

March 22, 2015

Jonah chapter 3
A city converted

We see in this chapter that the most hardened and wicked society, or nation, can be turned around with the Word of God and the work of the Spirit of God.

Jonah receives a second command to go to Nineveh. He obeys, but it is over his objection. Though he had spent three days and three nights in the fish, he had not been humbled under the mighty hand of God. But God does not deal with him as he did previously. Rather, he gives him another chance.

Vv. 1, 2. The Lord again tells Jonah to go and preach unto Nineveh, that great wicked city. He did not rebuke Jonah for not going the first time, for the storm and the fish was enough rebuke. V. 3. Previously, Jonah arose and fled in disobedience; now he arose and went in obedience. V. 4. Jonas preaching was very simple: "*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*"

Note that it was not a cry against sin, for the Ninevites knew they were sinners. Every person has that built in knowledge of God's definition of sin, though many work to suppress that knowledge. According to Jonah's words, they knew that they were going to be overthrown because of their sin, and that the God of Jonah was going to do it.

Evidently, the account of Jonah's rebellion against God and God's supernatural dealing with Jonah to get him to go to Nineveh had reached the city before Jonah. So when he showed up with his message, it got their attention.

How was it to be overthrown? Sodom was overthrown with a volcano, some time after Jonah, it was overthrown an invading army. But here it is overthrown by just one man preaching a simple harsh message: "*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*"

V. 4, a day's journey was about 20 miles, so it probably took about a day's journey to go through the city of Nineveh. His short message got the attention of the people and even reached the king.

Divine Threats

First, divine threats contain conditions, as do divine promises.

Ezekiel 33:14 "*Again, when I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; 15 If the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. 16 None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath*

done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live. 17 Yet the children of thy people say, The way of the Lord is not equal: but as for them, their way is not equal. 18 When the righteous turneth from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, he shall even die thereby. 19 But if the wicked turn from his wickedness, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby. 20 Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. O ye house of Israel, I will judge you every one after his ways.”

Second, divine threats contain offers of mercy:

Isaiah 5:25 “Therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.”

In God's mercy, he sent his servant Jonah to this great wicked Gentile city to preach the message given to him by God. It was a short, harsh message.

His message was not “I bring you good tidings of great joy”. His message was not a message of love and good will of God toward sinners. It was not a message of repentance, but it forced that conclusion.

Rather his message was very harsh and to the point. It was one of the soon coming judgment and total destruction. It was a message that startled the Ninevites.

It is pleasant to hear about the love of God drawing the sinner to himself, but here we see the threatened wrath of God moving a sinful city to repentance. The wrath of God against the violation of his laws, sin, is more difficult to preach than the love of God. People would much rather hear love than law, but Paul tells us that the preaching of the law is required to make people see their need of the sinless sacrifice of Christ.

Galatians 3:24 “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”

We will not develop this verse in Galatians and the several like verses in Romans, for we did that when we went through those books. We will say, however, that instruction in the law of God is required to show the sinner his need for Christ in order to approach God. Every shred of hope in self, that is of keeping the law, for entering into the presence of God must be destroyed. Only the Law of God will bring about that destruction of “self”.

God had designed to save Nineveh, and to bring its people to repentance, and here was a Hebrew prophet warning of God’s wrath. Rather than mocking the prophet as did the Israelites, they heeded his warning, and obeyed his word.

I would much rather witness to those who know nothing about the gospel of repentance and justification through faith than to try to witness to those who know all the right words. It is particularly the "Christian" religious leaders who mock the truth.

Psalm 62:11 *"God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this; that power belongeth unto God. 12 Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy: for thou renderest to every man according to his work"*

V. 5, *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. So the people of Nineveh believed God."* The people believed Jonah's short message, and their heart was struck with great fear. The king heard what was taking place in his city. He called his nobles together, and they debated what should be done. They decided to issue a royal proclamation. The proclamation included fasting with no food nor drink and covering both men and beast with sackcloth, and cast themselves upon the mercy of Jonah's God.

V. 5, *"So the people of Nineveh believed God,"*

Faith in God, or "belief in God" has been horribly abused today. To the average person, *belief in God* means do you believe there is a "man upstairs"? Every politician, especially at election time, believes in god, and will publically proclaim that belief. Every "religious leader" must profess a belief in god if he will have the sheep follow him with their money. Yet the god they refer to has nothing to do with the Holy, Just and Righteous God as revealed in the total of His Word.

Their god is not the Holy Father who gave his Only Begotten Son to pay the sin penalty for his people.

Deuteronomy 32:26 *"I said, I would scatter them into corners, I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men: 27 Were it not that I feared the wrath of the enemy, lest their adversaries should behave themselves strangely, and lest they should say, Our hand is high, and the LORD hath not done all this. 28 For they are a nation void of counsel, neither is there any understanding in them. 29 O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end! 30 How should one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, except their Rock had sold them, and the LORD had shut them up? 31 For their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges. 32 For their vine is of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter: 33 Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps. 34 Is not this laid up in store with me, and sealed up among my treasures? 35 To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste. 36 For the LORD shall judge his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he seeth that their power is gone, and there is none shut up, or left. 37 And he shall say, Where are their gods, their rock in whom they trusted, 38*

Which did eat the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink offerings? let them rise up and help you, and be your protection.”

Their rock is not our Rock. Their god is not the God who has given his command word with the demand that every person obey it. Their god does not have an unchanging law written in the nature of every man, and written in stone with an iron pen. The god of their belief is not a god of wrath against sin as Jonah presented here in chapter three. Their god is a god of love, who like themselves, winks at sin.

The list could go on and on defining the god when men affirm a “belief in God”

Belief in the God of Scripture will believe and declare all the counsels of God to the world, with equal authority of the Law, Psalms and the Prophets, as well as the Gospels and Epistles. (Acts 20:26, 27.)

Jonah chapter three tells us that belief in God produces great fear of the true God and who that God is. That fear produces a deep and serious awareness of sin, and turning to righteous living from sin. **Belief in the Biblical God and turning from sin cannot be separated:**

Deuteronomy 10:12 *“And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul 13 To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?”*

Job 28:28 *“And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”* Wisdom understands God and fears him.

Proverbs 3:7 *“Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.”* Godly humility fears God and departs from evil.

Proverbs 13:19 *“The desire accomplished is sweet to the soul: but it is abomination to fools to depart from evil.”* Fools hate the idea of humility and departing from their evil ways.

Proverbs 16:6 *“By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil.”*

Proverbs 8:13 *“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.”*

Psalms 145:19 *“He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them.”*

Psalms 147:11 *“The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy.”*

Ecclesiastes 12:13 *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”*

Luke 1:50 *“And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.”*

There was a popular song in the 50s, "Love and Marriage, Love and Marriage go together like a horse and carriage". Faith or belief in God and holy living have been torn apart today as has love and marriage.

Mark 1:14 *"Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, 15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."*

Those who profess "I believe in God" yet have no desire to turn to righteousness from sin do not believe in the Holy God of Scripture. They believe a false god that they manufactured in their own imagination. Their god is an idol who can only deliver them to the place of eternal torment in the eternal lake of fire:

Revelation 20:14 *"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."*

Revelation 21:8 *"But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."*

Jonah's message brought great fear upon the Ninevites, who were exceedingly wicked, and their conversion happened very quickly. They had been warned that within fourth days the city would be overthrown. Note that there is nothing in Jonah's message that calls for repentance, and turning to the Lord. Yet the people from the king down knew the destruction could be avoided by "*believing God*". They knew that believing God and repentance must go together. They knew that repentance could not be postponed until a more convenient time.

Repentance must not be put off, for we know not how long we have. One must not boast himself of tomorrow, for he knows not what tomorrow may bring. What caused the Ninevites to quickly believe and repent? God gave the spirit of repentance as the result of the preaching of one man.

2 Timothy 2:25 *"In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;"*

First, we have an example of an entire wicked and perverse population turning in unison to Jonah's God in less than forty days. So we see that it is not beyond the nature of things for an entire population of a nation or nations to be converted to saving "*belief in God*" through Christ Jesus.

Second, we see here the willingness of the heathen who have never heard the gospel to repent, "*believe in God*" and be converted.

Third, here was practical proof that Israel's God was the God of the heathen also, and he could prepare for himself a people out of the most heathen tribes and nations of the earth.

V. 6, They were led in their repentance by those in civil authority. They set the example, as all leaders of our day are to do. The leaders are to have a good report among those who know them. Christians are commanded to pray for those in authority, whether civil or religious.

We hear a lot of revolutionary talk today, but very little of prayer and repentance.

The conversion of the Ninevites was as honest and true as anything could be, resulting in God spared the very large, exceedingly wicked city. However, their righteousness did not pass down to their children. Isaiah, Nahum and Zephaniah all predicted the overthrow of the Assyrians long after Jonah's time:

Nahum 3:18 *"Thy shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria: thy nobles shall dwell in the dust: thy people is scattered upon the mountains, and no man gathereth them. 19 There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?"*

The godliness of the fathers cannot be passed down without training up the children in the ways of godliness. How many people are depending upon the righteousness of their parents for their eternal hope?

V. 7, fasting is not a requirement for the Gospel Church, so it is left up to the individual. Maybe for health, or maybe even for a spiritual victory, but fasting does not gain merit before God.

V. 8. The royal command was for man and beast to *"cry mightily unto God:"* The royal command for man and beast was that *"Neither man nor beast, herd nor flock"* should taste no food nor water. Without food or water, the beast cry out to God in their hunger, as men cried out to God in their fear.

Note that the beast, whether domestic or wild, share in the wrath of God against man's sin. We see this in California even now, as the drought takes hold of Southern California.

Joel 1:20 *"The beasts of the field cry also unto thee: for the rivers of waters are dried up, and the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness."*

Not only do men suffer the effects of sin as described in Deuteronomy 28, but so do the beast of the field.

At the royal decree, sackcloth was to cover everyone, including the beast. The king set the example, as he also sat in sackcloth and ashes which was a further sign of humiliation.

Sackcloth was a sign of genuine mourning and repentance before God.

In our Gospel age, we are not called to humble ourselves in sackcloth and ashes, but humility of heart is required.

1 Samuel 16:7 *“But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.”*

Matthew 5:4 *“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.”*

(James 4:10, &c.)

V. 8, the royal decree also commanded prayer, *“cry mightily unto God:”*.

“let them turn every one from his evil way,” Every individual was to cry out to God, and turn from his evil way. Every citizen of the city was called upon to repent and turn.

V. 9, *“Who knoweth?”* The king’s desire and hope was that God would turn, repent and show mercy by turning away from his wrath.

Those who believe in the Biblical God of Mercy and Grace know that if even the worse sinner will turn to God through the Lord Jesus Christ, he will find mercy and grace. The promise is for the unsaved sinner:

John 14:6 *“Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”*

John 6:37 *“All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”*

Those who will come to him will find a faithful Friend and Father.

“Who knoweth?” We know that in his mercy, he will restore his contrite people to proper fellowship.

Hebrews 4:16 *“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”*

Joel 2:12 *“Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: 13 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. 14 Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?”*

Jonah also shows the results of national “turning” to righteousness from sin. *“If my people will humble themselves...”*

V. 10. *“God saw their works, that they turned from their evil ways...”* God Himself testified that their belief in God and repentance was real. One might be able to deceive men, but God cannot be deceived. Their belief was real, unlike many who profess “repentance”, which goes unproved by their works. Some may even profess humility and repentance with their works, but their heart is far from genuine humility before God. God sees the truth of the heart, and the works here testified of genuine repentance.

1:2, *“for their wickedness is come up before me.”*

It is important for us to see that no matter how strong or how wicked a nation, or individual, may be, it can be overthrown by the preaching of the Word of God. The Lord does not need a large army nor terrible weapons of physical warfare to overthrow a nation, no matter how hardened in sin, rich, large and strong that nation may be. Nineveh was the strongest and richest nation of its day, and it was exceedingly wicked, yet it was overthrown in a day by one preacher who obeyed God, though he did not want to, and delivered God's message.

It is intimated in the Scriptures that a time is coming when "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." Let the people of God, therefore, refused to be discouraged. Their labors are not in vain. Their example shall not be thrown away. Their hopes shall not be disappointed. The cause to which they have consecrated their best energies is assured of certain triumph. The kingdoms of this world are to become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ; and when the victory is celebrated, it shall not be forgotten that you, my brethren, contributed to bring it about by your prayers and works and alms, and by your persistent pursuit of those things which make for righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. (*Jonah*, Samuel Burn, p. 172)

“God repented”, or changed his mind toward them.

Jeremiah 18:7 *“At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; 8 If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. 9 And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; 10 If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.”*