

Jonah's Lessons in Evangelism

Jonah 3- The Repentance of Ninevah

Passages: Jonah 3

Matthew 10:5-15

How often have you seen a cartoon (or even a picture) of someone carrying a placard which reads: "**Repent- the end of the world is coming soon!**"??? (I well remember the man who used to stand on the corner of Forest Road and the Princes' Highway—He carried a signboard which read: "UFO Christ"! You will also remember the big uproar that happened two years ago when a preacher in the US started warning everyone that the world was going to end on May 21st. His church even paid to place huge warnings on billboards!)

But, you know, as far as I can tell, these "*hell-fire and brimstone*" messages don't accomplish much for the Gospel! In fact, they are usually a great source of embarrassment and mockery. Preachers of this sort of message are thought to be fools, weird, even mentally unwell! **Rarely** do you hear of people actually believing their message and seriously turning to Jesus in repentance and faith.

Even the "great" Apostle Paul had trouble preaching this sort of message. In Acts 17, he went to the city of Athens and announced God's judgment and the need for repentance. Here's exactly what Paul said: (Acts 17:30-31) ³⁰ ... **but now (God) commands all people everywhere to repent.**³¹ **For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.**" It was a classic "hellfire and brimstone" message! But, as you might expect, most of the people in Athens sneered at Paul and rejected his message. Only a very few people actually believed Paul and went on to become followers of Jesus.

As I begin today's sermon, the question I want to begin with is very simple: **Given the fact that "*hellfire and brimstone*" messages are so unpopular, and that most people are turned off by this sort of verbal confrontation, why in the world did the people of Ninevah go against the norm and submit themselves to the message of judgment and repentance preached by Jonah, the Hebrew prophet? What caused them to listen? Why didn't they just run Jonah out of town?**

Let me remind you of exactly what happened. In chapter 3, verse 4, we're told that Jonah arrives in Ninevah and begins to preach, saying, "**Forty more days and Ninevah will be overturned.**" It's a classic hellfire and brimstone message! "**Turn or burn!**"

Then, suddenly, without warning, we're told in verse 5 that ...***"The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them"***.

Amazing! From the throne of the king down to the least of the common folk, hundreds of thousands of Ninevites took Jonah's message with all seriousness; repenting of their sins with great earnestness; seeking with great desperation to remove God's threat of judgment from their city.

Once again, I ask you-- Why? I mean, when you think about it from a question of military power, Jonah's message was laughable! The Assyrian army was known far and wide as invincible! Who would even contemplate that this city could be overthrown? Furthermore, Jonah's delivery of the message was done without any conviction or emotion! His heart wasn't in it! (Billy Graham would have been appalled!) You see, Jonah had no desire to preach to the Ninevites! He didn't even want to be there; he didn't want the Assyrians to repent—he wanted them to die! Clearly, Jonah was just going through the motions; just doing what he was told.

It's no wonder why, for so many of us, this whole story is beyond belief! (I mean, you've got to chuckle when you imagine that **even the animals were clothed in sackcloth and ashes!**)

Again, I ask, "But why?" What inspired these warrior Assyrians to repent at the lacklustre preaching of some insignificant Hebrew prophet?

Jewish historians and scholars have long debated this question. They, like us, have long been baffled by Ninevah's response. After giving it much thought, however, they concluded that there was one possible explanation for this city's repentance: **The Ninevites must have known that Jonah had been swallowed up by a fish! They must have known that God's judgment had fallen on Jonah because of his disobedience. They must have also known that, through his repentance, God gave Jonah a second chance. This is the only scenario that makes sense of the story—that Jonah's death and resurrection motivated the city of Ninevah to follow Jonah's lead and do what Jonah had done—namely, to die to their pride in a national act of repentance in the hope that the God of Israel (the God of Jonah) might also resurrect them and give them a second chance!**

Of course, two key questions must be answered:

First, how would the Ninevites have known about Jonah's death inside the belly of the fish?

Let's think about it. I mean, when the Ninevites saw Jonah, they could easily see the visible marks of his death. After all, Jonah's body had been in the stomach of a great fish for three days! For a period of 72 hours, the fish had tried to digest Jonah's dead body with its powerful gastric juices. As a result, when Jonah was finally vomited onto the beach, not only would he have been naked...but he would have had no hair left anywhere on his body--No eyelashes, no eyebrows, no hair on his head or on his body. Even more noticeable was the fact that Jonah's skin would have been bleached and wrinkled by the fish's stomach acids. Jonah was a terrible sight!

Added to that was the fact that Jonah would have been almost blind!

There's one more thing: Jonah would have smelled horrible—the smell of death (worse than that of Lazarus) wouldn't be easily washed off! Jonah was (quite literally) a dead man walking! (He was like one of those zombie in a recent movie!)

There's a second question that follows: How would the Ninevites have known to repent? After all, Jonah's message said nothing about repentance!

Let's go through the scenario again. A dead man has just walked up to the city of Ninevah. This zombie then starts walking through the city preaching about God's judgment. So, tell, me; as soon as Jonah opened his mouth to speak, what would the Ninevites have immediately realised? Indeed, from what would the Ninevites suddenly felt *compelled* to repent? Clearly, they would have realised that Jonah came from the land of Israel...one of the nations which they regularly plundered! So, here was a man who has come back from the grave... one of Israel's prophets...pronouncing God's judgment upon them. As they hear his Hebrew voice, they immediately feel the judgment of his God against all they have done to Israel over the many years of violence and bloodshed! This dead man is making them feel guilty!

Indeed, with one *look* at Jonah and at the *sound* of his voice, the people of Ninevah would have immediately known that Jonah's God (the God of Israel) wasn't one to mess around with! This God took sin and disobedience seriously! Moreover, this God had plans and purposes for the world that could not be stopped. That is why Ninevah repented in sackcloth and ashes. For you see, **Jonah's resurrected body was a sign to them—a sign that the God of Israel**

had the power to, not only bring *death* to disobedient rebel...but also to bring *life* to anyone who turned back to Him in repentance and faith! (Interestingly, the word “*overturn*” that Jonah used can have this very meaning! “Forty days and Ninevah will be overturned” can also mean “Forty days and Ninevah will be brought from death back to life.”)

And so, Jonah’s resurrected body was *a sign* to Ninevah of both God’s judgment and His mercy; of both death and life!

And that’s why everyone in Ninevah clothed themselves with *sackcloth and ashes* (even including the animals)! You see, sackcloth and ashes are the symbols of death! Through the voice of Jonah, the Ninevites saw themselves as **dead** before the God of Israel—“*They were dead in their trespasses and sins*”. Nothing in their land could escape this reality—even the animals were tainted! And so, the sackcloth and ashes spoke of death. It also spoke of the hope for **resurrection!** What they saw with Jonah and his resurrection gave them hope that that the God of Israel is the God of **second chances** and **new life**.

So, let’s take a step back and ask ourselves: What does this mean for us, today? More specifically, what does this mean for evangelism?

I think one thing becomes obvious from Jonah’s story, and that is: **Evangelism is far more than words!** As we have seen today, it wasn’t *Jonah’s message* that made an evangelistic impact on the Ninevites. It was the fact of *seeing* him... a dead man... raised back to life! They saw, in the body of Jonah, the marks of his death and resurrection! That’s why the whole city turned to God!

Now, it’s essential for us to recognise that Jesus confirmed this very truth! In Luke 11, He told his disciples, “***Jonah became a sign to the men of Nineveh***” (Luke 11.30). The resurrected body of Jonah that became **a sign of God’s power over death!** It was this ‘sign’ that triggered an entire pagan nation to turn to the God of Israel in a tremendous show of repentance and faith!

But, of course, Jesus didn’t stop with Jonah. He went on to point to **another sign**—to **another resurrected body** which would become an even greater sign of God’s resurrection power to His own generation. “***For as Jonah was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of Man be to this generation.***” (Luke 11:30). Jesus was pointing to Himself! He knew that He would soon die and be buried for three days...and on the third day, His Father would raise Him back to life! Like Jonah, Jesus’ resurrected body would publicly display the obvious marks of His death—the scars in His hands and feet; the hole in His side; the

marks on his forehead from the crown of thorns. Jesus would even command His disciples to touch His wounds and feel the scars: ***“Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”*** (Luke 24:39). The point is, Jesus knew that it wouldn't be **His words** that would ultimately convert the world. **It would be His scars**—the proof of His death and resurrection, which would point to the power of His Father over death! This is what would cause the world to turn back to God in repentance and faith.

So, where does that leave us? Well, obviously, it means that we need to do a lot less **talking** and a lot more **displaying** of Jesus' death and resurrection in our own bodies! After all, Jesus said that His body would be a sign to *His own generation*—the generation that was present when He was crucified, buried, and raised back to life. What He seems to be saying is that, for every generation henceforth, **it would be His church** (His *spiritual* Body on earth) **that would become God's sign to the world!** Living in the death and resurrection of Jesus, **we are now called to be God's sign through our own death and resurrection!**

So, let me ask you; ***“Can the world see your scars?”*** Where are the nail prints in your hands and feet? In other words, what have you suffered for Jesus' sake? What have you died to recently? What have you given up for the sake of the Gospel? Have you been ***“overturned”***? For the fact is that no one will ever repent unless they see the power of death and resurrection in your life! As it was with Jonah, death and resurrection must become visible to the people around you!

I think this idea helps to make sense of today's reading from Matthew 10. In Matthew 10, Jesus sends out His disciples to preach. But notice one thing: **They is nothing of hellfire and brimstone in their message!** Instead, Jesus tells them in verse 7- ***“As you go, preach, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is near’.”*** Clearly, it's the presence of God which is meant to motivate the nations to repentance!

Notice also that Jesus' messengers were called to do far more than preach! In verse 8, Jesus calls them to be visible displays of death and resurrection and, also, to bring the power of Jesus' death and resurrection to others! As the

disciples died to self and went forth to serve others, Jesus instructs them to ***“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give!”*** Furthermore, the message that must be seen and heard from God’s messengers is all about resurrection from the dead—It’s about “peace” (“Shalom); new life; new hope; new future! That’s why Jesus tells the disciples (in verse 13), ***“If the home is deserving, let your peace remain there. If not, let your peace return to you...”***. In other words, keep moving; keep sharing God’s peace with all those who are receptive to you. Now is not the time for fire from heaven. (I’m reminded of the way James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritan town which refused to welcome them? Jesus rebuked them severely!) Now is not the time for the threat of destruction. Today is the day in which we offer peace to the world; peace even to God’s greatest enemies (like the Ninevites!). Why? Because, God has sent us to be His sign of resurrection— We are to be visible demonstrations of God’s power to raise the dead!

So, show the world your scars! Show them the fish vomit that once covered you from head to toe! Tell them the story of your death and resurrection in Jesus! And may the church be the sign that God has called us to be in the face of an unbelieving world!

This is true evangelism!

Let’s pray!