

Chapter 12

JONAH'S PREACHING IN NINEVEH

In addition to reading Jonah chapter 3, verses 4, 5 and 10, we will also read from Luke 11, verses 29 and 30.

And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. . . . 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 3:4,5,10)

And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, "This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. (Luke 11:29-30)

In our last lesson, we saw the magnitude and difficulty of Jonah's mission in confronting the greatest city in the world with its sin and rebellion against the God of heaven and earth. Nineveh excelled all other cities in the world in everything, including its sinning. It was against the greatness of this sinning that Jonah was to launch a direct confrontation between God and the Ninevites. In this lesson, we will consider his preaching and what enabled him to gain a hearing with the people of this city.

We read in Jonah 3:4 regarding Jonah's entrance into the city, "***And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk.***" Just as soon as he arrived, we do not find that he sought out a motel to rest and refresh himself from his tiring journey. Neither does he take a sightseeing tour of the city to observe its design and great beauty. Nor is there any record that he looked for an escape route so that he could flee quickly in the event that the Ninevites turned against him. Instead Jonah goes immediately to work and proclaims the message that God gave him to preach. Before he could finish a day's journey, the city became alerted and alarmed at his preaching.

In the words, "***then he cried,***" it reveals the courage of his soul. He did not creep in privately nor advance cautiously as men do when dangers are anticipated. He didn't mutter or speak under his voice as if he was afraid. On the contrary, he lifted up his voice and "cried" as a trumpet so that all might clearly hear. He would probably stop at an intersection or wherever people would gather and there cry aloud the message that God had assigned to him. This would take remarkable courage when we consider how unpopular the message would have been. Not only was he exposing the sins which the Ninevites loved, but he was threatening them with destruction by the hand of God. He was touching

what they loved, and then threatening to destroy them if they did not give up what they loved.

Remember in the first chapter how God commanded Jonah, **"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."** Jonah's method of preaching was to be one of direct confrontation with the sinner. Jonah was not to enter into the city like the friendly ice cream man, but he was to march in like an ambassador representing the King of heaven and earth with an edict declaring war upon Nineveh. The Ninevites were given forty days to unconditionally surrender. They were to understand that this invisible King had their city surrounded and that their great walls were defenseless against His weapons of warfare. This King could send a flood of waters as he did in the days of Noah and wash them all away. This King, whom Jonah represented, could send a ball of fire and burn them up alive as He did in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah. He could send an earthquake and open the ground and swallow them up as He did to the rebels from the family of Korah. Or this great King could send a death angel throughout the city as He did in the days of Pharaoh and just silently stop every beating heart of the first born. Nineveh was to be made aware of the God with whom they were dealing. They had never dealt with an invading enemy like this King of heaven and earth, and they were absolutely defenseless before Him. All of their greatness was useless when compared to the might and power of the God of heaven and earth. We need to learn that lesson as well. No matter how healthy, how great, how wise, how powerful, or how wealthy you may be, you are nothing before the God of heaven and earth. You cannot stand against Him, and He calls for your unconditional surrender. He does not negotiate with you, but says "come, bow down and acknowledge who I am." The sinner will only find peace with God when he completely surrenders and comes all bowed down before the throne of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Next, let us look at the content of Jonah's preaching. The text states that he cried, **"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"** Some Bible teachers would have us believe that these were the only words which Jonah uttered, and that he literally spoke them over and over again in repetition. **"Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown; forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"** But these words are rather to be understood as the theme of his message rather than just the actual words of his message. Other Bible teachers believe that while the message contains more words than those listed in the text, it was nevertheless a basic message of certain destruction with no call to repentance and faith. This view is based on two considerations: (1) the Biblical text in Jonah does not include any reference to Jonah calling for faith and repentance, and (2) Jonah's attitude toward the Ninevites was such that he did not want them to repent, thus he would keep quiet about it. My reply to this view is that whatever

Jonah's attitude may have been toward the Ninevites, he is still under a Divine mandate to preach the message that God gave him to preach. **"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."** Jonah may not have wanted them to repent, but we cannot jump to the conclusion that Jonah was free to make up his own message and omit the call to repentance. Jonah could not add or subtract anything from God's message. The only way that we can discern what Jonah preached is from the direct statements of the text and from indirect statements and inferences drawn from the text. In examining the Biblical data in the third and fourth chapters, we find evidence that Jonah's preaching contained more than a mere warning of impending destruction. The first thing that we read about the Ninevites in verse 5 is that they **"believed God, and proclaimed a fast."** Before people can believe God, they must first know who He is. Nineveh was a highly idolatrous city given over to the worship of many gods. If they are being threatened with impending destruction, they would need to know who or what is about to destroy them. Jonah's message must inform them that they were dealing with the one true God who made heaven and earth. Otherwise, they would be calling upon an unknown god of their own imaginations. Remember back in the first chapter when Jonah confessed to the sailors that he represented the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Likewise, the Ninevites must be informed that it was not a tribal deity that they were dealing with, but it was God, the Creator of all things, and nothing exists without Him. It was Jonah's job to inform them who the God was that was threatening their destruction.

After the Ninevites were convinced about who God is, and that this God was going to destroy them in forty days, they would then ask, "Why is He mad at us? What have we done? Is there anyway we can avert His anger?" Then Jonah must point out that it was due to their wickedness as God had said, **"for their wickedness is come up before me."** Then a question would naturally follow, "In what ways have we done wickedness? Jonah, if God is going to destroy us for our wickedness, what particular ways have we offended Him?" Then Jonah must point out the personal sins of the people. Preaching on sin in general affects no one, but when you start pointing out the specific sins of particular people like Nathan did when he pointed to David and said, **"You are the man"** (II Samuel 12:7), then it has an eye and heart-opening effect. Preaching on sin must be pointed and specific. Our Lord did this in dealing with the woman at the well (John 4:39). Remember how she wanted to talk about religion and about doctrine, but our Lord refused to discuss that. He wanted to deal with her sin, and it was not until he pointed out her specific sin that it began to *"get down to where the rubber meets the road"* to use Dr. J. Vernon McGee's famous terminology. Preaching against sin must reach down in our hearts to reveal our pet sins. Every human being is sinful, but not every human being has the same pet sin. God will touch that reigning pet sin when He brings the sinner to repentance. Our

Lord also did this with the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-20). This man did not have a problem with sexual immorality like the woman at the well, but his pet sin was the love of money. He was covetous. When our Lord set forth the commandments in general, the rich young ruler stated, "**All these things I have kept from my youth.**" However, our Lord would not let him get by on that general assessment. He said, "if you have kept all that, then go and give away your wealth to the poor and come follow me." The pet sin found its mark. We must use personal dealing with sin in our preaching.

It is evident that Jonah had pointed out specific sins when you read the decree signed by the king of Nineveh. In chapter 3, the king decreed that each one of his subjects was to "**turn from his evil way** (his pet sin) **and from the violence that is in his hands.**" When the king signed that decree, how else would he have known what these sins were except that Jonah had pointed them out. If the Ninevites are going to be spared from God's destruction, they must know what sins they are committing so they can repent and turn from them to avoid God's judgment. This was the prophet's role to expose these sins, and Jonah did just that.

In his *Commentary on Jonah*, Dr. John Gill explains the ground on which the Ninevites believed God and turned from their sins.

They believed there was a God. They believed the word the prophet spoke was not the word of man but the word of God. Faith came by hearing the word which is the spring of true repentance and the root of all good works.

That is a profound statement and you need to read through it several times. There is immense theology contained therein, and Dr. Gill, along with John Calvin and the other Reformers, held to the position that a person cannot biblically repent until he first of all believes God is who He is. In other words, while repentance and faith are bound together, repentance cannot take place until a person is brought to believe what God is saying, and that He means what He says. You will never repent until you believe you are in trouble with God, and you will never turn and do good works until you first believe God. Repentance and good works flow out of true faith in God. I believe this to be a very biblical concept.

To summarize, we may say that Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites first of all involved a call to acknowledge the God to whom they were accountable. Secondly, they were to heed the warning which God was giving about coming judgment. Thirdly, they were to believe the testimony which God was giving them regarding their sin. Fourthly, they were to repent over their sins, and fifthly, perform the prescribed good works which would manifest

their faith and repentance. God is not going to accept good works unless He prescribes them. The Ninevites must make a change in their ethical conduct. The Bible says in verse 10 that when God saw their works, then He relented of His threat. These were the works which God had prescribed, for He will only accept that which He prescribes. It is not left up to men to decide what they want to do to please God. The only good work is a work which God has authorized and defined as good.

After Jonah preached the impending judgment of God on Nineveh, a reprieve of forty days is granted to the city. In the Bible, the number forty is frequently used as a period of probation, testing and trial. It rained for forty days and nights during the flood of Noah. Moses was up on the mountain receiving the law for forty days. The spies were in the promised land for forty days. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Our Lord was tested in the wilderness for forty days. It is a number associated with probation, testing and trial, therefore God uses this ideal number of days before Nineveh will be destroyed, denoting a testing time, a trial, a probationary period in which Nineveh was being placed.

Here is a question. Was this forty-day period an "unconditional" decree to execute certain destruction upon its completion, or was it a "conditional" decree based on Nineveh's repentance? Was Nineveh to react like a condemned criminal who is sentenced to execution on a certain date? Here is a hypothetical situation. Suppose I have been found guilty by my peers, and the judge has sentenced me to prison awaiting my execution. Then my execution is set for a certain time, and I am told by the warden, "Jim, you have forty days left and there are no more appeals." How should I view that? It is not going to do any good to begin repenting because the date is certain. Do you see the point? Is this forty-day period of time a certain decree established by God which will not be altered, and Nineveh is certain for destruction in forty days' time? If that is the case, the only way they can respond is by utter hopelessness, awaiting the inevitable. Some Bible teachers take that approach. Or, on the other hand, was the forty-day period to be viewed as a conditional warning? Therefore, if a prescribed conduct (or condition) would not be performed, then judgment would be executed at the end of the forty days. That is, was it conditional or unconditional? Was the judgment or non-judgment conditioned upon Nineveh's repentance or non-repentance, or was it an unconditional decree by the sovereign decree of God Himself? All the evidence points to the latter view, and this is how it was understood by Jonah. We can know that Jonah understood the warning to be conditional because it was what caused his greatest fear. Look at Jonah chapter 4:1-2.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. (That is, when Nineveh repented) ***So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah LORD,***

was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore, I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm."

It was Jonah's greatest fear, for he knew that the message he was preaching was a conditional warning, and he knew it would be just like the character of God for Him to show mercy and pardon the Ninevites if they repented. Jonah believed that this was a conditional period of time.

Also, the Ninevites understood the warning about the forty-day period of time to be conditional. The king of Nineveh set forth the decree, "***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?"*** So Jonah understood it in that light, and that was his greatest fear. Also, the Ninevites understood it in that light or else they would have just sat and moaned and waited for the judgment. Were they just counting the days, day one, day two, day three, day thirty-nine - get ready because it is coming tomorrow? No, they went about repenting and changing their ethical behavior toward each other. The very fact that a warning was given, speaks of its conditional nature. Again, Dr. Gill describes the forty-day period as a space,

which was granted for their repentance which is implied though not expressed and must be understood with this proviso except it repented for otherwise why is any time fixed. Why have they warning given them or the prophet sent to them? Why were they not destroyed at once as Sodom and Gomorrah without any notice? (John Gill, *Commentary on Jonah*).

So the very fact there was a warning given, implies the conditional nature of the forty-day period of time. Truly, the forty-day period is a manifestation of the longsuffering and patience of God. That is, what needs to be seen is the character of God, His graciousness, His long suffering, and His kindness. That is the very thing Jonah was afraid of. He knew that described the kind of God he represented. It was the goodness of God that was being manifested during that forty-day period of time.

Let us observe that it is the goodness of God that encourages and leads sinners to repentance. No sinner should ever despair of the mercy of God if he is still being given a period of time to repent. No sinner should ever be brought to a place of despairing of the mercy of God if he is still alive and still has time to repent. I mention this because I have met people who have erroneously been taught that they should question whether God had any mercy available for them. They were told to wait and wait until supposedly a direct

revelation of the Spirit would assure them that they were one for whom God would show mercy. That is an erroneous teaching. I state this again, no sinner should ever be brought to despair of the mercy of God if they are still alive and are granted a period of time to call upon Him. Today is the day of salvation. Call upon him today. There is mercy in God.

Now let us look at our Lord's comments upon the ministry of Jonah found in Luke 11:29-30 to analyze the significance of a "sign" in the Bible? I Corinthians 1:22 says that the **"Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom."** We need to understand the significance of a "sign" because the Bible makes much of signs. A sign is a confirming evidence to authenticate either the messenger or the message. Before we examine the meaning of our Lord's comments regarding Jonah, let us first seek to understand how the Bible makes use of the "sign." A sign is a reason or ground for believing, an evidence or proof of something. Look in Mark 16:19-20 where it concisely explains the use of the "sign." It will be fully brought out in this one statement. We read in verse 19 that after the resurrection of Christ and His ascension: **"He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they (the apostles) went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs."** Notice the ministry or purpose of the signs was to confirm the word of the Apostles. They went everywhere proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. If anyone questioned what they were preaching or whether they had the authority to preach this message, God gave the Apostles the ability to perform miraculous deeds and mighty signs and wonders. So that the signs were for the purpose of confirming the authenticity of the messengers.

Luke 11:30 says that **"Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites."** The people of Nineveh believed Jonah's message about God, so what convinced the Ninevites that Jonah was a true spokesman from God and not a false prophet or some mentally deranged man? What are the possibilities of a stranger walking into the world's greatest city and making this absurd statement - **"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,"** and then having the whole city give heed to what he was saying. What is the explanation for Jonah's amazing success? What was it about Jonah that enabled him to draw a crowd, and for the people to pay attention to what he preached? What would confirm that the words of the prophet were true? What would cause such a universal belief of the truth by the lowest citizen in the town to the king sitting on the throne? The internal behind-the-scene answer is that the invisible ministry of the Holy Spirit worked faith in their hearts, because faith is the gift of God. That is the behind-the-scene reason. I don't care how well Jonah preached or how many people he attracted to his audience, if God did not work by the Spirit to impart faith, there would have been no response to Jonah's preaching. That is the behind-the-scene cause, but on the other hand, there existed an external visible "sign"

from God which confirmed that the preaching of Jonah was true. That sign was Jonah himself and the knowledge of his experience in the fish's belly.

Now the scriptures do not tell us how the Ninevites learned of Jonah's experience. In fact, there is no reference to it at all in the book of Jonah. If it did become common knowledge, it must have come from either Jonah's own personal testimony or from the testimony of some of the sailors on the ship, who had possibly arrived in Nineveh ahead of Jonah. They would have personally identified him as the one who had been cast overboard on the ship. I found it most interesting in my research, the large number of Jewish and Christian commentators who refer to this possibility. Some are assured that it happened; that is, either Jonah told about what had happened to him, or somebody else, one of the sailors, told what had happened. However, other Bible teachers remain uncertain regarding this, because there is no reference to it in the book itself.

How can we arrive at any settled conclusion? Not only do I personally believe that the Ninevites knew about Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish, but I am assured that it happened, because of the statement made by the Lord Jesus Christ. I can take all of my commentaries and find that approximately seventy percent of them set forth that Jonah either preached his own testimony or that the sailors did so. About another thirty good teachers are uncertain and are unwilling to commit themselves. You cannot really arrive at a conclusion by comparing all of the commentators, but there is a Commentator that is better than any human commentator, and that is the comment that our Lord Jesus Christ gives on this subject. In Luke 11:29-30, the leaders of Israel were asking our Lord to give them a "sign" to prove that He was a true prophet of God. They asked this, even though He was constantly doing signs and wonders in their midst. This is evident that their request was flowing from a sinful and evil motive. Jesus' reply was, ". . . **This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation.**" I have found that the reason these commentators miss this, is because they only refer to the passage in Matthew 12:40 which talks about Jonah being a "type" of Christ when it compares the three days and three nights Jonah was in the belly of the fish with the three days and three nights that Jesus was in the heart of the earth. That is truly setting forth a type. But it is the Luke passage which does not deal with a type. There is a difference between a type and a sign. It is the Luke passage which deals with the sign element. The Matthew passage does not address that directly. So we read in Luke 11:32, "**The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.**"

Now while Jonah did not record in his little book that he conveyed the information of his own personal experience in the fish to the Ninevites, our Lord's use of Jonah's history reveals that the Ninevites did know this information. Notice in the text we have read that Jesus did not say that Jonah was going "to be a sign" to the generation living in Jesus' time, but that he "was a sign" to the Ninevite generation living in the time of Jonah. Jonah was a sign to that generation, and Jesus' deliverance from death would be the sign of His generation. Jesus was a true Prophet of God, while Jonah's deliverance from the fish's belly would be a sign confirming that he, Jonah, was a true prophet to the Ninevite generation. William Hendriksen, a leading contemporary commentator states:

For the Ninevites the sign was clearly the miraculous reappearance of the man thought to be dead. Had he not been cast into the sea during a raging storm and even swallowed by a great fish? Yet here he was alive and well. For Christ's contemporaries the sign was going to be his glorious resurrection.

How did the knowledge of Jonah's experience encourage the Ninevites to repent? If they had heard about Jonah's personal experience with his God and what his God had done to him, and then what God later did in delivering him, how would this affect the Ninevites in leading them to repent? The answer is given in Jonah 3:9. The king's decree says: **"Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?"** The Ninevites had already begun reformation; they had already begun to change their lives, repent, and make things right with their neighbors. The question is asked, "Will this do us any good?" **"Who can tell?"** How can they be assured of the possibility that God will turn away His wrath from them? How could they tell? The Ninevites could compare God's anger with Jonah to God's anger with them, and then reason that if God exposed His own Hebrew prophet to destruction in a fish's belly, what type of destruction would He bring upon a city of Gentiles who had absolutely no respect for Him at all. They could also reason that if God gave Jonah a three day span of time to repent, then God was perhaps giving them a forty-day span of time to repent. They could also reason that perhaps God would turn from His threat and remove His wrath from them. That is, they could see that if God showed mercy to Jonah and delivered him when he repented, then perhaps God might show mercy and deliver them if they repented during this forty-day period of time.

I wish to close our thoughts on this chapter with two applicable lessons. I have already alluded to the first one, which is applicable for us today, and that is, "no sinner should ever despair of God's mercy as long as he or she is alive." Today is the day of salvation. I have come in contact with a few people who have said, "Preacher, I have sinned away my day of grace. I can't be saved because there is no mercy for me." That reasoning comes as a

result of false teachings or conclusions that are drawn from implications in the Bible. If you are alive today, it is due to the goodness of God who says, "Today is the day of salvation." There is only one reason you are not in hell today, and that is the goodness of God. It is that very attribute of God which is designed to encourage lost sinners to seek His face. Romans 2:4 says, ***"Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"*** Do not fall into the slough of despondency, believing there is no mercy for you as Bunyan's Pilgrim did in his book, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Call upon God today, because He says, ***"In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."*** (II Corinthians 6:2). Also, look at II Peter 3:9: ***"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."*** Now look on down in verse 15: ***"And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation."*** Rather than trying to deal with the decrees of God and that issue, let us deal with it in a practical, pastoral manner. If you are alive today and you are not saved, it is due to the longsuffering of God. That is the only reason you are not in hell today. Then God is telling that there is mercy available in Jesus Christ. Repent, look to Christ. There is salvation in Him. Account, reckon, and reason that the very fact you are not in hell today is chalked up to the goodness, the longsuffering, and the mercy of God. Seek him out even today. Who could tell, repent and see if there is not mercy with God.

The second lesson we need to learn is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's sign to this generation in this gospel age. The only sign that this generation is going to be given is that Jesus Christ is God's Son, and that God has accepted the atoning work of Jesus on behalf of sinners. When God raised His Son from the dead, He marked Him out and identified Him to be His only true and begotten Son, and that His claims were true. When God raised Jesus from the dead, it was a manifestation to the whole world that God had received Christ and His atoning work on behalf of sinners. Look in the book of Romans 1:1-4: ***"Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."*** Go through the book of Acts and you will find that the theme in Apostolic preaching was that God raised Christ from the dead. That is brought out in Apostolic preaching because Jesus Christ's death, burial and resurrection is the gospel sign to this whole age. If you reject the evidence of the death, burial and resurrection, you do so to your own destruction. It is incontrovertible as to what happened to the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is God's

only sign He is going to give you.

If any of you are thinking, "I haven't become a Christian because I am waiting for something miraculous to happen to me to assure me that God will save me." If that is your thinking, you are looking for something that is never going to be. God has given you His only "Sign" and that is His Son. He said on the Mount of Transfiguration, "***This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!***" (Mark 9:7). I John 5:11-13 says, "***And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.***" What would God have you do? Are you going to wait for a sign, wait for a wonder, or wait for a feeling? No, you are called upon to exercise faith in believing God in what He says for you to do. He is the true God who has commanded all men everywhere to repent. That is what your duty is today. It is to believe the "***testimony***" that God has given. You will never repent unless you first believe that record. Will you do so even this day? Jesus Christ is the only "sign" that God has authorized for this generation of gospel hearers. Let us pray.