

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**When God Repents**

**Jonah 3:1-10**

**October 19, 2008**

**Dr. Robert Petterson**

**Covenant Presbyterian Church**

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

[www.covenantnaples.com](http://www.covenantnaples.com)

On September 11, 2001 two terrorist-piloted airliners slammed into the World Trade Towers. Seven years later it would seem that several planes have plowed into the New York Stock Exchange, creating an economic 9/11. After years of *casino capitalism*, greed is being punished with bank failures, emergency rescues, and high anxiety in the credit markets. The tremors on Wall Street have spread to Main Street, and the crisis has gone global.

Predictably, from presidential candidates and political pundits to the average *Joe* on the street, everyone is pointing a finger at others. In times of crisis, human nature demands that we find a scapegoat (as if assigning blame somehow fixes problems). So the question *de jour*: who is responsible for the mess we're in: gluttonous CEOs on Wall Street, power-hungry politicians in Washington, greedy bankers on Main Street, or home buyers who should have known better.

Maybe *Pogo*, that character from the newspaper comics of long ago, had the best answer: "We've met the enemy and he is *us*!" Is it possible that all of us bear some responsibility for this mess?

Did you ever see Ridley Scott's Oscar-winning horror flick: *Alien*? In a particularly grotesque moment, the space alien, which had been accidentally ingested, bursts out of a man's belly. Anyone who saw that 1979 film classic must have wondered, "What could be more disgusting than to have one of those monsters growing inside of me?"

The truth is: we all have a monster inside us. The Bible calls it our sin nature. Through Christ's work in our lives, it's possible to shrink the monster. But it never goes away. If we are not vigilant, it will grow back and burst out of us at a moment's notice. St. Paul recognized the monster within:

"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."  
(Romans 7:18)

I was in Uganda after successive dictators Idi Amin and Milton Oboté murdered more than 1.2 million people. In a cemetery full of babies murdered by Serbian snipers in Sarajevo, I heard tales of unspeakable horror from survivors of the genocide in Bosnia. On the borders of Rwanda I talked to those who were part of the murderous rampage that killed a million Tutsis in less than 100 days. In Sudanese refugee camps I saw the ravages of genocide that still rages in Dufar. In China I met smiling members of a Communist Party that systematically murdered millions over the past half

century. Yet, in all those places I couldn't find a single monster who perpetrated these heinous crimes against humanity. All I saw were smiling, well-behaved people like you and me. I came to realize that there is a monstrous evil that lurks inside the nicest people. More than once I have asked myself, "Could I do what these seemingly nice people did?"

After she returned from Rwanda, Kay Warren wrote in *Christianity Today*, "We can't defeat the evil in the world without facing the evil in ourselves." God's prophet Jonah needed to hear Kay's statement. God called him to go to Nineveh. No city was ever filled with a more monstrous evil than this capital of the Assyrian empire. Its savagery was unprecedented in human history. During its 600-year reign of terror, Assyria had unleashed genocide after genocide on the Middle East. No wonder God says in Jonah 1:2, "...its wickedness has come up before me."

But there is also monstrous evil inside Jonah: bigotry, hatred, revenge, and outright rebellion against a gracious God who would forgive the Ninevites if they repented. So God had to cut the monster in Jonah down to size by putting the prophet through the terror of being swallowed alive by a giant fish. You could reduce Jonah's story to Kay Warren's Rwanda insight:

**We cannot defeat the evil in the world  
without facing the evil in ourselves.**

The world is in a mess because each of us is in a mess. Before Jonah could deal with the monsters in Nineveh he had to deal with the monster inside himself. Fixing our world begins with fixing ourselves. It's a lifelong process. At the end of this story Jonah is still an angry man. We don't know if the monster inside Jonah was ever fully tamed. It is one of the ironies of Scripture that wicked Nineveh repented, but God's prophet didn't.

The truth is: we will never change our spouse until we change; we won't transform our families unless we are transformed; and we can never make a difference in the world until God has made a difference in us. If you are tempted to play the Pharisee and point out the evil in others, you might want to remember that old Irish saying: "When you point a finger at someone else, there are always four pointing back at you." Here are three truths I learn from today's edition of Jonah's story:

**1. Revival in the city begins with renewal in the church.**

I refuse to become unhinged by the turmoil in the world today. Franklin D. Roosevelt was right when he said, "We have nothing to fear but fear

itself." If God can save Nineveh, he can surely save America. Just as he called Jonah to go to that city, he has called us to raise a prophetic voice in ours. In Matthew 5:14 Jesus declares, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." We need to remember God's promise:

"If *my* people, who are called by *my* name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from *their* wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive *their* sins and heal *their* land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Revival comes to Nineveh *after* there is renewal in Jonah. When Jesus came to Jerusalem, he went first to the temple. Before the city could be changed, God's house had to be cleansed. The problems in America today aren't going to be solved in the White House, statehouse, courthouse, schoolhouse, movie house, or banking house. They must first be resolved in the church house, and in our houses. Like Jonah, we need to come to grips with:

### **Our responsibility**

God is very specific in Jonah 3:2: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah would have felt better if God had spoken something more general, like "glorify God" or "do good" or "love others." Instead, God was painfully direct: "Go to Nineveh!"—the *one* place Jonah didn't want to go. "...proclaim the message I give you."—the *one* message Jonah didn't want to give. So that Nineveh might be saved!—the *one* thing that Jonah didn't want to see happen.

The first time he heard that command, Jonah ran away. When God commanded the second time, verse 3 says, "Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh." If the genesis of all evil is in disobedience to God, transformation can only come through obedience. But obedience is never tested until we are asked to do that which we hate most. The key is in Jesus' words, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

Our salvation is purchased by Christ's death on the cross. We cannot be saved unless we embrace the cross. But too many Christians think that once they've accepted Jesus as their Savior, they can leave the cross behind and go their own way. This is the *easy believism* of so much of evangelicalism.

But, if we embraced the cross for salvation, we must carry the cross for sanctification. When a person picked up a cross in the Roman world, he was

going to his place of execution. He said goodbye to his family, friends, and things. Before Jesus could take up his cross, he had to die to *self* by saying to his father, "Not my will but yours be done." Jesus is clear: *Before* we can follow him, we must *first* die to self. Jonah had to die to all of his own pleasures and prejudices. Jesus gives a command: "Go and make disciples of all nations!" (Matthew 8:19) We *must* preach the message of repentance and grace to our cities. More importantly, we *must* live out the gospel in our lives, even when it kills us to do so. Then we need to come to grips with...

### **Our respectability**

Jonah did not cut a respectable figure. First of all, he was a Jew. The Assyrians despised Jews as weaklings and religious fanatics. Worse, he was a frightful sight after three days in the fish. In my imagination, I see this Jew coming into the outskirts of Nineveh: his clothes in tatters, bleached white from the stomach acids of that sea monster, tender skin blistered from the sun, covered with whale vomit and smelling of fish. His evangelistic methods and message aren't very impressive either. Verse 4 says that he walks around the city, like some wild-eyed prophet of doom, shouting the same eight word line over and over again: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!" Obviously Jonah hasn't read the latest bestseller, *How to Win Babylonians and Influence Assyrians*.

Yet God uses Jonah despite his weakness. The key is found in the original Hebrew language of verse three. It could be translated, "*According* to the word of God" or "*By the power of* the word of God...Jonah went to Nineveh." Jonah's authority wasn't in his appearance or eloquence, but in the power and presence of God. Churches worry too much about whether we are relevant or attractive to our postmodern world. The truth is: the millennial generation that everyone wants to reach is looking to see if we are *real*, not slick. St. Paul wrote, "I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom...I came to you in weakness and fear, with much trembling." (1 Corinthians 2:1-4) Jonathan Edwards' sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, ignited a revival in Colonial America. Yet this sermon that changed America was a ponderous theological treatise more than 1½ hours long that Edwards read from a manuscript in monotone voice. D.L. Moody was grotesquely obese, uneducated, and coarse. Yet over 100 million people heard his messages, and thousands came to Christ. Charles Spurgeon once confessed that he wouldn't walk across the street to hear himself preach.

The secret isn't in our respectability, but in our passion for Christ. George Whitefield brought revival to England and Colonial America while praying

everyday, "O Lord, give me souls or take my soul." Henry Martyn stood on a beach in India and cried out, "Here let me burn out for God." A critic of D.L. Moody said, "I counted 18 grammatical errors in your sermon tonight." Moody replied, "Young man, I am using to the glory of God all the grammar I know. Are you doing the same?" Finally, if we are going to be renewed so that the city can be revived, we need to come to grips with...

### **God's reckoning**

Again, Jonah's message is painfully short and brutal in verse four: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." What is the significance in those 40 days? God is patient. He will wait 40 more days for Nineveh to respond. While Noah preached, God held off the flood for 120 years. God gave Sodom and Gomorrah 400 years to repent. He allowed Jerusalem 40 more years after Jesus warned them of their coming destruction. But the 40 days in Jonah's warning also tells us that there is a limit to God's patience. How long will God bear with America? Are there still 40 more days? Or are we in the 39<sup>th</sup> day? I believe that the economic shockwaves today send a timely warning. Is the Day of the Lord approaching? Or has God in his grace given us 40 more days to repent and turn from our wicked ways? Jonah must change before Nineveh can be saved.

### **2. Revival in the city brings renewal to the culture.**

Christians must never fear the future when the fate of cities is in the hands of God. In the time we have left, look what our Lord can do in Nineveh:

#### **Faith**

Verse five begins with these words: "The Ninevites believed God." That's all it takes for salvation. When the jailor in Philippi asked St. Paul what he had to do to be saved, the Apostle's answer was simple: "Believe on the Lord..." Salvation begins with the simple belief that God's word will do exactly what he says he will do.

#### **Fasting**

Verse five continues, "They declared a fast..." Verse seven says, "Then he (the king) issued a proclamation in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink...'" Have you ever been so heavy of heart that food tasted like sawdust in your mouth? Food is for celebration, but fasting is for

repentance. We will never change unless we are sick of our sin and full of dread about its consequences.

### **Sackcloth and Ashes**

Verse five concludes, "...then all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth." Verses six continues, "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust." Verse eight records these words of his royal decree: "But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth..." This is the dying to self and taking up the cross that must accompany belief. The Ninevites exchange comfortable and fashionable clothes for the rough, ugly burlap cloth that is used to make gunny sacks for grain and cattle feed. The king takes off his jeweled crown and pours ashes over his head. He steps down from his throne and sits in the dust. People and beasts are covered with the same sackcloth and ashes. It's the Ninevite way of saying that kings are not above beggars, and sinful citizens are no better than beasts. One thinks of the first beatitude of Jesus: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3) During this election period I am saddened by the vitriolic hatred and Pharisaic judgment as both sides cast stones at each other. The angry name-calling is breath-taking in its brutality. We are a long way from wearing sackcloth and ashes. Nineveh puts America to shame. Until we die to self-aggrandizement, there will never be renewal in the church or revival in our cities.

### **Prayers of repentance**

In verse eight the king decrees, "Let everyone call urgently on the name of God..." What is the point of these *urgent* prayers? He says in verse nine, "Who knows? God may yet relent..." I think of the second beatitude of Jesus: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matthew 5:4) No matter how heinous our sins, prayers of repentance move the heart of God. We want the sinners out there in Nineveh to repent. But Jonah must first repent in chapter two of this story before the Ninevites repent in chapter three. Again, God said to Solomon, "If *my* people who are called by *name* will humble themselves...*then* will I hear from heaven and heal their land."

### **Taking the opposite direction**

In verse eight the king goes on to decree, "Let them give up their evil ways and their violence." The prayers of repentance have to be matched with changed lives. The biblical word for *repentance* literally means to turn

around and go in the opposite direction. Jonah first headed in the wrong direction to Tarshish. He had to turn around and go God's way to Nineveh. In the same way the Assyrians, known for their brutality, had to turn from their violence. It was a radical change in their national identity. The gospel always calls us to go counterculture. If America is to find healing she will have to change her ways. Before that, there will have to be some radical changes in the attitudes and actions of Christians.

### **Cultural Transformation**

True revivals not only change hearts, they change everything in the culture, from the king in the throne room to the beasts in the barnyard. True spiritual revival transforms the way people think about everything. Even institutions are changed. Nothing is left untouched. Marriages are healed. Slaves are set free. Old prejudices are erased. Social ills are eradicated. Historians report that there was a decade after Jonah that the Assyrians didn't even go to war. No wonder verse ten says, "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

### **Revival and renewal is fueled by the power of repentance.**

Are you afraid for our future? The king of Nineveh was petrified. But he rallied his nation to action. He had a single hope, recorded in verse eight: "God may yet relent..." Literally, the Hebrew word for *relent* is *repent*. In other words, if we turn away from our sin, God will turn away from his wrath. When America was mired in a bloody civil war, Abraham Lincoln called the nation to a season of fasting and prayer. He knew that God's judgment was on America for its enslavement of millions of Africans. But he hoped that if God's people turned from their wicked ways God might turn from his wrath. I believe that America is again facing God's judgment. Our wickedness has come up to God. We are a proud and arrogant people. We have lived for pleasure instead of following the prudent fiscal commands of the book of Proverbs. We have sought to avoid pain by borrowing on the future of our children. And now the chickens are coming home to roost. But there is still hope. Perhaps God has given us 40 more days. It must begin with us Jonahs—the men and women of God. Kay Warren is right: **we cannot defeat the evil in the world without facing the evil in ourselves.**

---

*Jonah: The Taming of a Rebel.* October 19, 2008. Copyright 2008. No part of this may be reproduced without permission from Dr. Robert Petterson or Covenant Presbyterian of Naples