

"The Great Nineveh Revival"

Jonah 3:1-10

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In the fall of 1734, Jonathan Edwards, the pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, MA preached a sermon series on justification by faith alone. The response was extraordinary. During the next few months, a great concern for godliness swept over the town as many individuals, especially young people, sought to gain assurance of their salvation. The church was packed for services every Sunday. In Edwards words, "the town seemed to be full of the presence of God. It never was so full of love, nor so full of joy, and yet as full of distress as it was then. I have never seen the Christian spirit of love for enemies so evident. There were remarkable tokens of God's of presence in almost every house." By the time the revival faded a year so later, more than 300 people in the town had professed faith in Jesus Christ.

Folks, the revival in Northampton is the spark, which spread to 25 different cities and towns in the Connecticut Valley over the next year and then throughout the colonies in what is called "The Great Awakening." It is considered one of the most significant events in American history. It was a clear work of the spirit of God. Revival. Over the centuries, numerous such "events" have occurred in a wide variety of times and places. Yet, in many ways, what happened 750 years before Christ in the great, wicked pagan city of Nineveh may be the most remarkable "revival" of all. Today our study of the book of Jonah brings us to chapter 3. These ten verses give an interesting account of what occurred in Nineveh and provide important lessons for us as well. Let's pause and pray the Lord would speak to us through his word this morning.

Ok, quick review. The Lord called the Israelite prophet, Jonah, to go preach in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. Jonah doesn't want to go because the Assyrians are cruel enemies of Israel. So, Jonah tries to run away from God, but that doesn't work. The Lord send a great storm that hits the ship on which Jonah is trying to flee. Jonah ends up overboard in the sea and would surely have drowned except God graciously rescues him by having a huge fish swallow Jonah.

After three days, the fish spits Jonah back up on dry land, apparently somewhere in Israel.

Jonah 3:1,2 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you."

This was basically the assignment the Lord had given Jonah the first time. Yet, this time, having learned a few things in the first two chapters of this book, he decides to obey.

Jonah 3:3a Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the Lord's command.

Then the author adds, **Jonah 3:3b Now Nineveh was an extremely great city, a three-day walk.**

This does not mean it would take Jonah three days to walk to Nineveh, the journey was much longer than that. Rather, once he got there, it would take three days to walk around exploring the city, or as the NLT reads, **Jonah 3:3b Nineveh, was a city so large that it took three days to see it all.**

Or in Jonah's case, three days to walk around the city preaching his message.

Jonah 3:4 Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!"

Now it is possible Jonah simply repeated that sentence over and over. As we will see, he was not exactly "into" his missionary assignment. Yet, it also could be a summary of his message. He maybe talked about why God was angry with Nineveh, and that they needed to repent. Some think that is what he preached, because that is what happened.

Jonah 3:5 Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least.

"Believed God" means they believe Jonah's warning. The fasting and sackcloth are symbols of repentance. In the bible, that involves turning away from sin, resolving to stop doing it, and then turning to God for grace and forgiveness.

Jonah 3:6 When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. These are again symbols of repentance.

Jonah 3:7 Then he issued a decree in Nineveh: By order of the king and his nobles: No person

or animal, herd or flock, is to taste anything at all. They must not eat or drink water. This is extreme fasting.

Jonah 3:8 Furthermore, both people and animals must be covered with sackcloth, and everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing.

Now, I don't want to get bagged down here, but we cannot be sure about what exactly is going on in the minds and hearts of the Ninevites. Bible scholars debate whether this was a true conversion or not. The pagan sailors in chapter 1 fear and call out to the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel. The King, however, uses the more generic word for God, "Elohim." Yes, the people and king believed the warning Jonah gave and repented of their wicked ways. However, there is no real indication they quit worshipping their false gods, and become worshippers of the Lord, the true God. Maybe this happens, but the text doesn't tell us that.

The king is hopeful, but is not certain his response and that of the people will save Nineveh. He says, **Jonah 3:9 Who knows? God may turn and relent; he may turn from his burning anger so that we will not perish.** And that is exactly what happens.

Jonah 3:10 God saw their actions-that they had turned from their evil ways- so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it.

The Lord did not destroy the great city of Nineveh as he had threatened to do. Ok, that is our text. Of course, there is more to the story and we will continue next week. So what is the Lord saying to us through His word this morning? I think he has some important things to say to us about revival or spiritual awakening. It was a great work of God. The entire city, Chapter 4 says 120,000 people, was transformed. Three days earlier these folks were as far away from God as anyone could be. They were pagan, nasty people. I would consider them about the least likely people on the planet to turn to the Lord. And yet they did. Even though we may not be sure about the extent of their conversion, they are certainly moving in the right direction.

Friends, as a Pastor, as a Christian, I am deeply concerned about the spiritual condition of our country and particularly our community. Our culture is becoming increasingly post-Christian.

More and more individuals, despite having some church background and training, have decided that Christianity is simply not for them. Many of them would say they still believe in God, but it is often a god they have created in their own minds, not the true God revealed in the bible. A lot of folks have decided Christianity is pretty much irrelevant to real life. So many are simply too busy with other things to think about church. And there is a growing number of people who think Christianity is actually harmful to our society. These folks don't just live in New York, San Francisco, or Minneapolis. Some of them live on the Iron Range. It appears the American church is in serious decline. According to the pew survey, only 65% of Americans not identify themselves as Christians. That compares to 75% just five years ago, and 85% back in 1990. This is not just a decline among so called mainline churches, though that is where the biggest drop has been. Membership in the Southern Baptist Convention, an evangelical denomination similar to ours, has declined for 14 years in a row. In 2005 there were 16.6 million Southern Baptists, today there are 14.5 million. Now, the story is a bit more complicated than any statistics tell. It is also true that more people attend church on a typical Sunday today, than did at the time of the American Revolution. Yes, our situation is much more similar to colonial New England before the great awakening, that it is the ancient Nineveh. The bottom line, however, is that we need the Lord to work in our midst, in our community, in our country, to bring revival or a spiritual awakening.

So my question is this: Why did all those people in Nineveh turn to God? Maybe if we can figure that out, we can get the same type of thing to happen here, today. Well, maybe it was Jonah's preaching. Yet, his message "in 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed" doesn't seem like it would persuade a lot of people. And I don't think Jonah was very passionate in his presentation. Remember, he doesn't really want the Ninevites to repent. In the next chapter we see Jonah is disappointed that the Lord chooses to spare the city. So, if the question is how do we encourage spiritual revival, I don't think the answer is "preaching like Jonah." I think it would be accurate to say that the Ninevites turn to God not because of Jonah, but in spite of him. Actually, when we consider some magnificent spiritual revivals that have occurred, the preachers are

seldom the reason behind it. I think of what happened on the day of Pentecost. The apostle Peter preaches a sermon and 3000 Jewish people respond and embrace Jesus as Messiah and Savior. 3000. Was it because Peter was such a great preacher? I don't think so. He was an uneducated fisherman with a Galilean accent. Frankly, Peter was not the reason 3000 people turned to Jesus that day. Even, in the great awakening, it would be foolish to credit Jon Edwards with being the force behind it. Yes, Edwards was a brilliant man. Perhaps the greatest philosopher and theologian in American history. He was also a very Godly man. But he was not a great preacher. He read his sermons in a monotone voice. One might make a case that George Whitefield, the British evangelist, who was part of the great awakening, had the preaching skills and passion to persuade vast crowds, but not Jon Edwards.

Folks, whenever you are thinking about preachers, or whenever those of us who are preachers are thinking about ourselves, it is important to remember what the apostle Paul says in **2 Corinthians 4:7 Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us.** Let me read that from the NLT **2 Corinthians 4:7 We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.**

Friends, the treasure to which Paul is referring is the gospel, the great news of Jesus Christ. The clay jars are all of us, because we all have been charged to share this message. Yet, Pastors, Evangelists, etc., specifically fall into this category. We are fragile clay jars. And we are often a little cracked. I think one of the most powerful evangelists of our generation has been Ravi Zacharias. Many of you know he died last May. Since that time very credible accusations of repeated sexual misconduct have come out. That is a topic of another time. But it is clear that Ravi Zacharias was a clay jar with a significant crack. Yes, God, used him to bring many people to faith in Jesus. But, the human instrument is not the key for spiritual awakening or revival. God is free to use whomever He chooses, and He often chooses to use those people, like Jonah, who are anything but articulate and passionate presenters of the truth.

Now, I do need to say this, if I am preaching a sermon, if you are teaching a Sunday School class or leading a bible study, we should not use Jonah as our model. Wise, winsome, persuasive words, spoken with genuine passion is the best way to communicate truth. That is what the Lord expect of us. He is free to use that however He pleases, but it is our responsibility to speak truth well.

Ok, Pastor Dan, so Jonah was not the reason why all the Ninevites turned to God. Maybe, the Ninevites were just ready for that message, or as some Christians might say, "ripe for the harvest." Maybe. As we have mentioned before, the Assyrian Empire, of which Nineveh was the capital, was very cruel and violent. Again, they would cut off the limbs of enemy soldiers, but leave one arm so they could shake the hand of the defeated before they died. Being a violent culture, it is likely that the people of Nineveh also often treated their neighbors badly. The people of that city may have been tired of the pagan way of life, and hungry for something better. Turning to the Lord is that indeed. I suspect in every spiritual revival one could point to pastors that may have made people more open to hearing God's Word and responding to it is a positive way. I think it was true with the "Jesus movement" from about 1963-1975. I was in high school for the end of that. I am reading a book by Greg Laurie entitled, "Jesus Revolution: How God Transformed an Unlikely Generation and How He Can Do It Again." Indeed, those who came of age during the Vietnam war, civil rights movement, sexual revolution, hippie and drug culture, etc. faced a lot of instability and uncertainty. The gospel of Jesus Christ provided answers to many questions that generations was asking. Yet, often times spiritual awakening or revival takes place in unexpected places and times. Jon Edwards called the Northampton revival "the surprising work of God." A revival in Korea, took place in the early 1900's. While those in other Asian countries like Japan and China were very resistant to the gospel at that time, many Korean's embraced the Lord Jesus. Why? The handful of missionaries there and Korean Christians could not explain, other than it was the work of God.

The bottom line is that true spiritual revival is always a work of God. It is He, and He alone who opens blind eyes and softened hard hearts. He chooses to work when and where He pleases. It doesn't really matter who the pastors or

missionaries are. It doesn't matter what is going on in the surrounding culture. It doesn't even matter if the people the church want a revival or not. God will move and work, when and how He wants. Today we saw that He can use a very reluctant, flawed prophet, to turn an entire city of 125,000 people (probably adults) to the Lord in a three-day period of time.

Folks, this points to the futility of many of our "methods of revival." Charles Finney, an American evangelist in the early 19th century, believed the key to revival was marketing and packaging. Oh, he used plenty of spiritual language, but it was a very pragmatic approach. It included making sure people sat in the right places during a meeting and making sure the right kind of songs were used to warm up the crowd. Many churches followed that pattern. They held annual revival meetings for a week each year, apparently hoping God would follow their schedule. There was an evangelist a few years ago who was holding meeting at various churches. His instructions were to turn up the thermostat 10 degrees at the start of the service, so that by the time he was preaching about hell, people would be feeling the heat, and respond to the alter call. Oh, I know these methods often produced responses, but I fear they were often just emotional responses, and not true spiritual responses.

So, revival, or spiritual renewal is the work of God that we as human beings cannot create or engineer. Does that mean we just sit around and wait for it to happen? No, there is a wonderful verse in the Old Testament which gives us important instructions. Some of you are familiar with it.

2 Chronicles 7:14 If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

This verse tells us three things we can do if we want to see spiritual awakening and revival.

Number 1: We should humble ourselves. We should acknowledge that we cannot change people's hearts, because only God can. Our planning, preaching practices, cannot bring about spiritual awakening or revival. And whenever spiritual awakening or revival does occur, our focus should not be on the human instruments God chooses to use, but on God Himself. Rather than applauding men or women, we should give glory to God. That is part of humbling ourselves.

Number 2: We should pray. That is the one activity that seems to correlate with revival. It is our privilege to pray and ask God, even beg God, to work in people's lives, drawing them to Himself. Robert Murray McCheyne was a pastor with an amazing ministry for eight years in Dundee Scotland before he died in 1843 at age 30. McCheyne said the key to ministry was not his preaching, but the church's prayer meetings. Twenty-six were held each week, including five which were children's prayer meetings. Folks, individual and corporate prayer are what we should be doing if we want spiritual revival. Tonight's Zoom prayer meeting is a great place to start. It would be great if you could join us.

Number 3: We are to repent of our sins.... or the verse says "turn from our wicked ways." I believe there is little we can do to "make revival happen," but there are things we do that prevent revival. A spiritual awakening is a great blessing. If we focus on pleasing ourselves and not of pleasing the Lord, we should not be surprised if we don't experience His blessing in our lives, and in our church.

Friends, I hope, that like me, you want the Lord to work in our community, country, and in other parts of the world. I hope, like me, you want to see many, many people turn to Jesus Christ, and receive Him as savior and Lord. We live in challenging and confusing days. It would be a wonderful thing if God would bring spiritual revival and awakening in our midst and in our time. May the Lord be gracious to us.