

The Reluctant Prophet & the Great City: Bringing a City to its Knees

Jonah 3:1-10

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on April 6, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ ***When was the last time you prayed for God to bring revival?*** To bring a unique season in the life of a church or an entire community where God's power moves in extraordinary ways to produce new spiritual life and vigor both in his people and in society at large.
 - ▶ *When was the last time you prayed for this?* To witness an extraordinary increase in conversions and in personal piety. To witness an exceptional working of God through the gospel, through the church, in effecting societal change and transformation. *Have you prayed for this?*

- ❖ Perhaps we haven't because we're not convinced it's really possible. We consider the meager effects of the gospel in our own lives and the minimal impact of the church in society today, and we're not sure if revival is even possible.
 - ▶ So we're easily content with the status quo. We're content with seeing minimal growth in our lives or in our church. We've conceded that society is on an inevitable downward slide in morality, and there seems to be no turning around.
 - The honest truth is that we don't expect too much from the power of God and the preached gospel, which explains why we rarely pray for revival.

- ❖ Perhaps we've forgotten or we're not aware of the spiritual revivals that have occurred throughout history. I think of **Great Awakening** that took place in the mid-18th century on both sides of the Atlantic. Through the gospel preaching of men like John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards, the Holy Spirit effected an extraordinary season of revival marked by a sharp increase in conversions and renewal among evangelical churches.
 - ▶ There is also the **Second Great Awakening** in New England at the end of the 18th century that resulted in the formation of many foreign missions boards. A century later, another cross-Atlantic revival came about through the preaching of men like Charles Spurgeon and D.L. Moody.
 - There is a lesser known one called the **Welsh Revival** that took place in Wales during 1904-1905 where it's claimed that over 100,000 people made new professions of faith in Christ. That would've been a fifth of the country. **When revival broke out, it wasn't just individual lives that were changed. Whole societies were transformed by the Spirit through gospel preaching.**

- ❖ Maybe you've never heard of the Welsh Revival, but I'm certain you've heard of one of the greatest revivals in all of world history. It took place in the 8th century BC in the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were known of their brutality.
 - ▶ As one writer puts it, "*The Assyrians were the Nazi storm-troopers of the ancient world. They were the pitiless power-crazed foe. They showed no quarter in battle, uprooting entire peoples in their fury of conquest. . . . For Jonah, Nineveh, then, was no ordinary city. . . . it stood as a symbol of evil incarnate.*"¹

¹ Hayyim Lewis, cited in Rose-mary Nixon, *The Message of Jonah*, 63.

- ❖ And yet in the span of a few days, the entire city was transformed. The Word of God was preached, and suddenly, from the greatest to the least, the inhabitants of Nineveh turned from their evil ways and their brutal violence. Amazing.
 - ▶ Isn't that what you want for our city? ***Wouldn't it be mind blowing to witness a revival in our day and age right here in the city of Houston?*** If it could happen in a city as wicked as Nineveh, then why couldn't it happen here?

- ❖ Just imagine what that might look like. We've mentioned before how Houston now ranks as **the most ethnically-diverse city in America**, and a good percentage consists of immigrants from nations with little to no gospel witness. Imagine if revival broke out among these people groups and the gospel spreads back to their home countries?
 - ▶ We've also talked about how Houston is **the largest hub of human trafficking** in our nation. Imagine if revival broke out and by year's end we witness the largest recorded drop in supply and demand for sex and labor trafficking?
 - You might think it's impossible, but so did every other church during every other period of genuine gospel revival. **Revival is not something anyone expects or plans. It's something totally of God's sovereign initiative.**

- ❖ That's why we need to pray for it. That's what I'm calling you to do. This year our ministry theme is called *For the City*, and we've been talking about how to be a church – not one that just so happens to be in a city – but to be a church for the city, for its actual neighbors.
 - ▶ **Today I want to urge you to be for the city of Houston by committing to pray for revival to fall on us and our city.** As we go through chapter three of Jonah, I want to show you a three-part pattern that's observable in Nineveh's citywide revival. Let's pray for and strive for the same pattern to take place here.

God's Warning of an Overturn

- ❖ When you consider what happened in Nineveh's revival the first observation is that **everything started when God's warning of an overturn was faithfully preached.** We see this in v4. It says, *“Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.”* Recall the context with me. Jonah was called by God in chapter one to arise and go to Nineveh to preach against it. But instead the prophet arose and ran the opposite direction.
 - ▶ He probably feared the Ninevites and their violent reputation, but ultimately we know that what he really feared is that they would actually listen and turn from their evil. Because Jonah knew that meant God would forgive. That's the last thing Jonah wanted. So he ran. But after being turned back around by a mighty storm and a great fish, Jonah was back on track and ready to bring God's message. Keep reading in v4, *“And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!””*

- ❖ **The Hebrew word (*hapak*) for *overthrown* can also be translated as *overturned*. The root verb simply means to turn.** It's used elsewhere to describe the turning over of a plate (2 Kg. 21:13), the turning around of a chariot (1 Kg. 22:34), or the turning/changing of one's own appearance (Jer. 13:23, *“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?”*).

- ▶ Let me show you one more usage. Turn to **1 Samuel 10:6**. This is Samuel speaking to Saul after anointing him as king, “*6Then the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned (hapak) into another man. . . . 9When he turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another (hapak) heart.*” Here the word is used to describe the change of a heart, the transformation of a life.
- ❖ So the word itself could refer to different things depending on the context. But for the Ninevites, when they heard the message they picked up on the context loud and clear. Knowing their own wickedness, they were correct to interpret Jonah’s words as referring to an overturn, an overthrow of the city (cf. Gen. 19:25).
 - ▶ But the choice of words is significant. That Jonah used a term that has such a range of connotations dependent on context would lead ancient readers to correctly assume that there is more than one possible outcome here.
 - If Nineveh’s context doesn’t change, then this is a straightforward warning of the city’s overturn. But if there is a change in their context – namely if they repent of their evil ways – then instead of an *overturn* we might be talking about a *turnaround* – a transformation of individuals and of society at large.
- ❖ On the surface, v4 looks like a straightforward prediction of doom with no wiggle room. But my point is that **implicit in this warning is the possibility that an *overturn* of Nineveh might end up as a *turnaround* of Nineveh.**
 - ▶ The possibility of the Lord’s mercy is there in v4. Jonah certainly saw it. That’s why he complains later in chapter 4 that this possibility is why he ran in the first place.
 - And the Ninevites seemed to understand the double meaning because they immediately call for a fast, and their king throws all their hope and stay on God’s sovereign mercy. “*Who knows? God may turn and relent*” (v9).
- ❖ **The point is that the revival that broke out in Nineveh was triggered by a messenger of God who was finally obedient to publicly proclaim a message that called a people to repent of their sins or else face catastrophic destruction.**
 - ▶ Friends, if you want to see revival break out in your own walk with God, or in our church, or in our city, then pray we must; for it’s ultimately a sovereign work of the Spirit of God. But the Spirit uses ordinary means and for that we’re responsible. We’re responsible for calling people to repent of their evil ways, to turnaround from their sins or else face the harsh reality of an overturn. We have to preach repentance.
- ❖ Now I realize for many people ‘*repentance*’ is such an old-fashioned religious term. No one talks about repentance these days. But maybe that’s why there’s so little revival these days.
 - ▶ If we want to see revival, then like Jonah we have to proclaim a message of repentance. That doesn’t mean you bust out the sandwich board and walk down the streets screaming, “*The end is near!*” I know it looks like that’s what Jonah is doing.
 - Our job and message will essentially be the same but our cultural assumptions will be different, which means we’ll need a different approach and emphasis.

- ❖ This is what I mean: The Ninevites, as wicked as they were, lived in a culture where apparently they still had a theological framework basic enough to know that if they heeded God's warning, repented of their evil ways, God *may* relent and turn from his fierce anger.
 - ▶ But we can't assume that for the inhabitants of our city in our culture today. **If you all you proclaim is a grim message of divine judgment, unlike the Ninevites, lost people today won't pick up on the implicit mercy available in that message.** They're only going to hear condemnation.

- ❖ Now that doesn't mean you avoid the bad news. People need to hear that God is angry with the evil and violence rampant in our society as well as in our own hearts. **If you skip the bad news, then you make the good news incomprehensible.** God sending his Son to die for our sins won't make sense. In fact, the cross will appear to be excessively cruel and unnecessary.
 - ▶ So we have to lay out the bad news just like Jonah. But unlike Jonah, when we speak into our culture, we have to clearly articulate the sovereign mercy of God who is willing to relent whenever sinners grieve their sin and repent of it.

- ❖ We have to emphasize what John Stott describes as **the gospel of divine self-satisfaction through divine self-substitution** – that God the Father's fierce anger against your sin is satisfied through God the Son's life and death in your place. As Stott puts it, "*For in order to save us in such a way as to satisfy himself, God through Christ substituted himself for us. Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice.*"²
 - ▶ That's the kind of preaching that neither assumes nor avoids the bad news or the good news of the gospel. That's the kind of preaching the Spirit uses to spark revival. It's happened before. It can happen again.

The City's Turnaround from Evil

- ❖ So the first observation in Nineveh's revival is that God's warning of an overturn is faithfully preached. Secondly, we see that when revival breaks out, **the city's turnaround from evil is expressed both inwardly and outwardly.** This has to do with the nature of genuine revival. A real revival begins privately in individual hearts but eventually it'll manifest itself outwardly in a public way.

- ❖ For the Ninevites, let's first consider their outward expression because it's obviously more obvious. Look at v5. It says, "*the people of Nineveh believed God.*" They believed his message through Jonah to be credible. And that belief resulted in a turnaround – expressed outwardly (publicly) through a citywide fast and the putting on of sackcloth. "*They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.*"

- ❖ **Fasting in ancient cultures was understood as a means of seeking divine mercy.** It wasn't uncommon, but this situation is unique. Usually a fast only involved abstaining from food, but in v7 the king intensifies it and includes water.

²John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 158.

- ▶ What is also unique is that, not only was it a citywide fast, it included the livestock. That just demonstrates how convinced they were of their danger before God.
- ❖ They also donned sackcloth in place of regular clothes. **In ancient culture, the tearing of your clothes and putting on of sackcloth was a universally recognized sign of extreme grief** (cf. 2 Sam. 13:19; Esther 4:1). It was a garment made of coarse, thick, black goat hair. It was meant to be uncomfortable and functioned somewhat as a form of self-punishment.
 - ▶ In v6 we see the king putting on his sackcloth, and it also says he “*sat in ashes*”. Ashes refer to fire and judgment, so this king was humbling himself and identifying with his citizens as equally under the fires of God’s judgment. These outward signs were conveying one simple message: *We are justly condemned. We deserve this.*
- ❖ **When people truly repent – when they experience a genuine turnaround – they don’t try to justify or minimize their sin.** Like the thief on the cross, the truly penitent willingly confess that they are getting their due reward. They are justly condemned (Lk. 23:41). And their only recourse is to throw themselves upon the mercy of God.
 - ▶ That’s what happens in the heart of man when true revival breaks out. That’s the inward expression. That’s a turnaround in the heart that only the Holy Spirit can produce. And I believe that is what’s happening with the Ninevites.
 - See v8, “*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.*” The king doesn’t try to justify their violence and evil ways. He calls it what it is and calls his people to turn away from such things.
- ❖ I realize these are all just outward expressions of revival. This is what we hear them say and see them do. And granted, they’re not perfect indicators of what’s going on in the heart. We all know that you can cry, you can wail, you can fast and flog yourself, you can have all these outward indicators and still not be truly repentant on the inside.
 - ▶ We know there’s a difference between godly grief and worldly grief. **Worldly grief is just feeling sorry for the consequences of your sin.** You grieve the fact that you were caught in sin. But godly grief actually grieves for the sin itself and for the one you’ve sinned against. One leads to regret, but the other leads to real repentance.
- ❖ ***What kind of grief were the Ninevites experiencing?*** I think it’s easy to assume that it’s just worldly grief. That they’re just scared of punishment, of being overturned. That they’re not truly sorry. It’s impossible. *How can such a wicked and violent people suddenly, after one day of preaching, be truly repentant for all their evil ways?* **It’s easy to question their motives and doubt the authenticity of their repentance.**
- ❖ But as Christians, our Lord has warned us against doing that. That kind of thinking comes from ***the elder brother*** in each of us. The elder brother couldn’t celebrate the repentance of his prodigal brother because he didn’t think it was real. “It can’t be genuine. It’s must be the consequences he hates – not the sin.” That’s why he didn’t partake in the celebration.

- ❖ Now I'm not saying we should be naive. **I'm not saying we should take every claim of repentance simply at face value.** Our whole point is that if there is an inward change in a person, then there will eventually be an outward expression. So we do need to keep our eyes open for signs of real repentance. Otherwise it would prove to be false.
 - ▶ **But our default mode should be to celebrate without reservation any time any sinner – even the worst of sinners – says he wants to repent of his sin and turn away from evil.** We should throw a party. And at the same time, we should press him to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (cf. Jn. 3:8).
 - Yes, true repentance will lead to a change of life. You can be sure of it. If you entered Nineveh forty-one days later, you would've found a completely different city. The city itself would've changed *because* individual lives and behavior would've changed *because* individuals hearts were changed by the Spirit of God through the Word of God. This is revival.

- ❖ Friends, we have to test our attitude: *What's my gut reaction when I witness revival happening in someone's personal life or in the life of a whole community? How do I react to outward expressions of grief? Do I immediately question motives? Can I celebrate with others when revival breaks out or am I bent towards skepticism?*

- ❖ Jonah was skeptical. He couldn't celebrate the revival. Instead it says in chapter four that he went out of the city and sat to the east of it to see what would happen. Perhaps God would still overthrow the city and prove that the Ninevites were not truly repentant.
 - ▶ **How sad would it be if God were to bring true revival in our midst, and we simply respond by sitting back with a critical spirit questioning if this is the real deal.** As we pray for revival, let's pray for our own hearts, for our own faith and confidence in the power of God and his gospel to actually change lives and change whole cities.

God's Turnabout in Response to Repentance

- ❖ For Nineveh, it turned out to be the real deal. They truly did experience a turnaround. *How do we know?* Because God had a turnabout. That leads to our third observation: **God's turnabout in response to repentance is reliable and revealing.**

- ❖ Jonah came in warning of an overturn. The Ninevites heed the Word of God and experience a turnaround. And God in response does a turnabout. Look at v10. "*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.*"
 - ▶ So God relented. He didn't bring about the disaster he warned was coming in forty days. Really we shouldn't be surprised. This is not out of character for God. Like we've said, Jonah knew it was completely in God's character to forgive at the first sign of repentance. And that's what made him so mad.

- ❖ Let's look into chapter 4:1-2, "¹*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."*
- ❖ So don't get the wrong impression. It's not like God didn't know this would happen. It's not like he's flip-flopping – a bit indecisive and unpredictable. No, God is totally reliable. His actions here in chapter three are consistent with his revealed character in Scripture.
 - ▶ God says it plainly in **Jeremiah 18:7-8**, "⁷*If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸and 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.*" **So in his turnabout, God is being true to form and true to his promises. He's being reliable – to his Word.**
- ❖ But for the Ninevites, they weren't aware of these promises. They knew mercy was possible, but they weren't sure how God would react. Listen to what the king says in **v9**, "*Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.*"
 - ▶ *Who knows?* Yahweh (the LORD God) was a foreign god to these Ninevites. To them, he was the god of the Hebrews. He wasn't an Assyrian god. So they weren't sure what to expect. *Who knows if this Hebrew God will relent? Who knows if he'll show any compassion? Who knows if we even matter to him?*
- ❖ The Ninevites didn't know. Jonah didn't know. But the reader should know. The author leaves a clue back in **v3**. "*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.*"
 - ▶ That phrase "Nineveh was an exceedingly great city" literally reads "a great city to God" (check your Bible's footnotes). Now adding "to God" at the end could just be used a superlative. That's why the ESV translates it as "exceedingly".
 - But considering the context, I think it's fair to read more into that. **By the end of chapter four, we come to see that Nineveh truly is a great city to God.** The Ninevites really do matter to him.
- ❖ Just as Jonah testified in chapter one, Yahweh is not some sort of tribal deity or city god. His jurisdiction (and thus his concern) is not limited to just one city, one nation, or one people group. No, he is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land (1:9). He's Creator of all and thus Ruler of all. **So Nineveh is *his* city regardless if the inhabitants acknowledge him or worship him as such.**
 - ▶ Now I can understand if a Ninevite wonders to himself, "*Who knows?*" But I have less sympathy for someone in Jonah's position who wonders the same thing. Jonah knows that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and willing to relent from disaster in response to someone's genuine repentance from sin – no matter who the person is or how wicked the sin. This is the kind of God we're dealing with.

- ❖ Friends, the truth is that we're in an even better position than Jonah to know these things. We have fuller revelation and better promises to lean on. We have **Romans 10:13** that promises, “*For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*” Or **1 John 1:9** that tells us, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” We have a New Testament picture of a Lord who is “*patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*” (2 Pet. 3:9)

- ❖ What does this mean? It means you and I don't have to wonder, “*Who knows?*” **Who knows if God is always reliable to show mercy whenever a sinner repents and calls on his name?** We know he's reliable. We know he always make good on his promises because he has sent his Son into the world to guarantee every one of them.
 - ▶ **John 3:17** says, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” Two thousand years ago, another prophet entered another wicked city, but this time the inhabitants didn't fall on their knees in repentance. No, they gnashed their teeth in anger and crucified him within the span of a week. **But by his blood, Jesus purchased our salvation, and he purchased more time for more sinners to reach repentance.**

- ❖ Friends, just like Jonah, tomorrow morning you'll step foot into a wicked city, a pagan city, but it's a great city to God. **Let's go in the spirit of Jonah, under the authority of Jesus, with a warning of danger and a message of mercy, and let's tell others of how this mercy is reliably available to all who turn away from their sin and towards Christ in faith.** May the Spirit of God use the ordinary means of our ordinary speech to spark an extraordinary work of revival!