

# ***Saving Nineveh***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Book of Jonah is short, just four chapters (two pages) and yet it is full of surprising twists and turns.

The book is about saving the great city of Nineveh, yet the drama surrounding this simple, Divine task gets complicated in a hurry...

**Chapter 1** - Lord calls Jonah,

*"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me" (1:2).*

But Jonah flees *"to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (1:3).*

Instead of going East, he goes West (exact opposite direction)

Boards a ship at Joppa (bound for Tarshish), storm, sailors cast lots, lot falls on Jonah, he confesses to them he's the cause - *"I know that the great tempest is because of me" (1:12)*, thrown overboard, a great fish prepared by the Lord swallows Jonah and he's in the belly of that fish 3 days & 3 nights.

**Chapter 2** - beautiful prayer to the Lord while Jonah is in the belly of the fish...

*"Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
And You heard my voice,  
For you cast me into the deep,  
Into the heart of the seas,  
And the floods surrounded me,  
Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight'  
Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple" (v. 2-4)*

Chapter 2 ends w/the fish vomiting Jonah onto dry land (v.10).

## 1. THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

**Chapter 3** - Word of the Lord comes to Jonah a *second* time...

*"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message I tell you" (v. 2).*

Jonah does this...(telling the people)

*"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (v. 4)*

King of Nineveh says,

*"Let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands" (v. 8)*

*"Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way..." (v.10)*

And so Nineveh was saved.

End of story, happy ending? **No, there's more and it has everything to do with Jonah's *response* to the people of Nineveh being saved.**

Jonah is both the protagonist and antagonist in this prophetic book.

This is because prophets in the Word can carry different representations, depending on the context.

Sometimes prophets represent the Lord or the Word, and sometimes they represent the state of the church, that is, people/us.

So, for example, Jonah spending three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, and offering that beautiful prayer, is a prophetic description of the Lord's temptations against the hells (AC 1691, AE 622:9)

- and in the New Testament the Lord uses this incident to predict his own death and resurrection (Mt.12:40).

So, Jonah, in this context, represents the Lord.

But in sharp contrast to this, we have Jonah, in the last chapter (4) carrying a very *different* representation where he *refuses* to look upon the inhabitants of Nineveh with mercy and compassion.

- this, we are told, represents the state of a fallen church, a selfish mindset, which does "*not wish well to any but themselves*" (AE 401:36).

Today's reading said, God's forgiveness of the Ninevites...

*"displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry" (4:1).*

Lord challenges Jonah saying,

*"Is it right for you to be angry? (v. 4)*

But...

*"Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city..." (v. 5)*

## **2. A SIMPLE REQUEST**

What was Jonah being asked to do? Seemed like a simple request, yet he obviously had a strong reluctance to go to Nineveh right from the very beginning!

Why, after the people of Nineveh repented of their ways, was Jonah still angry?

Historical level - Jonah, a Hebrew, was being called by the Lord to preach the Word of God to a foreign nation, a gentile nation (clearly Jonah didn't want to do that).

The task of a "chosen people" - to spread the Word/Gospel.

Same with us - called to reach out beyond our "own people," as it were.

We are called to share our faith with people outside the church, with people who don't know the truths of the Lord's new revelation, to those in a "gentile" state.

The focus, here, is on the people of Nineveh...

The book ends with an unanswered question:

Will Jonah let go of his anger and resentment toward the people of Nineveh who repented... or will he stay unmoved, unconvinced that Nineveh is worth saving?

### 3. THE LORD'S DESIRE TO SAVE

Why didn't Jonah care?

Jonah had more pity for the withered plant that had protected him while he sat angrily outside the city than he did for the Ninevites.

This the Lord points out to Jonah, saying,

*"You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which more than one hundred and twenty thousand person cannot discern between their right hand and their left?"*

Here, Jonah, as already mentioned, represents the state of the fallen church.

Point? He represents a selfish impulse we **don't** have to act on.

Reaching out in service to others is the strongest antidote against the straight jacket of self-pity which makes us want to declare this person or that situation "irredeemable," not worth saving...

People who are being born from the Lord, that is, being regenerated by Him, are receiving the Lord's life. The Lord's life is Divine love, that is, a love towards the entire human race, which love is such that His will is to bring salvation, if possible, to the whole of it, that is, to all people.

When we call on the Lord's pity, the Lord's mercy, which *"wishes to save and draw all people to Himself"* (AC 1032)...

**...we look at "Nineveh" with new eyes!**

Church Sign: *"Come worship a God who lets a lot more people into heaven than you or I would."*

To feel pity is to be *"alerted by the Lord to offer help"* (AC 6737).

#### **4. NINEVEH, THAT GREAT CITY**

Let's explore a little deeper what saving Nineveh represents in our own lives...

"Nineveh" represents situations we consider irredeemable, not worth saving.

Whatever the situation or circumstance we're in...  
**tempted to give up, not worth it...**

Your "Nineveh" might be a struggling relationship with

- a co-worker
- sibling or friend
- some aspect of your marriage
- or parenting
- or a tense situation at work with your boss or supervisor
- just want to walk away from it, "wash your hands" of it

**But there's a spiritual principle at stake here...**

Think about it - the only thing we take with us to the other side is our relationships...

- relationship with God, His Word
- each other - friends, family, marriage, work
- and it's the *quality* of these relationships that matter the most
- are we investing the proper kind of care and attention they deserve?

Like Jonah, the Lord challenges us to re-consider our position saying, "*should I not pity Nineveh, that great city?*"

"Nineveh" represents a gentile state of mind which lacks the light of truth.

**NOTE: this could apply just as easily to *us* as it could to other people!**

**We find ourselves in plenty of situations where we lack clarity/truth**

- in the fog of confusion
- in ignorance (and ignorance is not a crime)

"Nineveh" is a MINDSET that is *very* much redeemable for the simple reason that it hasn't yet had the benefit of "hearing" the Lord's Word, of having a particular truth or teaching shine on it.

Take a situation in your life right now that you're tempted to "wash your hands of," write off as hopeless...

Ask yourself, has it had the benefit of light, the Lord's truth, shining on it?

- have you prayed about the situation, asked for the Lord's mercy?
- done some research, educated yourself?
- got a second opinion?
- talked to a trusted friend or confidant about it?

Or, like Jonah, will you sit outside the city, angry and resentful that you have this annoying situation going on in our life?

## **6. SAVING NINEVEH**

As mentioned earlier, the book ends with an unanswered question:

Will Jonah let go of his anger and resentment toward the people of Nineveh who repented... or will he stay unmoved, unconvinced that Nineveh is worth saving?

The answer isn't given.

Instead, we are left with a crucial detail, reference to a common human emotion, a feeling that, contrary to the appearance, serves as an important catalyst for spiritual change: **despair**

After the plant that had protected Jonah from the sun withered and died, we are told that...

*"Jonah...grew faint...[and] wished death for himself, and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live" (4:8).*

The role of despair:

The primary reason why people undergo states of despair is so that the things of which they are firmly persuaded, originating in self, may crumble, and also so that they may receive the perception of what is good and true, a perception they are not able to receive until those false persuasions originating in self are, so to speak, softened.

AC 2694

Point? Our own stubbornness or "false persuasions" are what lead us to deem our Nineveh situations "unsalvable." This could be because of...

- prejudice/bias
- assumptions
- ignorance
- over generalizing (painting w/a broad brush)
- lack of curiosity
- haven't done our "homework" (educated ourselves)

## CONCLUSION

We have friends and loved ones who...

- have "written off" God
- have "written off" the church or this church organization
- have wandered away from the Lord and His Word into a "gentile state..."

Like Jonah, the Lord calls us,

*"Arise, go to Nineveh..."*

Face your fears - don't go West, instead of East (opposite direction)

Take a chance

Trust the Lord

Speak the truth as best you know how

Pick your "Nineveh" and commit to not giving up on it.

**The Lord doesn't give up on us, so why would we give up on the people or groups or institutions in our lives?**

Take pity on the situation.

Pray that the Lord may soften your heart.

Shine a truth or teaching from the Lord's Word on it, and let the Lord do His redemptive work for as the Lord says,

*"Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and left...?"*

**AMEN.**