

FISHERS OF MEN

Some people regard the United States as exceedingly wicked, as a new Sodom and Gomorrah, beyond hope, and doomed to be destroyed by God. Two years ago, Gallup reported the following: “A record-high 50% of Americans rate the overall state of moral values in the U.S. as ‘poor,’ and another 37% say it is ‘only fair.’ Just 1% think the state of moral values is ‘excellent’ and 12% ‘good.’ (Megan Brennan, “Record-High 50% of Americans Rate U.S. Moral Values as ‘Poor,’” June 15, 2022) Yet, the authors of the report concede, “Although negative views of the nation's moral values have been the norm throughout Gallup's 20-year trend, the current poor rating is the highest on record by one percentage point.” Many perceive that the United States are in moral decline. But are they? Last year, Adam Mastroianni of Columbia University, and Daniel Gilbert of Harvard University, published a study in which they concluded that such a perception is false. Columbia Magazine summarized their findings this way:

They recently conducted a meta-analysis of all the major surveys that asked Americans about the state of moral values in this country — a total of some two hundred conducted over the past seven decades — and they found that US residents have been griping about one another’s flagging sense of decency for as long as researchers have been soliciting their opinions on the matter. And yet when individual respondents are asked multiple times, over the span of a decade or more, to describe the level of civility and kindness they observe in their fellow citizens, their descriptions of other people’s attitudes and behaviors do not actually worsen at all. Mastroianni and Gilbert, whose [paper](#) appears in the journal *Nature*, say the results of similar surveys conducted in dozens of other countries over the decades suggest that people all over the world are susceptible to the illusion that their contemporaries are less moral than they once were. They say that this misconception is likely explained by two well-established psychological phenomena acting in tandem: that we tend to pay closer attention to negative rather than positive information about people’s actions in the present day; and that we tend to selectively forget such negative impressions as the years roll on, leaving us with nostalgia for the past. (David J. Craig, “Is America in Moral Decline?” *Columbia Magazine*, Fall 2023)

Last year, the American Bible Society published a research report called, *State of the Bible: USA 2023*. The report states:

A huge proportion of Americans (86%) see the country in moral decline. These are people of all religions or none at all. They see the downslide, but they can’t agree on what the problem is. Parents, music, social media—all of these may contribute to the problem, but there’s one diagnosis recognized only by a select group. Those who know and love the Bible understand its power as “a guide for moral development.” They see that the moral decline of America parallels the decline of Scripture engagement in America. Could the nation’s moral decline be slowed or even reversed by greater attention to Scripture?

Whether, or not, the United States, or the world, is in moral decline may be disputed. In any case, morality is not what it should be, and God can in various ways discipline a nation. If a Christian is concerned about the

state of morality of his nation, then he ought to be careful about his own morality, and he ought to be diligent to call his countrymen to repent and believe the gospel, and to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

In the days of Jeroboam II, King of Israel, Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, was a great city, and greatly wicked. Concerning its area, the Scriptures say, “Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.” (Jonah 3:3) Concerning its population, the Scriptures say there were in it “more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand.” (Jonah 4:11) This means that there were more than one-hundred and twenty-thousand children under the age of four years. (compare Deuteronomy 1:39) If a man walks at a pace of twenty miles in a day, and if it would take him three days to walk the perimeter of the city of Nineveh, then the size of Nineveh was around two-hundred and eighty-six square miles. If the children were one-fifth of the population, then the total population was around six-hundred thousand people. Concerning its wickedness, it was full of violence. (Jonah 3:4) Nahum the prophet prophesied concerning it:

Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not; The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the prancing horses, and of the jumping chariots. The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and there is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcasses; and there is none end of their corpses; they stumble upon their corpses: Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the wellfavoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts. (Nahum 3:1–4)

Nineveh was renowned for its violent ways. The statesmen of Nineveh were deceitful and brutal, and the king with his army conquered other nations, and enslaved the people. God is patient with men. When the Lord revealed His glory to Moses, He said:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

God is longsuffering, but He has His limit, and He reached His limit with Nineveh. He would no longer tolerate the sins of that wicked city. He said to Jonah, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.” (Jonah 1:2) God commanded Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, and there cry out against their many sins. Concerning Jonah’s response to God’s call, the Scriptures say:

But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:3)

Jonah was a prophet of God, but when God sent him to Nineveh, he refused to go. Not only did he refuse to go to Nineveh, but he fled in the opposite direction. Why he refused, he would later confess to the Lord. As his ship sailed west to Tarshish, it was struck by a terrible storm. The ship’s crew feared for their lives, and so they, heathens as they were, cried out to their gods for help, and, in order to lighten the ship’s load, they cast its cargo into the sea. Jonah, the prophet of God, did not call out to God for help, but rather slept inside the ship. When

Jonah finally confessed to the crew that he was fleeing from God, and so God was causing the storm, the crew asked Jonah what could be done to appease God. Jonah knew that God would be appeased, and so would calm the sea, if Jonah would repent of his rebellion and perform the duty that God gave to him. Yet, Jonah would rather die than repent, and he told the sailors to cast him into the sea as a sacrifice to God. At first the crew would not do as Jonah advised, but, as the storm did not let up, they asked God for mercy, and cast Jonah into the sea, and the storm ceased.

God caused a great fish to swallow Jonah, and he was in the belly of the fish. Jonah in his misery cried out to God for mercy, and God showed him mercy. After three days and three nights, the fish brought Jonah to shore and vomited him out onto dry land. Then God again commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and deliver the message He would give him. This time, Jonah obeyed the Lord. He entered the city and proclaimed, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” The message was that in forty days God would destroy the city of Nineveh. The message was absolute, without qualification, yet a qualification is easily inferred. If God meant absolutely to destroy the city, then He would have done so without forty day’s notice. Clearly God meant to give the wicked Ninevites opportunity to repent of their sins, and to prove their repentance. The message was eventually brought to the king, and his response was proper. The Scriptures say, “Word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.” (Jonah 3:6) The king took to heart the prophet’s message. He rose from his throne and removed his royal robe, and then clothed himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes, and he did this as a sign of his humility and repentance. Then the king, with his nobles, issued the following decree:

And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? (Jonah 3:7–9)

Not only did the king repent, but he used his royal prerogative to command his subjects to repent. He ordered the people to fast, to wear sackcloth as a sign of their repentance, with all their might to cry out to God for mercy, and to change their ways. The king commanded this with the hope that, if they all repented, then God would be merciful and not destroy them. The Scriptures tell what happened next: “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.” (Jonah 3:10) The people responded to the order of the king, but more importantly, to the proclamation of the prophet. They turned from their evil ways, and so God did not destroy them, as He surely would have done had they not repented.

The new state of affairs Jonah considered to be evil, and he was incensed. He prayed to God:

I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live. (Jonah 4:2, 3)

Here from Jonah’s own mouth is the explanation of his flight from God’s call. When he had at first fled from God’s calling, it was not because he feared the violence that the people of Nineveh might do to him, but rather

because he feared the mercy God might show to the Ninevites. Jonah knew how the Lord had revealed his glory to Moses. He knew that God is merciful and that He forgives people when they repent. Jonah hated the people of Nineveh, and he desired their destruction. He knew that, if he preached God's message to them, that they might repent, and then God might forgive them. Jonah considered this a great injustice, and so he refused to preach. When he did preach, his fear was realized, The people did repent, and Jonah expected God to forgive them. When Jonah was sailing to Tarshish, he would rather have died than preach to the Ninevites. Then after preaching to them, he wished to die rather than see them be spared, and he asked God to take his life. The Lord simply asked Jonah, "Do you think it's right for you to be angry?" The implied answer is, of course, "No, it's not right," and the Lord would explain to Jonah why.

Jonah went out of the city on the east side, opposite the side where he entered, and he made a booth to shield him from the sun. There he waited to see what would become of the city, to see whether God would destroy it, or not. Although Jonah was angry with God, God in His mercy caused a gourd to grow on the vine so that Jonah might have more shade, and Jonah was glad about it. Next day, at dawn God appointed a worm to kill the plant, and it withered. When the sun rose, God caused a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah, so that Jonah grew faint and wished to die. God asked Jonah if he was right to be angry about the loss of the gourd, and Jonah said that he was right to be angry, even to the point of wishing to die. So the Lord said to Jonah:

Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:10, 11)

Jonah felt sorry about the death of the gourd, which he did not cultivate, or cause it to grow, and which lived but a day. In Nineveh were around six-hundred thousand souls, including small children, whom He had created in His image, whom He had caused to grow, whose lives He had providentially ordered. How much more were they worth, made in the image of God, than a vegetable? Such hypocrisy on the part of Jonah who wished to die because a plant perished, and also wished to die because six-hundred thousand people did not perish. If God, against whom all sin is an offense, desires to show mercy to penitent sinners, how much more should men, who are themselves miserable sinners, desire to show mercy to the same, and to proclaim to men God's great mercy and forgiveness.

John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ by preaching to the people a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He preached to King Herod Antipas that he sinned by marrying his brother's wife, and he called the king to repentance. The king did not repent, but put John in prison. After this, Jesus began His earthly ministry, and proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:15) Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was beginning, and that, if anyone would enter into that kingdom, he should repent of His sins, and believe the good news. Then Jesus, as He walked by the sea of Galilee, saw Simon, and his brother, Andrew, both fishermen, casting a fishing net into the sea. Jesus said to them, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." (Mark 1:17) Jesus was looking for good men who would follow Him, and assist Him in His work of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. He was looking for men who would care about God's glory, and man's misery, and would devote themselves to call men to repentance so that God might show them mercy. Simon and Andrew, when they heard Jesus call them, did not hesitate. They immediately left their occupation, and followed Jesus. A little while later, Jesus saw brothers James and John, who, like Simon and Andrew, were fishermen, and were in their boat mending their nets. Jesus called them, also, and they, too, left their occupation, and even left their father, and followed Jesus.

The preaching of these men, and others, would be like casting a great fishing net, and drawing into a boat a great number of fish. Although fishermen gather fish for death, Jesus's apostles would gather men for life.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. (1 Corinthians 7:29–31)

Jesus had taught His disciples that the Jews would reject Him and have Him killed, but He would rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven to God, who would make Him Lord over all. In His Olivet discourse, He taught His disciples that, because the Jews rejected Him, their own Messiah, He would punish them. He would destroy their great city, Jerusalem, and the temple there, and this would befall the generation that rejected Him. (Matthew 24 = Mark 13 = Luke 21) Saint Paul had this in mind when He wrote to the Corinthians. When he wrote, the time was short before the destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of the Mosaic dispensation. Christians were then living in the Last Days, and they were to order their lives accordingly. Of course, husbands should always live for their wives, and people should, when appropriate, weep and rejoice, and they should buy the things they need. Yet, Saint Paul told Christians that they should live in consideration of a coming great judgment. They should not live extravagantly, but soberly; not for the world, but for Christ. They should mourn their sins, and rejoice at God's forgiveness. They should give all that they have for the treasure that is the kingdom of God. The destruction of Jerusalem is long past. Yet there is coming a day of reckoning in which Jesus will return to judge the world in righteousness. The Christian must live in light of this Final Judgment, and order his life accordingly. He must always repent of his sins, and turn away from them, resolving to do better. He must be diligent to warn others of the coming judgment, and to proclaim to them the good news that God is merciful, and has given His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

Let us understand that God is gracious and merciful, and forgives the sins of those who repent. Let us gladly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ so that men might not perish. Let us live our lives in view of the future coming of Christ to judge the world in righteousness.

Now unto the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, be glory and dominion, for ever and ever. Amen.