

The Primacy of Biblical Preaching!

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Lawson

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I want you to be taking your Bibles and finding the book of Jonah, Jonah 3, and if I was to put a title on this message tonight it would very simply be this, "One Man, One Message, One Method." Jonah 3. I want to begin reading in verse 1. I want to set this text before us and then tonight we will consider what it has to say. The word of God says,

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. 4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. 6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 9 Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." 10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

If we learn anything from this passage of Scripture, it is that we see what God can do through one man, but more than that, we learn what God can do through one man preaching.

I think we would have to agree that preaching has fallen on hard times in these days, and modern preaching has been described as a mild-mannered man standing before a mild-mannered people urging them to be more mild, but preaching such as we see here with Jonah seems to be something we would have to admit that has been relegated to the ancient past, at least preaching that comes with such urgency and with such authority. What is so amazing to me about Jonah 3 is that Jonah went into a strange town not known for its receptivity to the word of God, without bells and whistles, without smoke and mirrors, without high-tech equipment, without entertainment and amusement, without drama, without marketing schemes, without advertising campaign, to the contrary Jonah was armed simply with the word of God and he went forth and preached and heralded the word of God and God moved upon this town in ways that are unprecedented in biblical history. Here is the account of one man, Jonah, armed with one message, repent, committed to one method, preaching, and he saw God work more powerfully and on a grander scale, as I said, than any other place in redemptive history.

I have a firm conviction that you ought to be able to parachute one man into any town armed simply with a MacArthur Study Bible, and to be able to turn that city upside down for Jesus Christ. Yet today rather than preaching with renewed fervor, so many are preoccupied with secondary strategies, pursuing the latest church growth techniques, alternate worship styles, and corporate marketing plans to build their churches. While some of these augmentations may have a place, and I underscore "may have a place," the crying need of the hour is to restore power to the evangelical pulpit. I have a great concern, I have a great burden that we have drifted away from the primacy and the centrality of expository preaching and preaching the word of God. We have drifted away from our confidence in the sufficiency of the word of God preached to carry out its eternal work, and so tonight I want us to look at this chapter and I trust that God will encourage your heart and put steel in your convictions that you will be all the more resolved to be a man of the ministry of the word of God.

Now as we look at this chapter, I want to begin in verse 1 and I want you to note with me, first, the call he received. As this chapter begins, it starts with the call of God and, men, that's where ministry always begins, it begins with God. All things are from him and through him and to him. It starts with the call of God upon Jonah's life, a call that was issued to him a second time, and this is where every ministry must begin, and as we consider the call he received, I want you to notice, first, it was issued to a specific person. Look at verse 1, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time." God singled out this one man to be his instrument to preach the word. God always issues his call specifically to individuals. God's call was not issued indiscriminately, to whosoever will may preach. God drew a circle around Jonah's name and said, "You shall be My messenger."

God's call to preach has always been selective to chosen individuals. It was that way with the prophets. In Jeremiah 1:5 you recall God said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." And God did the same with the Apostle Paul in Galatians 1:15. Scripture says, "God set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me

through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles." Men, the same is true for us as well. If God has called you to preach, he has set you apart from your mother's womb, he has drawn a circle around your name from before time began. You are his eternal instrument to preach the word.

But not only a specific person, would you also notice a specific place. In verse 2 the Scripture says, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city." There was a specific place on God's map where Jonah was to go and to carry out his ministry, it was the city of Nineveh, one of the great cities of the Assyrian Empire. This, as you know, would be a demanding assignment for Jonah. This was not exactly the buckle of the Bible Belt where Jonah was sent and Nineveh was a city known far and wide as a place of iniquity and wickedness and violence and idolatry. It was one of the cruelest people on the face of the earth. They were known for sacrificing their children to their pagan deities. They were known for the cruel way with which they dealt with their enemies, nailing their enemies to the walls of their cities. They were known for their ruthless aggression, the way they would prey upon innocent people. They were a people without a conscience, hardened by sin, yet this is exactly where God sent Jonah to preach and I want to say to us who have been called, there are no easy places to which we are called to minister for Jesus Christ. As far as the curse of sin has gone, so we will find opposition wherever God sends us to minister. There are no easy assignments in the kingdom of God. There was not for Jonah, there will not be for you and me as well, and what encouragement this is and how this ought to nail our feet to the floor where we minister to know that God calls us to a specific place.

But I want you to notice, third, about this call, not only a specific person, Jonah, and a specific place, Nineveh, but a specific purpose. Continue to look in verse 2, this was the assignment, "and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." God now tells Jonah what he is to do, "You are to go to Nineveh and you are to proclaim the proclamation which I am to give to you." In other words, both the message and the manner of the delivery of that message were prescribed by God. "The message I will give to you, but I want you to proclaim it, not share it." Proclaim it. This is a Hebrew word "qara." It is a strong word, this word "proclaim." It means "to call; to invoke; to summons; to appeal to." It is a direct word spoken in a time of critical need. Far more than mere suggestions or the offering of opinions, the word of God is to be delivered with authoritative issuing of a prophetic message, and so God told him to proclaim the word of the Lord.

But also he gave him what he was to say as well. The message would not originate with Jonah. God would give him what to say, "the proclamation which I am going to tell you," and this word "proclamation" which comes from the same Hebrew root for "proclaim" suggests a formal type of announcement such as made by an official messenger or designated ambassador who would be dispatched by a king to issue his royal decree. This is what Jonah was to do, he was to proclaim the proclamation as an official ambassador of the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Men, I want to tell you, if God has called you to preach, this is exactly what we are to do. We must preach God's word, the proclamation that he gives to us in the 66 books of the

Canon of Scripture. We are to preach the full counsel of God, nothing more, nothing less. And I want to ask you: are you one of these men of God? Are you one who has been called by God? Martyn Lloyd-Jones has said there is no higher, no greater, no grander calling than the call of God upon a man's life to preach the word of God. If God has called you to be his servant, never stoop to be a king.

Now second, not only the call he issued but I want you to see the commitment he made beginning in verse 3 because this time in response to God's call, Jonah chose to obey and to do God's will. Look at verse 3, "So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD." At this point, Jonah is probably standing on the beach of the Mediterranean Sea or someplace thereabouts, he has been personally delivered there by a great fish. He spent the night on a foam blubber mattress and he's now ready to preach. Nineveh is some 550 miles away across rugged terrain. Jonah has no plane to catch, no car to drive, but I'm sure at this point if Jonah had to crawl to Nineveh he would do that.

And, "Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk." You understand that this means the outer circumference of the wall of the city took about three days to walk around that circumference. It's been estimated that it is about 60 miles in length. No longer running from God's will, he now pursues it, purposing to go where God wants him to go and to do what God wants him to do. Leslie Allen, a commentator, writes an interesting note here. He says, "Jonah trudges for a whole day and yet he has not reached the heart of this vast city. He feels small, one man against a vast metropolis. Lost like a needle in a haystack inside this gigantic Vanity Fair, this Sodom of a city." And as Jonah now commits himself to do the will of God to proclaim the proclamation that God will give him, I want you to note four qualities or four marks about the preaching of Jonah. May God do this in our hearts.

First, I want you to note that his preaching was courageous. It was courageous. Verse 4, "Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'" This was not exactly a seeker-sensitive message. He was courageous to cry out the word of the Lord. He did not conduct a door-to-door survey to determine the felt needs of the pagans in the city of Nineveh. He did not poll the Ninevites to discover what they wanted to hear. He did not adapt the cultic music of Baal worship to convey divine things. I enjoyed that one [laughter]. Rather he opened his mouth and courageously cried out God's message. He raised his voice above the commotion of this great city, not mildly bringing up the subject of God's word. He threatened them with it.

Philip Brooks in his famous Yale lectures on preaching in 1877, speaks of this kind of courage in preaching that we need. "If you're afraid of men and a slave to their opinion, go and do something else. Don't preach. Go and make shoes to fit them. Go even and paint pictures which you know are bad but will suit their bad taste. But do not keep on all your life preaching sermons which say not what God has sent you to declare." Be courageous. Jonah was courageous as he preached the word of God.

John Stott writes in that great book "Between Two Worlds," "There is an urgent need for courageous preachers in the pulpits of the world today. Neither men-pleasers nor time-servers ever make good preachers. We are called to the sacred task of biblical exposition and commissioned to proclaim what God has said, not what humans want to hear. We have no liberty to scratch their itch or pander to their likings."

Where are the courageous preachers of the word of God in this hour and in this generation? Second I want you to note about his preaching, not only was it courageous but, second, the element of conviction, and by this I mean the conviction within his own heart. Look at verse 4 again, "Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out." The fact that he cried out, I think, conveys to us that there was a deep full conviction within his own soul of absolute assurance of the reality of the message. It was a fire that was burning in his bones.

Alexander Maclaren, the great Scottish Baptist preacher of the 19th century has a good word for us at this point in his comments. "This expression concerning the fact that Jonah cried out, suggests the manner befitting those who bear God's message. They should sound it out loudly, plainly, urgently, with earnestness and marks of emotion in their voice. Languid whisperers will not wake sleepers. Unless the message is manifestly in earnest, the message will fall flat." Maclaren goes on to say, "Not with bated breath as if ashamed of it, nor with hesitation as if not quite sure of it, nor with coldness as if it were of little urgency. God's word is to be pealed in men's ears." And then Maclaren says, "The preacher is a crier."

If you were to ask me what is the one missing mark in the evangelical pulpit today apart from a lack of biblical theology and doctrine, I would answer with one word: passion. Where are the men of God who will preach with conviction and passion? It was Richard Baxter who once said, "I preach as never sure to preach again, as a dying man to dying men." Where are such dying men today?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great expositor said, "Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire." Where are such inflamed men today?

D. L. Moody, the 19th century evangelist said, "The best way to revive a church is to build a fire in the pulpit." Where are such on-fire men in the pulpit?

Joseph Parker said, "True preaching is the sweating of blood." Where are the men who will sweat blood in the preaching of the word of God?

And the greatest of all the church's evangelists, George Whitefield once said, "I love those who thunder out the word. The Christian world is in a deep sleep. Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it."

Conviction, courage. I was visiting recently with a man who heads up a seminary and we were talking about great preachers of yesteryear, and I asked him, "Where are great men like," and we walked back through the ages. I said, "What is the one missing element

today that marked those men?" And without even hesitation, he snapped back, "Gravitas, a sense of gravity in the pulpit, a sense of weightiness in bringing the message, a sense of earnestness in communicating the word of God." He said, "We have many communicators, we have many men of levity and frivolity in pulpits, there is little gravitas."

I want you to notice a third mark of Jonah's preaching, not only courage and not only conviction but I think, third, we can say confrontation. Look at the message again, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." This was unmistakably a message of the certainty and the severity of the righteous character of God. Forty days and the judgment of God will fall like a hammer. This has always been the approach of God's men down through the ages. Someone has written Jonah's message from the steps going up to the ark was not, "Something good is going to happen to you today." Amos was not confronted by the high priest of Israel for proclaiming, "Confession is possession." Jeremiah was not put into the pit for preaching, "I'm okay, you're okay." Daniel was not put into the lions' den for telling people, "Possibility thinking will move mountains." And John the Baptist was not forced to preach in the wilderness and eventually be beheaded because he preached, "Smile, God loves you." Instead the message of these men was, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." The message of judgment is a forgotten message today, quite frankly, and we must remember that the good news is never embraced as good news until they know what the bad news is.

Adrian Rogers has written concerning this kind of confrontation, "It is better to be divided by truth than to be united in error. It is better to speak the truth that hurts and then heals than falsehood that comforts and then kills. It is not love and it is not friendship if we fail to declare the whole counsel of God. It is better to be hated for telling the truth than to be loved for telling a lie. It is impossible to find anyone in the Bible who was a power for God who did not have enemies and was not hated. It is better to stand alone with the truth," Rogers said, "than to be wrong with the multitude."

There's a fourth element that I want you to note in verse 4, not only confrontation, and not only conviction, but also I want you to see compassion. He does say forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown, in reality, God's message was a message with the invitation of grace and with the hope of salvation, there is a window of time if you will come to God. If you will come to God on his terms, you may be delivered from the judgment to come. Merrill Unger writes, "The 40 day delay in the execution of divine judgment upon Nineveh gave the people time to repent." And Douglas Stewart in his commentary notes, "Jonah's message must have seemed to many Ninevites to be an invitation to repentance giving hope that they and their city might not be destroyed."

As we preach the word of God, not only do we bring with courage a message of confrontation, but we bring a message of compassion as well as we extend the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are merchants of the hope of the gospel of Christ. We offer forgiveness of sins. We offer pardon from iniquity. We offer reconciliation with God. We offer new life in Christ. We offer heaven forever. We offer propitiation of God's

wrath. We have the greatest, most glorious news that ever come from the lips of any man in the history of the world. We are heralds of the good news of Jesus Christ.

So this is the commitment that he made. He was courageous, he was confident, confrontational, but yet compassionate. Well, I want to ask you: did God bless this means? Well, I want you to see the conversions he saw. Now what follows is the greatest evangelistic response in the recorded history of the world. The people actually stopped to listen. The hum of commerce died down. The buzz in the marketplace quietened. The chatter of the neighborhood grew silent. A holy hush settled over the city. Look at verse 5 and I want you to notice several components here. It was a saving movement of God. Verse 5, "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God." How strange. They had no previous biblical understanding of truth and yet as the word of God was brought as prescribed by God himself, the God who called Jonah to preach was also calling the Ninevites to believe, and the text says that they believed in God. This was a town of some 600,000 people as Jonah 4:11 says, that there were 120,000 children. This was a massive turning to God even if taken in a hyperbolic sense, but they actually responded to the preaching of God's message and they believed.

This Hebrew word for "believed, aman," it means "to be firm," it means "to be established," it means "to trust; to be supported; to stand firm." This is what happened and, men, this is what I believe will happen in our ministries as well. God is pleased to honor the preaching of his word with conversions of souls. They will come in due time but as the rain comes down from heaven and shall not return without accomplishing the purpose for which it has come, so the word of God as it goes forth in the preaching through his servants will accomplish his eternal purposes.

But second, in verse 5 we see it was also a sobering movement of God's Spirit. It says, "they called a fast and put on sackcloth." These were signs of inward contrition and humiliation. Fasting was an act of self-denial symbolic of the self-denial of their own heart as they believed upon God, and the sackcloth was a symbol of sorrow and repentance. It was a coarse, dark, crude, black cloth that was uncomfortable and unfit to wear. The coarseness of the sackcloth made the wearer miserable. This was symbolic of their mourning over sin and how they felt on the inside as the Spirit of God and the word of God was breaking up their heart.

It was sobering. It was sweeping. Look at the end of verse 5. Top to bottom this was a sweeping revival. It says, "from the greatest to the least of them." From the rich to the poor, masters and servants, upper-class, lower-class, princes and paupers. A true work of God through the preaching of the word knows no barriers. It is not restricted to a homogeneous unit because it is dependent upon preaching the transcendent truth of God that overshadows barriers and denominational and ethnic differences.

In verse 6 we see how sweeping it was, "When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes." Sitting on ashes was also symbolic, it was a sign of helplessness and despair. It was symbolic of knowing one deserves to be incinerated and under judgment

and hell. It was symbolic of lowering one's self in the presence of God and here even the king himself comes under the deep conviction of the Spirit of God as the message reaches all the way to the king.

And in verse 7, the king becomes an evangelist, "He issued a proclamation and it said, 'In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth.'" So desirous were they that the whole city would turn to the true and living God that they even involved the animals representative of, "Lord, it's all of us. We are turning to You. We are believing in You."

Then we see at the end of verse 8 it was sanctifying as well, "and let men call on God earnestly that each may," watch this, "turn from his wicked way." My friend, this was the real thing. There was a break from the past, a break from sin. They were turning from their "wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands." They were not merely professing with their lips a cheap grace, but with deep sorrow over their sin and repentance of heart they turned from their sin under the preaching of Jonah.

"Who knows, God may turn and relent," verse 9, "and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish.' When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it." Here is the result of the simple preaching of God's word, to bring about a saving, sobering, sweeping, sanctifying revival. This, I believe, is the great need of the hour, for the men of God to take the word of God and the power of the Spirit of God and to declare the message of God, and I believe that God will be pleased to use it again in this hour as he has in centuries past. If God has called you to preach, for God's sake preach the word.

We'll let Charles Haddon Spurgeon have the last word in this who spoke over 100 years ago. The Prince of Preachers speaks to us, he said, "We want again Luthers, Calvins, Bunyans, Whitefields, men fit to mark eras, whose names breathe terror in our foemen's ears. We have dire need of such. Whence will they come to us? They are the gifts of Jesus Christ to the church, and they will come in due time. He has power to give us back again a golden age of preachers, a time as fertile of mighty ministers as was the Puritan age, and when the good old truth is once more preached by men whose lips are touched as with a live coal from off the altar, this shall be the instrument in the hand of the Spirit for bringing about a great and thorough revival of religion in the land." Now listen to what he says, "I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. The moment the church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her. It has been through the ministry of preaching that the Lord has always been pleased to revive and bless His churches."

Beloved, the need of the hour is for men of God to take the word of God, in the power of the Spirit of God, and to proclaim the message of God, and I believe God will bring about a great and thorough awakening in our day as we rise up to preach the word.

Join me in a word of prayer.

Father in heaven, would You stir our hearts tonight, rekindle within our own hearts our call to preach, how You have put Your hand upon our shoulder and drawn us unto Yourself and have said to us, "Proclaim the proclamation which I shall give you." Lord, it's a high and holy calling that You have given to us and, Father, I pray that You would nurture within our own hearts a sense of fear and a sense of awe that You have called us to be heralds of Your word. O Lord, may we be courageous, not be men-pleasers. Lord, may we be full of conviction, may we both confront as well as preach with great compassion as we declare the full counsel of God, both salvation and damnation, both grace and wrath. And Lord, I pray that You would be pleased by Your sovereign grace to bring about a saving, sobering, sweeping, sanctifying revival in this day. And Lord, we do echo the words of our brother Mr. Spurgeon, that we do not look for any other means of bringing about this revival apart from the preaching of Your word. God, with these men here tonight, I pray that You would arrest their hearts and stir deeply within them, ignite the flame within them, stir up the gift within them, that they would devote themselves afresh to this high and holy calling. In Jesus' name. Amen.