

A Gentile King Promotes Reformation

Jonah 3:6-10; Ezra 6:11-12

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We observed in the previous sermon how the Lord converted “the great city” of Nineveh by means of the faithful preaching of one minister that was made effective by the almighty power of the Holy Spirit to the conversion of that great capital city of the Assyrian empire. Such an unparalleled conversion of a Gentile city must be attributed to nothing less than the sovereign power of God in blessing His preached Word to the hearts and lives of ungodly sinners. The Lord indeed gives our faltering faith and hope a huge boost concerning a coming worldwide reformation of all nations as we see the power of God in action here in Jonah 3:5: “So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.”

By this true historical account of the conversion of Nineveh to Jehovah God, we are much encouraged to continue to pray and hope in the Lord concerning that time of millennial blessing when all nations will come to Christ (Psalm 72:11; Romans 11:25-26; Revelation 15:4). But we are also much encouraged to continue to pray and hope in the Lord that if the Lord can save and did save a godless city of idolaters, then we must not despair in continuing to pray for our loved ones, friends, or co-workers who walk in the paths of unbelief and ungodliness. For there is hope in the Lord for sinners; for God’s compassion and power were not restrained in saving the wicked city of Nineveh, and His compassion and power are certainly not restrained in saving even the chief of sinners at the present time.

But besides the faithful preaching of Jonah, what means did the Lord use to bring about that great reformation in Nineveh? As we shall now see, the Lord also used the authority of the king to promote this amazing reformation in Nineveh. Let us then consider the following main points from our text: (1) The Compulsory Power of this Gentile King Is Used to Promote Reformation (Jonah 3:6-9); (2) God’s Approval Given of the Reformation Promoted by this Gentile King (Jonah 3:10).

I. The Compulsory Power of This Gentile King Is Used to Promote Reformation (Jonah 3:6-9).

A. Not only did the Lord bring about reformation within Nineveh by means of the divinely established ordinance of the ministry (i.e. by means of the preaching of Jonah, a faithful minister), but also by means of the divinely established ordinance of the magistracy (i.e. by means of the official proclamation of this Gentile king). For the Holy Spirit has left us with this clear testimony as to the God-ordained role of the civil magistrate in promoting reformation within a nation (even within a Gentile nation) when He (the Holy Spirit) declares through the prophet Jonah, “For 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. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles” (Jonah 3:6-7a).

B. We are not told the name of this Assyrian king mentioned here in Jonah 3, or how the preached word of the prophet Jonah came to him (whether by Jonah personally or by others who heard Jonah preach). It would appear, however, that the conversion of the Ninevites mentioned in Jonah 3:5 was a general summary of what was wrought by God’s grace in Nineveh, while Jonah 3:6-9 gives us the more detailed explanation as to the means God used to bring about this great reformation in Nineveh, namely, the example and the decree of the king of Nineveh.

C. Though the humble example of the king of Nineveh (acting in his personal capacity) in laying aside his royal robe, in covering himself in sackcloth, and in sitting down in ashes was no doubt used by the Lord to promote the worship of the one true living God of the Bible among the people of Nineveh, it was also the authoritative decree of the king of Nineveh (acting in his official capacity) in causing the proclamation to be published throughout the capital city that God used to turn the hearts of the people of Nineveh to Jehovah God (example and command must go hand in hand). Dear ones, those who argue that God in Scripture promotes the civil toleration of all religions and that the civil magistrate's authority ought not to be used to promote only the one true religion of the Bible (to the exclusion of all other religions) are confronted here in Jonah 3:6ff with a Gentile magistrate who did not buy into that popular, erroneous view of the role of the civil magistrate. The king of Nineveh did not believe that he was overstepping some moral boundaries in using his compulsory power to issue an authoritative command to promote the worship of Jehovah God as the only way to prevent God's impending judgment from falling upon them. The king and his noblemen were among those who believed the Word of God preached by Jonah, and they used their compulsory power to promote the one true religion of the Bible; for, dear ones, an authoritative decree is not a mere suggestion—an authoritative decree is a command and implies there will be consequences to pay for those who obstinately rebel against such good and lawful commands in promoting the worship of the one true living God of the Bible.

D. Let us compare for a moment what we read in Jonah 3:7 with what we read in the Constitution of the United States.

1. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit gives us (in Jonah 3:7) the biblical role of the civil magistrate in regard to the one true religion of the Bible: "And he [i.e. the king of Nineveh] caused it [i.e. the worship of Jehovah God alone—GLP] to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles." The king of Nineveh by his official decree established Jehovah worship as the one true religion. The Gentile king of Nineveh acted as the minister of God to his people for their good (as Paul also teaches in Romans 13:4) in using his compulsory power to promote Jehovah worship (and it is implied likewise he used his compulsory power to restrain all false worship, for the Lord was pleased with the steps taken by the king and by the people in turning from their idolatry to the one true living God of the Bible, Jonah 3:10).

2. On the other hand, the Constitution of the United States has an entirely different view than that of Scripture as to the role of the civil magistrate in regard to the one true religion of the Bible (i.e. biblical Christianity).

a. **Article I** in the Amendments to the Constitution of the United States declares: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." In other words, the one true religion of the Bible (i.e. biblical Christianity) is expressly forbidden from being established as the national religion of the United States by the civil magistrate. And not only that, but every false religion is constitutionally and legally to be tolerated, so that every false religion is placed alongside biblical Christianity in having an equal standing within the pantheon of gods and religions constitutionally and officially tolerated and promoted by civil magistrates in the United States.

b. In addition to what we have just noted in Article 1 in the Bill of Rights, **Article 6** of the Constitution of the United States declares that there are never to be any religious tests or religious qualifications required of candidates in order to hold office: "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Thus, constitutionally, even a Satanist has the same legal right as the Christian to be president, and is not prohibited from holding any office in the federal government of the United States. Dear ones, such civil magistrates that must constitutionally tolerate (and thereby promote) every false religion imaginable (contrary to the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."), such constitutions cannot be lawful and such civil magistrates cannot be the ministers of God to the people for good, for the official toleration and promotion of false religion is contrary to the Moral Law of God and contributes to millions of people going to hell—and that, is not good, but evil.

3. I ask, dear ones, how much more diametrically opposed to one another could two systems of government be than that of Scripture on the one hand which officially authorizes and commends the use of the civil magistrate's lawful authority to establish and promote biblical Christianity and to restrain idolatry, false religion, heresy, and blasphemy, and that of the United States on the other hand (and many other nations of the world) which officially authorizes and commends the religious toleration of national polytheism (the worship of many gods).

E. And if it be maintained by Christian tolerationists that the civil magistrate cannot use his compulsory power to establish and promote the one true religion of biblical Christianity or use his compulsory power against religious sins and errors because civil government is immediately ordained by God as Creator (in a state of nature) and not immediately ordained by Christ as Mediator (in a state of grace) as is the Church of Christ, then the same argument must also extend to the family which is also immediately ordained by God as Creator (in a state of nature). What Christian would say that a father has no compulsory power to restrain his children from manifest idolatry, blasphemy, or Sabbath-breaking? And if he did not do so, would we not consider him to be derelict in his moral duties as a father? Then on what moral grounds can it be said that the civil father of a nation does not possess the same compulsory power and ought not lawfully to use it to promote the one true religion of biblical Christianity and to restrain idolatry, false religion, Sabbath-breaking, and blasphemy? Thus, God has entrusted compulsory power to the state (in the form of the sword of punishment), compulsory power to the family (in the form of the rod of chastening), and compulsory power to the church (in the form of the key of discipline); and that all compulsory power is to be lawfully used to restrain sins and crimes against God (Commandments 1-4 of the Ten Commandments) as well as to restrain sins and crimes against our neighbor (Commandments 5-10 of the Ten Commandments) by civil magistrates, by parents, and by ministers and elders.

1. And if the use of all compulsory power against idolatry, false religion, heresy, and blasphemy is unlawful and unbiblical, how do we explain the commendable use of compulsory power to protect the one true religion of the Bible by Jewish rulers (in Deuteronomy 13:1-5), and by Gentile rulers (like Darius in Ezra 6:11-12; Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:26; Ahasuerus in Esther 8:11; Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:29; and Darius in Daniel 6:26)? And if all compulsory power against false religion is unlawful and unbiblical, how do we explain the use of compulsory power by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in making a whip to chase the moneychangers out of the temple and overturning their merchandize, not once but on two separate occasions at the beginning of His ministry (in John 2:13-17) and at the end of His ministry (in Matthew 21:12-13)?

2. Clearly, dear ones, the Bible teaches that civil magistrates ought to use compulsory power to establish the one true religion taught in Scripture and to prevent and restrain the exercise of false religion (and the Bible makes no distinction between the moral duty of Jewish rulers and the moral duty of Gentile rulers, as if only Jewish rulers were bound to establish and promote the worship of Jehovah God in keeping the First Commandment—"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."). And so the Holy Spirit clearly teaches the God-ordained role of the civil magistrate in using a lawful compulsory power exhibited in the authoritative decree issued by the Gentile king of Nineveh in establishing and promoting the worship of the one true living God of the Bible, rather than officially tolerating (and thereby promoting) all false religions alongside the one true religion of the Bible.

F. Now let us consider briefly the content of the authoritative decree of the king of Nineveh and his noblemen in Jonah 3:7b-9.

1. As we see (in Jonah 3:5), Nineveh first believed and trusted in the promise of salvation offered to them through the preaching and testimony of Jonah (and were first forgiven before God) before they began to evidence their repentance through the outward signs of fasting and putting on sackcloth. For dear ones, we receive Christ in the Gospel in order that we may be pardoned on the basis of Christ's suffering

for our sin, and we receive Christ in the Gospel in order that we may be justified (i.e. declared righteous by God) on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness, and we receive Christ in the Gospel in order that we may repent in earnest grief and sorrow over having offended the Lord our God by our many transgressions of His Holy Law.

2. Beloved, we don't repent in order to believe in Christ; nor do we repent in order to be forgiven or justified by God. For that order declares that we must first work by our repentance before we receive God's forgiveness and justification; but then, dear ones, God's forgiveness and justification are no longer free, but are a debt that must be earned and deserved by the work of repentance (which is contrary to what the Apostle Paul declares in Romans 4:4-5). Dear ones, this distinction is not minor, but distinguishes the true Gospel from the false Gospel—and therefore life from death (for only the true Gospel saves whereas a false Gospel can save no one). Dear ones, I ask you ever so earnestly, for herein is life or death. Is your faith in your sorrow for sin or in your love for God wrought within you? Is your faith in the tears you have shed or in the prayers you have offered to God? If so, your faith is misplaced; your faith is in vain. For even faith in what is wrought by God within man is still trusting in man's righteousness. Or is your faith in God who justifies the ungodly? Is your faith in Christ and His righteousness alone? If so, your faith is firmly anchored in the God of your salvation, and is not in vain.

3. Now having made clear that the people of Nineveh first believed God, we are ready to consider that having believed, having been forgiven, they repented and grieved over their sin against such a holy yet gracious God. The people of Nineveh outwardly evidenced their repentance and godly sorrow by means of fasting and wearing of sackcloth (Jonah 3:5) and sitting in ashes (Jonah 3:6), which fasting and being clothed in sackcloth was decreed by the authority of the king of Nineveh (as indicated in Jonah 3:7ff). Fasting (i.e. going without food, and in this situation, without water as well), and wearing of sackcloth (i.e. placing a very rough, scratchy material like a gunny sack next to your skin), and sitting in ashes were outward acts that were all intended to remind the people that they did not deserve from God even the necessities of life (food, clothing, or shelter) due to their many transgressions committed against the Lord, but rather deserved God's judgment (now and for all eternity). Therefore, all that they had (materially and spiritually) were gracious, undeserved gifts from the Lord. These mere outward acts of the Ninevites were in no wise that which brought God's salvation, but were simply the outworking of their faith in the Lord (for as James states, "Faith without works is dead" James 2:26). Dear ones, saving faith always evidences itself in good works of love, repentance, and new obedience (not in order to gain salvation, but in order to show forth our love and gratitude to our Savior who has so graciously saved us from the guilt and penalty of sin). God works within all who have been saved both to will and to do His good pleasure (according to Philippians 2:13), so that even the good works wrought in our life (as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ) are not works for which we can take credit, but are works produced in us by the Holy Spirit (to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen).

4. I also want to make clear that though it is good and righteous for the civil magistrate to use lawful compulsory power to establish and promote the one true religion of the Bible, such good civil laws cannot (in themselves) save the souls of men—for salvation is of the Lord alone. Therefore, let no one misunderstand why such good and righteous civil laws ought to be established.

a. Just as in a Christian family, the good and righteous house rules that you parents establish in your homes for your children are not intended to be the actual cause of salvation to your children (only the Lord Jesus Christ can cause salvation through the Gospel), but are rather intended to outwardly promote that which is good and to outwardly restrain your children from that which is evil (for God's glory and for their own good). So likewise in the Christian nation, good and righteous laws established by the civil father (or magistrate) are not intended to be the actual cause of salvation to his people (for he knows that only the Lord Jesus Christ can cause salvation through the Gospel), but are rather intended to outwardly promote that which is good and to outwardly restrain that which is evil.

b. Dear ones, where are children more likely to be exposed to Jesus Christ (who

alone brings salvation through His Gospel)? In a home where idolatry, false religion, Sabbath-breaking, and blasphemy are tolerated, or in a home where idolatry, false religion, Sabbath-breaking, and blasphemy are restrained, and where only the true religion of Christ and the pure Gospel of salvation are faithfully and lovingly taught and lived out? The answer, I believe, is obvious. So likewise, I ask, where are citizens more likely to be exposed to Jesus Christ (who alone brings salvation through His Gospel), in a nation where idolatry, false religion, Sabbath-breaking, and blasphemy are tolerated, or in a nation where idolatry, false religion, Sabbath-breaking, and blasphemy are restrained, and where only Christ and the pure Gospel of salvation are faithfully and lovingly taught and lived out? The answer, I believe, ought to be just as obvious in this case.

5. Interestingly, the decree of the king of Nineveh fell alike upon man and beast (Jonah 3:7-8). Why? Not because the animals were guilty of any sin (obviously, non-rational beings are neither wicked nor righteous in any inherent sense, only angels and human beings are wicked or righteous in any inherent sense). Then why cause the animals to fast and to wear sackcloth? Because the king of Nineveh further demonstrated outwardly what their sins justly deserved from God, the deprivation and destruction of all their animals upon which they so much depended for food and for labor. The king of Nineveh rightly understood that all that he possessed justly deserved God's righteous judgment due to his sins (and due to the sins of his people).

6. But carefully note that the decree of the king of Nineveh concludes with the light of hope in the God who saves the ungodly and the undeserving (Jonah 3:9). For if God had given them 40 days to believe and repent before destruction fell, there was yet hope in the God of their salvation. And if God had rescued a rebellious prophet from destruction in the belly of the whale who had grievously sinned against the Lord, there was yet hope in the God of their salvation. Dear ones, there is yet hope in the God of salvation for the ungodly, for the rebellious, for even the chief of sinners. Come to Christ now, receive and rest in the God of salvation who alone can save you from His righteous judgment in hell.

II. God's Approval Given of the Reformation Promoted by This Gentile Magistrate in Nineveh (Jonah 3:10).

A. It is the seal and confirmation that God has given to us of the good works wrought by the king of Nineveh and by the people of Nineveh in demonstrating their faith in the one and only true God, who is the God of Israel and the God of the nations—Jehovah. How do we know that the work of the king in his official capacity in promoting the true religion, and the work of the king and people in repenting and evidencing their repentance was pleasing to the Lord? God repented of the evil (i.e. of the judgment) which He had previously declared He would bring upon the Ninevites. I want to spend a little time discussing in what sense God cannot repent (as stated in Numbers 23:19 or in 1 Samuel 15:29) and in what sense God does repent (as stated here in Jonah 3:10 or in Jeremiah 18:7-10). But that will have to wait until the next sermon.

B. That with which I want to conclude at this point is that the hope that the king of Nineveh and the people of Nineveh had in the mercy of God (as stated in Jonah 3:9) was not a false hope, but was a true hope—a hope in the God who delights to show mercy (Micah 7:18). Their hope in the God who delights in mercy was not in vain. Here, dear ones, is ever your confidence and your hope for all your needs, whatever they may be—God delights in mercy. Amen.

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