

“YET FORTY DAYS, AND NINEVEH SHALL BE OVERTHROWN”

Jonah 3

How did you meet your husband or wife? That would make a good program for a Valentine's Fellowship Supper to have couples in the congregation tell how they met. Here is how Lorraine and I met. We were in a group of young people who went out to various locations in Baltimore, Maryland and held street meetings. The young women would round up the children, set them on the steps of the houses, grouped according to their ages, and teach a Sunday School lesson, a song, and a memory verse. A young man would preach to the people sitting in doorways or hanging out of their windows, the other young men would go in various directions handing out Gospel tracts and slipping them under the doors. Charles Hadden Spurgeon preached in one of the largest churches in London. He said any church that didn't go out into the streets and city squares to preach was doomed to wither and die.

Jonah came into the streets of Nineveh, probably the greatest city of that time, and preached a message of warning, a call to repentance. He held street meetings. He must have been a sight to see. The time he spent in the fish's belly would have left its mark on his skin and his clothing. Then he had to walk several hundred miles from the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to Nineveh. He presented a bedraggled appearance to the curious onlookers. Despite how curious his appearance, the Holy Spirit empowered his sermons so that people not only listened to him but they were touched in their hearts.

1.) Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. (Jonah 3:1-3 NKJV)

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time." What an encouragement that is to all of us who have fled from the presence of the Lord. God doesn't give up on Jonah. He could very easily have found another prophet to take His message to Nineveh. As Jesus said, He could have made the stones cry out. He didn't. He gave Jonah a second chance.

Jonah went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. If we are going to do God's work, we have to do it God's way. Too often people have disregarded God's Word, compromised God's Word, twisted and perverted God's Word in order to gain the approval of others. It doesn't accomplish anything if we build up the church's membership if in doing so we lose God's approval. A church can gain hundreds of members and lose its soul.

Twice in the book of Jonah God refers to Nineveh as "that great city" and in the third verse where the translation says "an exceedingly great city" the Hebrew says "a city great to God." God could see all the cities of the world in a moment of time and He called Nineveh "great." Nineveh was not dear to God's heart as was Jerusalem, but He saw that it was great. Nineveh was situated on the Tigris River well into Kurdish territory in modern Iraq. On a modern map it is fifty miles south of Turkey and fifty miles west of Iran. "Three days journey in extent" That means it would take three days to walk around the outside of it. Historians say there were 1500 towers on its walls. Jonah didn't walk through in three days. I'm sure that he preached all forty days.

2.) And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. (Jonah 3:4-6 NKJV)

Half true is completely false. That is a good rule when listening to a persuasive argument for something. Half the Gospel is not Gospel at all. There are some people who teach the love of God and the promise of heaven, but they do not teach that God is holy and hates sin and will send all the wicked to hell. Others speak of the horrors of hell and that God is angry with the wicked every day but they never mention the love of God and His gracious offer of forgiveness. They think they can scare people into being saved. Fear without hope only hardens hearts.

Casual reading of these verses might lead us to think that Jonah preached only fear and damnation. But his sermons are drastically abbreviated into one sentence, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" We miss the significance of "forty days." Throughout the Bible forty days is used repeatedly as the time for preparing to serve God. In the time of Noah, God destroyed all the wicked and saved righteous Noah and his family through forty days of rain. Moses went up on the mount of God twice to receive God's laws and commands. Each time he was there for forty days. The spies went into the Promised Land to spy out the land for Moses. They were there forty days. Elijah wanted to die. God sent an angel to strengthen him with food and water. Then he traveled forty days to the mountain of God. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to fast and be tempted for forty days. These examples in the Bible are why we have forty days

of repentance during Lent. In the early church Advent was also forty days long until it was changed by the Roman Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church still observes a forty day fast during Advent.

The people of Nineveh and even the king of Nineveh understood the significance of "forty days": So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

3.) And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (Jonah 3:7-10 NKJV)

The fasting, the sackcloth, a crying mightily to God were outward expressions of repentance of their hearts and lives. As the king commanded and God's laws demanded, they turned from their evil ways and from the violence in their hands. Why did they repent? They had hope that the God who had graciously spared Jonah from the death at sea that he deserved and gave him a second chance would likewise have mercy on them. As the king said, "Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?"

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. Revival had come to Nineveh. Their fierce, brutal army was feared by the nations all around. The Spirit of God using a single voice proclaiming the Word of God was able to conquer that city in forty days time!

