal. One thing is certain: when *Jonah* is given a second chance to take his life in the correct direction, there is no hesitation.

It is significant that the factor of Jonah's being in the sea creature three days and nights is cited by Jesus as a sign of his own resurrection (Matthew 12:40). This tends to stamp the account as an actual, historical event.

Jonah now understands that he cannot flee from God, and that it is up to him to be God's messenger to Nineveh. The fact that God approaches Jonah a *second time* says something about God's character as well. Others, such as Peter and John Mark in the New Testament, are determined to redeem themselves from their previous failures, and

God allows them to do so (see John 18:15–18; 25–27; 21:15–19; Acts 13:13; 15:37–39; 2 Timothy 4:11).

B. SERIOUSNESS OF THE MESSAGE (v. 2)

2. "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

The second summons for Jonah has a new element. Previously Jonah was told that he is to preach against *Nineveh*. This time he is informed that he is to speak only what God tells him. The implications are that he must wait until God is ready and that he is neither to add to nor subtract from God's *message*.

C. SUBMISSION TO GOD'S WAY (v. 3a)

3a. Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.

Jonah has learned that obedience to God is better than disobedience. In the centuries ahead, Jesus will contrast those two responses by comparing them to building houses on sand and rock (Matthew 7:24–29). Many are intrigued by the contrast of the two foundations in that story, but the main point that Jesus makes is that of disobedience versus obedience.

D. SIZE OF NINEVEH (v. 3b)

3b. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.

The three-day factor is subject to different interpretations. It may refer to the fact that preaching through the city in all its neighborhoods takes *three days*. Some consider it to mean that anyone who wishes to tour the city will find that it takes three days; the inner wall has a circumference of eight miles, and that is huge by ancient standards (compare Jonah 4:11). It may be that the general area of Nineveh and its suburbs requires a three-day trip to get there from a certain point.

III. CONDEMNATION RESULT (JONAH 3:4–9)

A. PROPHET'S SERMON (v. 4)

4. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

Jonah is a representative of the God of Israel, and this somehow prompts the people of *Nineveh* to give him an audience. The message of the prophet is very brief: just five words in the Hebrew language in which it was first written and eight words in the English here. It is not a message that offers any hope. Yet the 40-day factor suggests a window of time in which the people might be able to do something that will please God in order to avoid another catastrophe (see the comments on *Jonah* 1:2).

B. PEOPLE’S RESPONSE (vv. 5, 6)

5. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Those who hear *Jonah* are convinced! This is indicated by three responses: belief, a fast, and the wearing of sackcloth. This verse does not state how the decision to mandate a fast is reached and announced. But the next verse suggests that the king and his nobles may be the ones behind these extraordinary actions that involve every level of society. No one is above or beneath the need to repent. These outward expressions are dramatic, and they are typical for the people of the time who wish to show repentance or extreme agony.

The word *repent* is not used in the account as it is given by *Jonah*. But Jesus uses that term when he commends the people for repenting at the preaching of *Jonah*. Jesus then condemns the people of his day for a lack of repentance (*Matthew* 12:41, 42).

Jonah’s preaching triggers one of the greatest citywide revivals of all time. Yet *Jonah* does not want this revival to happen, as we shall see in Lesson 2.

6. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

The precise identity of which *king of Nineveh* is involved cannot be determined. A good guess is Ashurdan III (reigns 772–755 BC). It is during his reign that most of the catastrophes cited in the commentary for *Jonah* 1:2 occur.

The question is often asked as to why the king is referred to as *king of Nineveh* instead of *king of Assyria* (the nation). Ancient kings like to accumulate titles that indicate their superiority. They often add the names of any region or nation conquered. A king who travels to one of his cities is king over that city. To be the king of *Nineveh* is a great honor, for it is a great city!

On this occasion, however, the king lays aside his kingly apparel, and he leads others in acts of humility. Regarding the combination of sackcloth and ashes, see *Esther* 4:1, 3; *Isaiah* 58:5; *Jeremiah* 6:26; *Daniel* 9:3; *Matthew* 11:21; *Luke* 10:13.

C. PROCLAMATIONS OF THE KING (vv. 7–9)

7–9. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

New factors are given in this verse: the fasting includes the animals, and refraining from both food and water is the nature of the fast. Domesticated animals often demand to be fed at the times to which they have become accustomed, and they do this by the assorted noises they make. The resulting din of hungry animals and children creates a stressful reminder of the repentance.

The unknown factor in the fast is its duration. About 300 years later, Queen *Esther* will ask for a three-day fast when she prepares to enter the presence of the king without having been invited (*Esther* 4:16). A similar time period may be involved here, or there may be repeated days of fasting.

8. *“But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.”*

The covering of animals is not unusual, but in this case the garments are *sackcloth*. This repentance is not just an outward adornment; it involves a decision to abandon *evil* of any type. The final part of the repentance is sincere and genuine prayer to *God*. This may be vocal and loud, as is customary in that region, or it may be the quiet prayers of contrite hearts.

9. *“Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”*

At this point the people of Nineveh have no assurance of respite from the promised destruction. The mercy of the God of Israel may be known to them, but it is very rare for people to think that any god cares about the people of other nations. The fact that God cares enough to send a messenger to warn them may be the element that gives them a glimmer of hope.

CONCLUSION

The apostle Paul gave his famous sermon at the meeting of the Areopagus when he was in Athens. He noted in that sermon that God commands everyone to repent (Acts 17:30). Several conclusions may be derived from that sermon and the story of Jonah.

1. Repentance is something that can be commanded. It may involve the emotions, but repentance is primarily an act of the will. It is a deliberate choice.

2. Repentance is a decision that is made after the individual examines his or her own life, the goodness of God, and the consequences of not repenting.

3. Sincere repentance involves both present and future obedience. Repentance is not a one-time event, but is a continuing process (1 John 1:9). The actual need for repentance may diminish as growth in Christ continues, but sensitivity about sin will increase.

4. Repentance is a personal matter. The people of the city of Nineveh repented, but it is fundamental to understand the importance of the individual as part of the whole.

HEARING AND ACTING ON THE LORD’S WORD

In early 1988, Edgar C. Whisenant (1932–2001) published a booklet titled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. It predicted the Lord’s return to occur between September 11 and 13 of that year. The booklet sold in the millions of copies. When his prophecy failed, Whisenant wrote new books that adjusted the predictions to the years 1989, 1993, and 1994.

The fact that Whisenant had been a NASA engineer meant that he was not an unintelligent person. But he definitely was a false prophet. Many false prophets try to add credibility to their predictions by claiming that “the Lord has given me a word” or “the Lord said to me.” When their prophecies don’t come true, they prove that God has not been speaking through them.

Self-styled prophets are all too eager to hear “words from the Lord” when it is merely their own imaginations working overtime. Ironically, Jonah’s case was the opposite: he was *unwilling* to hear the word of the Lord even though God *was* speaking to him! God will attempt to speak to you today through creation (Psalm 19; Romans 1:20) and through his written Word (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). When he does, will you embrace him and his will, or will you run?

AN EYE IN THE SKY

Environmental scofflaws have a new enforcement technique to contend with these days. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection is now comparing old aerial photos of the state's wetlands with newer images to find differences that reveal violations of environmental laws. Two examples of violations: a concrete plant illegally filled in wetlands, and a junkyard logged a wooded swamp and filled it in to expand the junkyard's operations. Monetary fines were hefty.

Similar techniques are being used elsewhere. Breaches in hog farm waste lagoons in North Carolina that pollute streams do not go unnoticed. Satellite surveillance has detected illegal loggers clear-cutting Brazil's Amazon River basin. The list goes on. But even with heavy fines, it's not known whether the violators were repentant!

God's "eye in the sky" observation of Nineveh's sin resulted in genuine repentance; this was not the "I'm sorry I got caught" attitude we so often see today. It's a common human trait to think we can escape the consequences of sin. But God watches and collects evidence from on high.

LET'S TALK IT OVER

- 1. How does the wickedness rampant in our big cities affect you?**
- 2. What are some ways that people today seek to "flee ... from the presence of the Lord"? How have you tried to do so? How did you grow spiritually as a result?**
- 3. God often gives second chances. What does that say about Him? What does that say about us?**
- 4. What is there about big cities that present both barriers and opportunities to the church?**
- 5. Why is the concept of the ungodly perishing at the hand of a God of fierce anger not a greater motivation for evangelism and missions? How can it be?**

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. How does the wickedness rampant in our big cities affect you?

Often we simply shake our heads and think, "What an awful place; I'm glad I'm not there!" But our ultimate response must reflect God's heart. That may involve going to such a city personally to evangelize. Or it may involve helping to recruit and send teachers to such hard and sinful places. The church must not content itself merely with occupying the suburbs and exurbs. To do so will result in a faith that embraces the comfort of isolationism. To do so will leave the devil on a playing field without an opposing team in the big cities.

Most major cities have a variety of Christian service organizations doing battle there. Perhaps we can look for trustworthy individuals and groups already serving in those cities as we seek active participation in stemming the onslaught of unrighteousness. Instead of head-shaking, there should be saber-rattling of the sword of the Spirit.

2. What are some ways that people today seek to "flee ... from the presence of the Lord"? How have you tried to do so? How did you grow spiritually as a result?

Like Jonah, some folks pretend they can live in a place where God simply is not there. Some—such as new college students—find that when they leave the place of the faith of their families, they can "leave God behind." Indeed, some relish the opportunity. Such thinking obviously is contrary to passages such as Psalm 139:7–13, which states that God cannot be escaped. There is no place to hide.

Many of us are not so blatantly rebellious, of course. But we resist the urging of the Spirit to be about God's business, whether vocationally or simply socially. Some use the Internet to lead "secret lives" that flirt with the devil's fellowship. In effect, they clothe themselves in the hypocrisy God so strongly condemns throughout His Word. God will not be so mocked.

3. God often gives second chances. What does that say about Him? What does that say about us?

Peter knew something about second chances, because he experienced this himself (John 21:15–19). Perhaps he was remembering his own second chance when he wrote, "The Lord is ... not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God's desire is for all to be saved from sin. Yet He created us with free will, and He gives us opportunities to use it. We are flawed creatures who make sinful choices. We desperately need multiple opportunities to repent—and God gives them! Will we recognize and use those opportunities?

4. What is there about big cities that present both barriers and opportunities to the church?

Common themes run through the answers to both issues. For one, the great wickedness of desperate crowds is both barrier and opportunity. Sin is more easily seen and more easily hated in environs of high population density. Of course, the presence of such a seemingly overwhelming number of sinners says the devil is being quite successful there. But we are not to be intimidated by numbers, for the true power is on our side.

Second, the impersonality—"nameless faces"—of the city offers both barrier and possibility. Accountability fades in a place where no one truly knows who you are, so you can "get away with" more. But such impersonality leaves a deep hunger for relationship and love, the very blessings the church offers in abundance.

5. Why is the concept of the ungodly perishing at the hand of a God of fierce anger not a greater motivation for evangelism and missions? How can it be?

It is difficult for many to accept the idea of a God who is so holy that His holiness demands punishment for sin. We would rather emphasize the love of God! That is important to do, but we dare not minimize His holiness in the process.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for this lesson, which compels us to examine our lives. May we find areas in which we need to repent and change. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.