

SACKCLOTH AND ASHES

Jonah 3: 1-10

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One Sunday morning a man visiting a church in a distant town was surprised when the sermon was only ten minutes long. The pastor apologized to the congregation for the brevity of his message. He explained that his dog was very fond of paper and had eaten the concluding pages of his sermon manuscript. Greeting the minister at the end of the service, the visitor said, "I would appreciate it if you would let me know if your dog ever has any puppies. I'd like to give one to my pastor."

Like that pastor's abbreviated sermon, I would like to share just three things with you this morning about the passage of Scripture that was read a few moments ago. Jonah preached. Nineveh repented. God forgave. Let's take a look at the first one. Jonah preached. He preached one of the shortest sermons that has ever been recorded, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed." It was a powerful message and he preached it over and over as he walked throughout the city. It was powerful because it was God's message. Isaiah, another Old Testament prophet, speaking for the Lord said, "As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for sower and bread for the eater, so is My word that goes out from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11). God gave a powerful message to Jonah for the people of Nineveh and He had a specific purpose in mind when He gave it to him.

That specific purpose is the second thing that I want to share with you this morning. Nineveh repented. In both word and deed they turned aside from their wickedness. They believed God's message and decided that everyone should fast and pray and put on sackcloth as a visible expression of sorrow for their sinfulness. Even the king got involved, stepping down from his throne, taking off his royal robes, putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes. The animals within the kingdom also participated in the fast and were dressed in sackcloth. What the people of Nineveh did is a vivid reminder that true repentance brings about a genuine change in what we say and how we live. Pride is replaced by humility. Sin is cast aside and replaced with righteousness as well as a desire to seek God's forgiveness. The king of Nineveh said, "Everyone must pray earnestly to God, and must give up his evil ways and the wrongs he is doing. Perhaps God will change His mind; perhaps He will stop being angry, and we will not die" (Jonah 3:9).

This brings us to the third and most important thing that we need to consider in this third chapter of the book of Jonah. God forgave. God saw what the people of Nineveh had done and how they had given up their evil ways. So He did not punish or destroy them. He forgave them. Throughout the Bible there are countless references to God's desire to forgive a sinful humanity. Let me share two of them with you. In the early days of the church many believed that a day of divine wrath and judgement was just around the corner. Writing to them, the apostle Peter reminded these early Christians in his letter to them that God is patient, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). This same thought is also expressed in the pages of the Old Testament. When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, He came down from Mount Sinai in a cloud and passed before Moses declaring, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7). One of God's most enduring character traits is forgiveness.

So what does all of this have to say to us on this first Sunday after the celebration of our nation's independence, the 4th of July? First, because we are God's people we have an obligation to share God's Word with a lost and dying world. Like Jonah we too must go to the Nineveh's of this world and proclaim both God's judgement of sin and His desire to forgive. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, but that was his duty and his responsibility. He was a spokesman for God and so are we. If we don't tell people about God and how they can be saved from everlasting judgement, who else is going to do it? Speaking to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news'" (Romans 1:14-15)! The people of Nineveh were saved because Jonah preached to them. We too have that same obligation and in the future I plan to present a series of sermons on how we too can be messengers of hope and salvation to those living around us.

Here's the second thing that this passage of Scripture tells us. God was going to destroy Nineveh because they were known throughout the Middle East for their wickedness. What about America? Are we following in the footsteps of the people in Nineveh? When I look around and see the kinds of things that are going on in our country today, I cannot help but conclude that we have become a truly pagan nation. Our cities are unsafe, filled with violence. The moral and sexual restraints of the past have been cast aside and replaced with unrelenting permissiveness. Like the ancients who sacrificed their children as burnt offerings to pagan deities, we have sacrificed millions of innocents on the altar of abortion, over 60 million since 1973 and that infamous court decision. America today is not the same

nation that I grew up in as a child. Of this I am confident. Unless there is a great, national movement of heartfelt repentance, we will perish. God will bring judgement against us and it may arrive much sooner than we expect. Times of great revival have redeemed our country in the past going all the way back to the Great Spiritual Awakening in the 1700's. Now as never before, we need a great spiritual awakening of genuine repentance. Otherwise there may not be many more 4th of July celebrations in America.

Finally, I am reminded of how Jesus compared the people of Nineveh to the people of His own day and time. He said, "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). God forgave the people of Nineveh and saved them from destruction because they repented and turned back to God. Jesus was not so sure that the Jewish people to whom He was preaching would do the same thing. Instead of repenting and heeding God's message of forgiveness, they did just the opposite. They condemned Jesus to death and nailed Him to a cross while shouting these words at Pilate, the Roman governor, "Let His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). Their shouts were prophetic. Approximately 37 years later the Jewish people revolted against Rome and lost. They were cast out of their country, their beautiful temple in Jerusalem was leveled to the ground and they and their children down through a multitude of generations became refugees without a homeland to call their own. God wanted to forgive and bless the Jewish people. He wanted them to embrace Christ and share the message of God's salvation with all the world. They refused.

Their failure precipitated disaster, not so much because of what God did but because they turned aside from the one and the only one who could save them, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is my solemn and heartfelt prayer that we as a nation, and most assuredly those within our nation who claim to be Christians, will refrain from following in the footsteps of those who have turned their backs on God and His Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, may we hear and embrace these words of hope and deliverance from God's Word, "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 will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).