

A GREATER THAN JONAS

The ancient city of Nineveh was a great city. Concerning its area, the book of Jonah says, “Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.” (Jonah 3:3) Concerning its population, the book says that in it were, “more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand,” which is to say around one-hundred and twenty-thousand children under the age of four years. (Jonah 4:11; compare Deuteronomy 1:39) This means that, if a man walks twenty miles in a day, and if it would take him three days to walk the perimeter of the the city of Nineveh, then the size of Nineveh was around two-hundred and eighty-six square miles. Moreover, if the children were one-fifth of the population, then the total population was around six-hundred thousand people. Only twenty-nine cities of the United States of America are larger. Baltimore, Maryland is smaller than Ninveveh. The city of Greenville, South Carolina, is very small, compared to Nineveh. It has an area of around thirty square miles, and a population of around seventy-two thousand people. Moreover, over half the population of Greenville are Christian. In the time of Jonah, none of the people in Nineveh served the Lord, and all were very wicked.

The city of Nineveh was so wicked that the Lord sent Jonah to the people of Nineveh to prophesy their doom. The Lord 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) Jonah was, of course, a Hebrew, and the Hebrews and the Ninveites were mortal enemies. For Jonah to go to Nineveh to proclaim its destruction would be like a Christian today doing the same in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Jonah, not wishing to die, but wishing for the Ninveites to die, did not go to that city, but by ship fled in the other direction. So, the Lord caused a great fish to swallow Jonah, and three days later vomit him out onto land near Nineveh. (Jonah 1:17) The Lord again said to Jonah, “Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.” (Jonah 3:2) This time, Jonah, knowing that He could not thwart God’s purpose, resigned himself to it, and went to Nineveh.

Jonah entered the city, and proclaimed to the people, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” (Jonah 3:4) Jonah delivered the message that the Lord gave him, which was a message of judgment. The king of Nineveh, when he heard Jonah’s warning, “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 repented. He removed his royal garment, the symbol of his power and authority, and he replaced it with sackcloth and ashes, a symbol of humility and remorse. Not only did he repent, but he commanded his subjects to do the same. He issued a decree which stated:

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)

Miraculously, the people repented. Jonah’s message was a declaration of judgment, and did not offer any qualification. Yet, God might have destroyed the Ninivites without warning. The king inferred that God gave the city time to repent. So, he threw himself on the mercy of God, and he was right to do so. The Scriptures say, “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)

When Jesus cast out demons, some said that He did so by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of the demons. So, some demanded that He prove Himself with a sign from heaven. Jesus said, “But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you.” (Luke 11:20) His exorcisms

were a sign. It was obvious that He cast out demons by the Spirit of God, and only hard-hearted and sinful people would doubt it. Jesus told the people that their generation was evil, and, although they demanded some miraculous sign from heaven, He would not give them one. None, that is, except for the sign of Jonah. Just as God after three days caused the great fish to deliver up Jonah, so He would after three days raise Jesus from the dead. This would be a vindication of Jesus, and the greatest sign that He is the Son of God.

The Queen of Sheba was a heathen, but she recognized the great wisdom of Solomon. The Ninevites were heathens, but they repented at Jonah's preaching. Jesus is a far greater man than either Solomon or Jonah, yet the Jews of Jesus's time were so wicked, so hard of heart, that they would not listen to His wisdom, or repent at His teaching. So, on Judgment Day, the Queen of Sheba and the Ninveites would condemn Jesus's contemporaries for their foolishness and impenitence.

Just as God gave Nineveh forty days to repent, so He gave Jerusalem time to repent. Late in Jesus's earthly ministry, He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." (Matthew 23:37, 38) Jerusalem, unlike Nineveh, did not repent, and forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, God sent the Roman army to destroy it. God is merciful and full of compassion, and He is always ready to forgive the penitent sinner. It is always right to repent of sin, and never too late.

Let us believe in both the severity, and the mercy, of God. Let us always repent of our sins. Let us call others to do the same.