

# God Saves the Great City of Nineveh—Within Forty Days

Jonah 3:3b-5

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This has to rank among God's most amazing, supernatural works in history—the salvation of Assyria's great capital city of Nineveh, and within the space of forty days. In little more than a month, the Lord with great power and grace took the preached word of one solitary prophet, and turned that great center of Gentile paganism into a great center of Jehovah worship. God says that there were more than 120,000 infants and small children within the city that did not know their right hand from their left hand (Jonah 4:11), and on the basis of that information, some scholars have estimated the population of Nineveh to have been as much as two million people. Can you imagine cities like Chicago, Boston, Milwaukee, or Phoenix, being converted to Christ and manifesting their faith through repentance and fasting within forty days as was true in Nineveh? It's absolutely amazing! But then again, so is our God!

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) A Summary of Jonah's Message to Nineveh (Jonah 3:3b-4); (2) The Divine Work of Faith and Repentance in the People of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5).

## **I. A Summary of Jonah's Message to Nineveh (Jonah 3:3b-4).**

A. As we ended the last sermon, we saw that upon Jonah being re-commissioned by the Lord to go forth as God's prophet to Nineveh, he immediately made his way to "Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD (Jonah 3:3a).

B. Whereas earlier the Lord had described Nineveh as “that great city” (in Jonah 1:2), now the Lord describes Nineveh as “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey” (Jonah 3:3b).

1. Just to refresh your memory from a previous sermon, ancient history records that the city of Nineveh and its surrounding suburbs were approximately 60 miles around its perimeter (*Jonah, his Life, Character, and Mission*; Patrick Fairbairn, p. 23). Nineveh’s wall that surrounded the city was 100 feet high, and was so wide that three chariots could run side by side on the wall at the same time. The wall around the city had 1,500 security towers, each of the towers being 200 ft. high. And as was noted earlier in the sermon, the estimated population of the city was perhaps two million people (*Calvin’s Commentaries on Jonah*, Vol. 14, p. 22).

2. The “three days’ journey” likely refers to how long it took Jonah to pass through the city preaching at various key places where the greatest number of people might hear the word of the Lord. By all accounts, Nineveh was indeed “an exceeding great city”—indeed, one of the greatest of the ancient world.

C. As Jonah moved from one location to another throughout the exceeding great city of Nineveh on that first day, he preached of the impending judgment that God was about to bring upon the city due to its great wickedness: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). Here is a seemingly very simple message, yet one yielding such amazing results—the conversion of an exceeding great city. How is it to be explained that such a vast number of people were converted by means of such a simple message and by means of one solitary prophet and minister of the Lord?

1. First and foremost, the astonishing results in the conversion of this pagan, gentile city of Nineveh cannot be attributed to the messenger or to his great oratorical skills and abilities, but can only

be attributed to the power of the Lord in granting to the Ninevites eyes to see and ears to hear with confident trust in the Lord the very simple message of judgment to come upon them for their sin and rebellion against the Most High God.

a. Dear ones, herein is a message we cannot afford to miss. Faithful preachers ought to be clear, honest, and straightforward in the proclamation of the gospel, for what is most important is that people know what God is saying to them. Their preaching ought to be filled with holy conviction that what is being declared is nothing less than the word of the Lord, and not the mere words of a man. Sound preaching is not intended to impress the listeners with the extent of one's vocabulary or to impress the listeners with funny stories to make them feel comfortable and to keep their attention.

b. Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites was simple, clear, and filled with conviction that God was speaking through him, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." It was the Almighty Spirit of the living God that powerfully and effectually gave to the Ninevites the faith to receive and rest in the offered salvation preached by Jonah in this simple sermon.

c. Dear ones, when the preaching of a faithful minister is simple, clear, and filled with conviction that God is speaking through him, it will be abundantly evident that the results which are accomplished in the lives of those who hear and believe the truth cannot be attributed to the preacher, but must be attributed to the grace and power of Christ in blessing His word. God then receives all the glory for great things He has done, and not man. Thus, we account for the amazing results in Nineveh by acknowledging that just as the God who works what is impossible to man raised Jonah from the belly of that great sea creature, so likewise the God who works what is impossible to man raised a rebellious, idolatrous gentile city from the grave and death of their transgressions and sins against Jehovah God.

2. Second, we account for the amazing results wrought by the Lord in converting the Ninevites by the word preached through Jonah to the message that the Ninevites were sinners that deserved the righteous judgment of the Holy God: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

a. The Ninevites understood from Jonah’s message that God was about to judge them, therefore they had sinned against the Lord and were deserving of His holy judgment. Their need for the Lord’s mercy was made clear to them in that they had offended Jehovah God by their idolatry, their murder, their oppression, their lying, and their robbery (sins indicated concerning Nineveh in Nahum 3).

b. The Hebrew word for “overthrown” (“and Nineveh shall be overthrown”) is used a number of times by the Holy Spirit to refer to the judgment God brought against Sodom and Gomorrah in overthrowing those wicked cities by fire (Genesis 19:21,25,29; Deuteronomy 29:23; Lamentations 4:6; Amos 4:11). Whether or not the Ninevites understood by what means God would overthrow “the exceeding great city of Nineveh”, they understood this deserving judgment was directed at their sin and rebellion against the Holy God who had created them.

c. Dear ones, we would all be whistling on our way to hell drunken with a false hope that all was well with us, if it were not for the consciousness of our sin through the law of God and the consciousness of what our sin justly deserves, namely, the righteous judgment of God. And we who have been redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ from the guilt, penalty, and power of sin must reflect often upon what our sin justly deserves from a Holy God in order that we might grow in our love and appreciation for our Savior and the wonders of a free salvation, grow in our repentance and godly fear of the Lord, and grow in our desires and acts of new obedience on account of the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who came into the world

not to save the righteous and the godly (i.e. those who consider themselves to be by nature good people), but to save sinners (yea, even the chief of sinners), and to save the ungodly. Thus, the amazing results in Nineveh were due to the Lord using His word (a word of judgment) faithfully preached by Jonah.

3. Third, we account for the amazing results wrought by the Lord in converting the Ninevites to the mercy of God that was to be understood in the preaching of Jonah.

a. The word preached to the Ninevites revealed to them not only the righteous judgment of the Holy God, but also the merciful invitation of the Gracious God that was extended to undeserving sinners. For when Jonah preached to the Ninevites, note carefully what he said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." If the Lord had removed all hope of His merciful salvation from Jonah's sermon to the Ninevites, there would not have been 40 days given before God's judgment fell, it would have immediately fallen without delay in instantaneous fire out of heaven (and I might add, had God chosen to do so, He would have been absolutely just in doing so, due the wickedness of Nineveh in rebelling against the Moral Law of God revealed to them even by way of the Light of Nature given by God to all men, Romans 1-2). The fact that God sent His prophet to the Ninevites, and delayed their deserved judgment for forty days was, no doubt, used by the Holy Spirit to lead them to look in faith to God's rich mercy and forgiveness of their sins, as we see in Jonah 3:9, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" Dear ones, remove the mercy of God in offering to all the forgiveness of sin, and there is no reason at all to trust in Christ or to repent of one's sins. Even in our repentance and godly sorrow for our sin after having been converted, we can only rightly grieve and sorrow as we ought, as we eye by faith the mercy of God that is in Christ Jesus. For if our shame, grief, and sorrow do not look in faith to all the blessings purchased for us (His

people) by Christ in the Covenant of Grace, we shall not know the comfort stated by Christ when He said, “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). The Ninevites knew they deserved the judgment of God as they awaited God’s wrath. But that which stirred faith in the Ninevites to grieve and sorrow over their sin was the invitation to come to the God of mercy who saves those whose only qualifications are that they are unworthy sinners that deserve not only the temporal judgment of God, but the everlasting judgment of God in hell. You who are within the sound of my voice today, if you are a sinner who deserves God’s judgment, you have warrant to look in faith to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. You need no other qualification to come to Christ than to be a sinner deserving of God’s everlasting wrath.

b. But not only could the Ninevites rightly infer the offer of God’s merciful salvation to them in His delay of judgment for 40 days, but they also had Jonah as a sign to them, in order that they might also discern the rich mercy of God shown to them in sending them this particular prophet and minister of God, Jonah. Let me explain what I mean.

1. In a previous sermon, we observed how the Lord Jesus pointed to Jonah as a sign **to the obstinate, unbelieving Pharisees** of His own resurrection (in Matthew 12:39-40): “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah: For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Here the Lord declares that Jonah was a sign to the unbelieving Pharisees pointing to Christ’s resurrection.

2. But in the parallel passage found in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 11:29-30), we observe that Jesus Christ also declared Jonah to be a sign to the Ninevites to whom he (i.e. Jonah) preached: “This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonah the prophet. **For as Jonah was a sign unto the**

**Ninevites**, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation.” In other words, if Jonah was a sign given to the Ninevites, Jonah must have also preached to the Ninevites about his initial rebellion against the word of the Lord to come to Nineveh, how the Lord pursued and chastened Jonah by means of the hurricane-like storm, how Jonah sacrificed his life to save all those on the ship by having them cast him overboard, how he was immediately swallowed by a great fish prepared by the Lord and was buried there for three days as God chastened him, how he eyed by faith the mercy of the Lord’s salvation from the belly of that great sea creature, and how out of that seemingly impossible watery grave the Lord brought Jonah forth and graciously renewed to Jonah His commission to go to Nineveh as a sign of God’s merciful salvation to all those who deserve the righteous judgment of God for their rebellion against Him. How could Jesus be a sign to the Jews, if He had not preached to them the gospel and worked great wonders to confirm the gospel of salvation He brought? Likewise, how could Jonah be a sign to the Ninevites, if the Ninevites knew nothing about what Jonah had experienced? I submit to you, dear ones, just as the figurative burial and resurrection of Jonah from death to life was a powerful sign to the Ninevites to hope in the mercy of the Lord who saved Jonah, so the literal burial and resurrection of Christ from death to life was a most powerful sign to the Jews of Christ’s generation (and all generations to come) to hope in the mercy of the Lord who raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead.

3. Thus, if the Lord had sent this very prophet whom He had miraculously rescued from the seemingly impossible grave of that whale’s belly, the Lord was extending to the Ninevites the promise of His salvation to rescue them from the power of God’s righteous wrath and judgment to come. Thus, Jonah was raised from the belly of the whale in order to point those of Christ’s generation to the Lord’s miraculous bodily resurrection, but Jonah was also raised from the belly

of the whale in order to point the Ninevites themselves to the God of Jonah's salvation, whose mercy endureth forever, and whose mercy is offered to guilty sinners, to ungodly sinners, and to even the chief of sinners. Jonah was a living epistle of God's undeserved salvation to the Ninevites.

4. Thus, dear ones, we see that all that Jonah experienced was ordained of the Lord that he might be a shining trophy of God's rich mercy, that even a pagan, idolatrous gentile city like Nineveh might behold in Jonah a living epistle of God's undeserved salvation. And dear struggling Christian (whatever your trial may be, whatever your struggle with sin, whatever your struggle with physical afflictions, whatever your struggle with financial hardships, whatever your struggle with family relationships), the Lord is making of you a living epistle (just like Jonah) of His undeserved mercy in justifying you, in sanctifying you, in preserving you, and in supplying all your needs according to His riches by Christ Jesus, that those non-Christians around you might hear and behold the wonders of God's mercy. Beloved, therefore, do not despair, but rather eye by faith the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

## **II. The Divine Work of Faith and Repentance in the People of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5).**

A. Thus, in both word and deed, Jonah preached to the Ninevites the holy wrath of God that deservedly weighed so heavily upon them, and preached to the Ninevites the gracious salvation of the Lord that was freely offered to them. And what was the gracious and powerful effect of God's marvelous grace to these pagan idolaters when freely offered life by the grace of God? "So the people of Nineveh believed God" (Jonah 3:5). God granted to them the grace to put their confidence and trust in the promise of His undeserved salvation. They did not first have to go



through some period of reformation. They did not first evidence their love and repentance. They did not first wait upon the Lord to give them a further sign from heaven before they believed in the promise of the Lord. No, dear ones, they believed the free promise of God's salvation, and then as an evidence of their faith in the Lord and in His salvation, they turned from their evil ways in humble repentance and proclaimed a fast to demonstrate their sorrow over how they had so grievously offended the Lord their God by their idolatry, their murder, their lying, and their robbery (see Nahum 3).

B. Dear ones, you are not forgiven by the Lord and justified (i.e. declared righteous) by the Lord on the basis of or by means of your repentance, love, and new obedience. The Scripture is clear that the sole instrument that God has ordained to receive the forgiveness of God and the imputed righteousness of Christ is faith alone (Acts 10:43; Galatians 2:16). You see, when we place even those works of God's grace such as repentance, love, and new obedience as prerequisites and conditions to God forgiveness of a sinner and God's justification of the ungodly, we have established a justification by the law every bit as damaging to the free grace of God and every bit as legalistic as to make the observance of circumcision, the dietary laws, and the Jewish feasts and festivals a prerequisite and condition to God's forgiveness of a sinner and God's justification of the ungodly. Repentance, love, and new obedience are the necessary fruit of saving faith, that have (like faith) been purchased for us by Christ in the Covenant of Grace, yet it is only by faith that we receive and rest with confidence in the promise of God that we are forgiven and justified on the basis of the work and righteousness of Christ (rather than looking to some duty to be performed by us, or some spiritual qualification to be found within us). When we look to ourselves for any qualification to come to Christ and to receive His offer of salvation, we have fallen under the Covenant of Works. Dear ones, we trust not even in

our own faith to save us, for faith is like an eye—faith eyes not itself, but faith eyes an all-sufficient Savior and His Covenant of Grace as it is offered to us in the Gospel.

C. Dear ones, in conclusion, if the Ninevites had relatively so little gospel information (in comparison to all that we have), their faith in the Lord shall be the silencing of all excuses on the part of all of us who have several copies of God’s Word in our homes, who have heard the gospel of salvation proclaimed to us countless times, and yet have treated it with little relevance, ignored it, neglected it, and procrastinated in receiving and resting in the promises of God proclaimed to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Dear ones, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

1. If ever there was a biblical and historical example to which our faith may look as we hope in the promises of God’s great power and mercy in bringing the fullness of the Gentile nations and the nation of Israel unto a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in that future millennial period of gospel prosperity, the salvation of Nineveh is an unparalleled and unsurpassed demonstration of God’s grace and power to save pagan cities and kingdoms by means of the preached gospel. Dear ones, how Jesus Christ would have us cast ourselves today without reservation upon His firm and certain promise: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6), and to look outside of ourselves to the power and faithfulness of the God who cannot lie when He promises: “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (Psalm 110:3).

2. Dear ones, there is nothing that our great God cannot do in mercy to save the undeserving and the ungodly (whether an undeserving individual, city, or nation). Our faith rests not in our obedience, in our prayers, in our repentance, or even in our faith itself—our faith rests alone in Christ and in His gracious promise to save the chief of sinners, the chief city of sinners, or the chief nation of sinners.

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