



JONAH

In the Old Testament book of Jonah, the Hebrew prophet was sent by the Lord to the wicked city of Ninevah -- the capital of the Assyrian empire -- in order to preach a message of imminent judgment. Set aside for a moment the fact that Jonah didn't want to obey the Lord and preach this message, and thus fled on a ship headed in the other direction. The point is that when Jonah finally did obey the Lord and did start preaching in Ninevah, he didn't call the people to repentance. Rather, Jonah declared, "Forty days and Ninevah will be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4) However, even though Jonah never called the people to plead to the One True God of Israel to have mercy on their souls and on their city, even though Jonah never called on the people to beg for forgiveness and turn away from their wickedness, that is, in fact, exactly what the Ninevites did.

The text says: "Then the people of Ninevah believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Ninevah, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes. He issued a proclamation and it said, 'In Ninevah by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?'" (Jonah 3:5-9)

Sure enough, the Lord heard the earnest prayers of the people -- and their king -- as they repented, and He relented. "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it." The promised judgment did not come. The people and their city were spared from God's wrath. What an extraordinary moment. The pagan people heard the word of the Lord and it burned in their hearts. They believed God's word, pleaded for mercy, and the Lord gave them mercy, even though He had never indicated that He would do so.

But this was not the only time the word of the Lord came to the people of Ninevah.

About 100 years or so later, the next generation of Ninevites had abandoned the Lord and fallen back into tremendous evil, violence, bloodshed, lies, sorcery and other wickedness. In the Old Testament book of Nahum, we read that the Lord again spoke to the people of Ninevah, this time through a different Hebrew prophet, this one named Nahum. Yet this time the people of Ninevah did not repent. They did not listen to God's word. They did not plead for mercy. They did not turn from their wicked ways and start praying, fasting and begging God for mercy. And thus, mercy did not come. Instead, the judgment of God came upon the people, and in 612 B.C. the city of Ninevah was utterly destroyed.

Today we as Americans must confront this question: Is America in a "Jonah" moment, or a "Nahum" moment? That is, will we hear the word of the Lord that we have strayed far from the teachings of the Bible and allowed our land to become polluted with abortions and pornography and violence and wickedness of all kinds? Will we admit how far we are from God's plan and purpose for our lives? Will we confess that our hearts are far from Jesus Christ and plead with the Lord for His mercy and grace and forgiveness? Will we fast and pray and earnestly seek God's face, and implore Christ to give us a Third Great Awakening? Or will we ignore the word of the Lord and continue in our sins and watch our nation continue to decline, or even implode?

Twice in American history we have seen sweeping spiritual revivals known as the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening, respectively. Millions of Americans repented of their sins during those seasons, became devout followers of Jesus Christ, began to read the Bible voraciously and to obey the word of the Lord. Nowhere in Scripture, however, has America been promised a spiritual revival in the 21st century, much less one that would be so sweeping, so game-changing that it would qualify as a Third Great Awakening. But who knows? Perhaps the Lord will show us tremendous mercy and forgiveness if we all humble ourselves and pray, and seek His face, and turn from our wicked ways? However, if we don't repent and turn back to the Lord Jesus Christ, we may very well consign ourselves to suffer the fate of the Ninevites during the time of Nahum.

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