

Message #5

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Jonah

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THE JONAH BEN-AMITTAI

GREATER NINEVEH CRUSADE

JONAH 3

I.

Our metropolitan area has been the center of world news this week. I know of one person from our congregation who was at the festival last Sunday night. He was not wounded, but he was obviously affected by what he witnessed. Other people that I have talked to this week have had more distant connections to the tragedy--- friends of friends who were present, including some who were wounded, and friends of children and grandchildren who were hurt.

As humans and as Christians, we have a natural desire to attach some meaning to this kind of event. As Christians, we try to think God's thoughts and try to figure out if there is some cosmic purpose to this tragedy. If the festival had been some kind of wild orgy that was interrupted by gunfire, we might be tempted to interpret this as judgment from God. But country music festivals tend to be more family friendly and often associated with God and country.

At the beginning of Luke #13 Jesus responded to news of two tragedies, one caused by an evil person and the other caused by a natural disaster. This is how the story reads (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 13:1): **"There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.** Pilate had these people killed. (LUKE 13:2) **And he answered them, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ---Remember Jesus and most of His disciples were from Galilee. (LUKE 13:3) No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (LUKE 13:4) Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them; do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? (LUKE 13:5) No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.'"** What is the basic takeaway that Jesus says that we should have from tragedies like this? Turn from sin to God.

The passage before us today deals with a city that has a reputation for evil. (PROJECTOR OFF) Can you think of any cities like that? Now we must recognize that there were some great things that happened in the aftermath of the Las Vegas tragedy last week. There were long lines at blood centers with people wanting to give blood. There were prayer vigils all over the area. There was money that has come rolling

in for families of the victims. Volunteers showed up at various places wanting to help. There were many acts of heroism.

That being said, it seems to me that as Christian people we must be cautious in thinking that a metropolitan area that still often wears the title "Sin City" proudly is immune to the judgment of a holy God. The metropolitan area of Las Vegas is just as much in need of repentance as was the ancient city of Nineveh.

We have been studying the Old Testament Book of Jonah. The time setting is about 800 years before the time of Christ. (DIVIDED KINGDOM) Jonah was a prophet who came from the northern kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom had strayed away from the true God. The Lord sent famines and military defeats to get the attention of the citizens of Israel. He sent prophets like Jonah to get them to turn back to the true God. Still they were resistant.

(NINEVEH) So now God sent Jonah to go to Nineveh, the chief city of the Assyrian Empire. He did not want to go. Jonah headed in the opposite direction. (JONAH 01) My interpretation is that Jonah was afraid that the people of Nineveh would repent. That would mean that the Assyrians would be likely to overrun his country. If he did not go, perhaps judgment would fall on Nineveh and the Assyrians. They would be weakened, and they would not be in a position to threaten his fellow countrymen.

But we saw last week that the Lord created a situation whereby Jonah ended up in the belly of a great fish and was forced to return to land. Jonah was still a reluctant prophet. But he agreed to return to the divine assignment which he had been given.

II.

So in vv. 1 & 2 of Jonah #3 we come to JONAH'S RENEWED MISSION AND GOD'S PROVISION OF SECOND CHANCES. (II. JONAH'S RENEWED MISSION...) The text reads, "**Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.'**"

These are very similar words to the original commission that Jonah received at the beginning of #1. One slight modification is that now God says that he wants the prophet to communicate a very specific message. We are not told exactly how this commission was given to Jonah, but it is clear that this was a divine message. Also we are not told about the exact timing of the message. But it seems reasonable to think that it happened quite soon after the great fish coughed up Jonah onto the shore.

What is notable about these two verses is what God does not say. He does not say, 'Well, you really blew it, meathead, didn't you? How does it feel to be the only Old Testament prophet who refused to go on a mission that God gave him? It's penance time, buddy, and boy are you going to have a job to do to get back into My good graces.'

No hint of anything like that, is there? You see, when we repent of our sin, when we acknowledge it and turn in faith to God, He truly forgives us. He doesn't rub our noses in the dirt. It is often hard for us to believe that because the forgiveness offered by our fellow humans is often conditional. It is not free and complete like the forgiveness that God offers. When we look at the major characters in the Bible, we see that this is often true. Abraham twice tried to pass off his wife as his sister. Yet he eventually became known as the "father of the faithful." King David committed adultery and murder. But God gave even him a second chance. The Apostle Peter denied that he even knew Christ. But God gave him a second chance.

God gives us second chances also---- and third chances and fourth chances. When we mess up, God wants us to acknowledge that sin. But he always keeps His door open for us. God's forgiveness is complete. That is not to say that there are not natural consequences for our sins. Often there are. But God will not hold our sins against us.

III.

In vv. 3-5 we encounter THE JONAH BEN-AMITTAI GREATER NINEVEH CRUSADE AND THE POWER OF GOD AND HIS WORD. (III. THE JONAH BEN-AMITTAI GREATER...) "Ben" is the Hebrew word for "son." Jonah was the son of Amittai. According to v. 3, **"So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth."** We don't know how much time went by from the moment Jonah landed back on the shore and this second word from God came to him. I suspect that it was fairly soon. Then it would have taken him a while to make the several hundred mile trip from the shore of the Mediterranean, if that is where the word of the Lord came to him, to Nineveh. (NINEVEH)

There are a number of details in this account that are obscure. So the details are subject to different interpretations. First, Nineveh is described as "an exceedingly great city." Literally the text says that it was "a great to God" city. This term appears nowhere else in the Old Testament. It could mean Nineveh had a special significance to the Lord. It could be a way of saying that it was a very big city. The phrase that follows could be understood as a further explanation of that great size. (NINEVEH 02)

Nineveh was the largest city in the Middle East at this time. By way of comparison, Samaria, the capital city of Israel, is estimated by one archaeologist to have had 30,000 people. According to a statement in the next chapter, Nineveh had 120,000 "persons who do not know their right hand from their left." That

could mean that there were 120,000 children alone in Nineveh. I am a bit more inclined to think that the Lord is here speaking about the total population of Nineveh, which was previously unaware of the judgment that was about to fall upon them. If that is the case, then Nineveh had four times as many people as did the capital of Israel.

Even as today there is a city of Las Vegas and a metropolitan Las Vegas, so also there was a Nineveh proper and a metropolitan Nineveh. Archaeologists have discovered that there was a wall eight miles long that surrounded the city of Nineveh. Then there was a larger metropolitan area. Ancient writers describe this wall as being 100 feet tall and 50 feet wide. Supposedly three chariots could ride beside each other on the top. There were 1500 towers that were each 200 feet tall. Archaeologists who have studied the remains of the city think that these measurements are somewhat exaggerated. But still this was a very impressive city.

(NINEVEH 04) The expression "three days' journey" is also unique in the Old Testament. There are some scholars who make the case that the meaning is that Nineveh was of such significance that it would require a three day visit by an official delegation. Others think that the term is saying that it would take a three day walk to go across the entire metropolitan Nineveh area. Others think that Nineveh was of such a size that it would take three days for a visiting prophet to hit the main areas of the city. In any case, we know that Nineveh was big and significant. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 4 we are told, "**Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'**" According to v. 2 Jonah was given specific instructions from God about what he was to say. Was this the totality of his message? Or was this a summary of his big idea? We don't know.

The other thing that I try to figure out is the possible language barriers that would have been involved. It seems that Aramaic was in the process of becoming the *lingua franca*, the common language, of the day in the Assyrian Empire. Hebrew is a related language, but not exactly the same. It was perhaps a bit like the difference between Spanish and Portuguese. I have known some Brazilians who can pretty much understand Spanish and some Hispanics who can pretty much understand Portuguese. But there are still some differences. If this was something what it was like for Jonah, he may indeed have had a very brief message. As we will find out next week, Jonah was also still not thrilled about his mission. So he may not have gone out of his way to overcome the language barrier.

Consider also the tone of this message from God. It was not "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." It was "The end is near. Destruction is coming. You are in danger of hellfire."

Then also there is no indication that Jonah made any of the preparations that we would think might be necessary to have a proper evangelistic crusade. There was apparently no advance team. There was no fund raising. There was no music. There were no reserved auditoriums. There was no newspaper or TV advertising. Jonah was not even very thrilled about his assignment. He was a reluctant prophet.

Yet we read at the beginning of v. 5, **"And the people of Nineveh believed God."** Again we are left with a lot of questions. What was the nature of this spiritual transformation? Were these people all gloriously saved? Did they come to a saving faith in the God of Israel? That is possible. But we need to remember that the people of Nineveh had their own collection of Assyrian gods. How much could the people have learned about the God of Israel in such a short time, also from a Jewish prophet who was probably not fluent in the language of these Assyrians? Also we might note that the word for "God" in our passage is the generic name of God "Elohim," not the specific name for the God of Israel, "YHWH." Perhaps this was a preliminary change. Perhaps this was a true spiritual response to the limited knowledge that they had about the true God.

It may be helpful to remember the story about Ahab, the king of Israel, that we explored in our study of Elijah and Elisha. Ahab is labeled as an evil king. Yet at one point he responded to a pronouncement of judgment upon him by putting on sackcloth and ashes. The Lord responded by withholding immediate judgment. Perhaps something like that is at work here.

It is clear that the people of Nineveh in our story responded positively to whatever knowledge that they had about the true God. Given their pagan background it is remarkable that they responded in the way that they did to the simple message of a foreign prophet. So we can legitimately wonder what, if any, other factors the Lord may have used to bring this to pass.

Timing was a factor that must have been at work. Our text is not specific. But we know a little bit from the reference to Jonah in 2 Kings. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 KINGS 14:23) Beginning in v. 23 of #14 we read, **"In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years."** (2 KINGS 14:25) Skipping to v. 25: **"He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher."**

So we know that Jonah was around when King Jeroboam II was ruling in Israel. At the time of Jeroboam II, King Shalmaneser III was concluding his long reign as king of Assyria. (SEE CHART) Toward the end of his life he appointed Assur-danin-pal to be the crown prince. A short time later Assur-danin-pal tried to take over from his father. Shalmaneser fought back. He appointed another son, Shamshi-Adad V to be the new crown prince. The first crown prince gained control of Nineveh and 27 other cities. Nineveh was the largest city in the empire, but it was not actually the capital at this time.

Looking down in v. 6 of our passage, we need to notice one other detail. The verse there speaks of "the king of Nineveh." That is the only time in the Bible when that term appears. There are 92 times when the term "the king of Assyria" appears. What is going on? Occasionally in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament the word "king" is used to refer to crown princes or co-rulers. That is what, I believe, we have here. I think that the reference is to crown prince Assur-danin-pal, who is the king in charge at Nineveh at the time of our story.

I made reference a couple of weeks ago to a dissertation that a French doctoral candidate has written. He has convinced me that all of these factors came to a head in 824 BC. King Shalmaneser died in that year, and these two crown princes were squared off against each other. There was danger and tension in the air. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In April of that year there was also a solar eclipse. An ancient Assyrian text has been discovered that gives the possible interpretations that are to be made of a solar eclipse. According to one, the king will be deposed and killed. According to another, the king will die and rain will flood the land. According to a third, a deity will strike the king and fire will consume the land. The ancient Assyrians, including their leaders, were very superstitious. Assyrian kings were very concerned about the appearances of solar eclipses.

Then, also, according to a Babylonian historian of the fourth century BC by the name of Berosus, civilization in this part of the world was first directed by a god who was part man and part fish and who came from the sea. According to Berosus the name of this fish God in Assyria was Oannes, which is the Greek name for Jonah. If this was indeed the Assyrian name for this fish god, somebody showing up in Nineveh by the name of Jonah with a story about being delivered from a giant fish could have found a receptive audience. Maybe he had witnesses along. We can only speculate.

The mound under which archaeologists discovered the palaces of the king of Nineveh (PROJECTOR ON---NINEVEH 05), which is just across the river from Mosul, Iraq, is called "Nebi Yunus" by the locals. It has born this name for as long as people can remember and as far back as written local history goes. "Nebi Yunus" is Arabic for "Mound of Jonah." Thus there is historic evidence for a long association of Jonah with Nineveh. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Lord may have brought all of these factors together, along with a simple but powerful message. The Holy Spirit was no doubt at work, and the result was some kind of mass spiritual transformation.

In the 1730s a spiritual revival broke out in New England. One of the leaders of this awakening was a scholarly pastor by the name of Jonathan Edwards. By most reports he was not a dynamic speaker. He read his sermons. His eyesight was not very good. His sermons were long. He spoke on one occasion at the congregational church in Enfield, Connecticut. During his long sermon he said, **"...it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment: it is ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you [were] suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep;' and there is no other reason to be given why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up: there is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship: yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell."**

One observer reported that **"there was such a breathing of distress, and weeping, that the preacher was obliged to speak to the people and desire silence that he might be heard."** Scores of people that day were convicted of their sin and were prompted to turn in faith to Jesus Christ.

The point of application is this: Our responsibility as Christians is to explain the gospel to the people in our realm of influence, in the opportunities that God brings across our path. We don't have to be eloquent. Jonah had a very simple message. Jonathan Edwards was not a dynamic speaker. But as with these two men, we need to trust that the Lord will bring other factors together beyond our knowledge to cause our simple pointing of people to Christ to sometimes bear fruit beyond our expectations. God's Word is powerful, and He works behind the scenes to make it effective.

IV.

We come then to v. 5b-v. 9 and NINEVEH'S CHANGED BEHAVIOR AND THE REALIZATION OF THE SERIOUSNESS OF SIN. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. NINEVEH'S CHANGED BEHAVIOR...) Look at the evidence of the genuine belief on the part of the people of Nineveh beginning in the middle of v. 5: **"They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.'"**

What an incredible sight this must have been. Almost overnight an entire city was transformed. Thousands upon thousands of people turning from a sinful lifestyle, putting on sackcloth, fasting and calling upon God for mercy. Sackcloth was even put on animals, and food and drink were withheld from them, at least for a time. Imagine what the city might have sounded like. Animals moaning and crying

out for food. People crying out for mercy from God, genuinely fearful that some calamity was about to fall upon the city.

Notice the word "violence" in v. 8. The original Hebrew word means **"defiance of law by one too strong to be brought to account."** That had been Assyria's problem in the past. Their religious beliefs said that the king was the representative on earth of the chief Assyrian god Assur. The military success and extreme cruelty that the Assyrians experienced in their early history seemed to suggest that they were above any earthly law. Any military campaign and any evil method that the king supported were inherently good because the king was God's representative on earth. But this was in fact violence, and now the Assyrians were repenting of the defiance of divine law.

Any evidence of violence in our area? What about sex trafficking and prostitution and drug dealing? I wonder how God views the gambling industry when workers spend their paychecks and the rent money to play the slots?

The people at Nineveh had a sense of the real danger that they faced. The people in the Enfield Congregational Church were awakened to the reality that their sin could cause them to spend an eternity in a hell of fire. Last Sunday night 22,000 concert goers were suddenly alerted to the possibility that their earthly lives could suddenly end. For 58 souls that was indeed the case.

What is needed for Christian conversion is not a promise that Jesus could make our lives a little better or that He could help us develop our full potential. What is needed is a realization that our sin puts us at odds with a holy God who has the potential to send us to an eternal lake of fire.

There was a Swiss theologian by the name of Karl Barth who had some errors in his theology. But he accurately diagnosed the problem with the popular conception of God in our culture. He wrote, **"Our relation to God is ungodly. We suppose that we know what we are saying when we say 'God.' We assign to him the highest place in our world; and in so doing we place him fundamentally on one line with ourselves and with things.... We press ourselves into proximity with him: and so, all unthinking, we make him nigh unto ourselves. We allow ourselves an ordinary communication with him, we permit ourselves to reckon with him as though this were not extraordinary behavior on our part. We dare to deck ourselves out as his companions, patrons, advisers, and commissioners..."**

"Secretly we are the masters in the relationship. We are not concerned with God, but with our own requirements, to which God must adjust himself.... Our well-regulated, pleasurable life longs for some hours of devotion, some prolongation into infinity. And so, when we set God upon the throne of the world, we mean by God ourselves. In 'believing' on him, we justify, enjoy, and adore ourselves." This is not the God that the Ninevites recognized. This is not the God of which the people in Enfield,

Connecticut, became aware. This is not the God of the Bible. This is not the God who is really there. The God who is there is a God who takes our sin seriously. If we want to be rightly related to Him, we must acknowledge the seriousness of our sin and trust in Jesus Christ who bore the penalty for our sin by dying on a cross.

We who are truly Christians have been granted eternal life. That cannot be taken away. But we must remember that we are still sinners and that our sin is serious. It can mess up our lives and the people around us. We need to rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome it.

V.

We come finally to v. 10 and GOD'S RESPONSE AND OUR APPRECIATION OF HIS GRACE. (V. GOD'S RESPONSE AND OUR...) **"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."**

The Assyrians had no assurance that God was going to withhold His judgment from them. The message that they heard from Jonah was **"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"** Yet their humility and prayers to God showed that their hope was that this God whom Jonah presented was not only holy but also merciful. The fact that He had sent His prophet to call upon them to repent left them with some hope that this God would withhold judgment if he saw them turn from their sin to some kind of trust in Him.

So God delayed His judgment upon Nineveh until the rise of the Babylonians some 150 years later. It is a fundamental theological truth that God does not change. But people do change. It was God's sovereign plan all along that the Ninevites would be spared His judgment. But the means of bringing about the change in these Assyrians was a message of warning delivered by one of His prophets and by this kind of response from his listeners.

In God's prophetic warnings in the Old Testament there is usually the implication that if people repent, God will relent. In Jeremiah # 18 vv. 7 & 8 (JEREMIAH 18:7-8) the Lord says through the prophet, **"If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it."**

Such is what happened at Nineveh. The Assyrians in the space of a few days or a few weeks responded in a miraculous way to the preaching of one reluctant prophet. Israel, on the other hand, which had been exposed to repeated warnings from numerous prophets over a period of many years remained in

apostasy. In a few more years these Assyrians would be the instruments in God's hands to discipline His chosen people.

This is the grace that we need after we come to a realization of the seriousness of our sins and our need to trust in the God-man Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. This is the grace that we need as we continue to live the Christian life. This is the grace that our community needs as it comes to grips with the tragedy that has happened in our metropolitan area and the reality of the eternal issues that are ultimately at stake in our human mortality.

In the New Testament Book of Hebrews we are provided with this comforting exhortation. In Hebrews #4 v. 16 (HEBREWS 4:16) we read, "**Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**" We have great sin, but we have a greater Savior. Let's draw near to Him in faith. (PROJECTOR OFF)