

Reading: Jonah 1

Theme: The Commission and the City.

Last week we looked at an overview of some of the main themes in this historical book of Jonah. This evening I want us to see 4 things from v1-2:

1. The commission of Jonah

We noted Jonah had been used as a prophet previously (2 Kings 14:25). He had proclaimed the forthcoming prosperity and expansion of Israel even though they did not deserve it. One day Jonah had a new commission from the Lord. We do not know how it came to him - by an audible word, dream or a vision, but he was definitely commissioned by the Lord. It wasn't that he had an idea or a notion and then decided to act - or in this case, react against it. God had a specific plan and purpose in calling Jonah. We noted last week it was an unusual commission as prophets usually brought God's word to God's covenant people - sometimes God gave the prophets messages against other nations as they ministered to God's covenant people. Yet here Jonah was sent to prophesy **in and against** a foreign nation. This was a clear call from the Lord to go and preach to Nineveh, which some 40 years later would destroy Israel, but why did Jonah have to do this?

God knew why and what purpose He sent Jonah and why He showed mercy to Nineveh. One reason was that He was going to stir up His people by causing them to envy His mercy to Nineveh. The Israelites would be shamed by Nineveh's reception of God's word of threatening and the subsequent repentance by this pagan people, but God's covenant people ignored God's word for so long and carried on in their own sinful way. God still does that as He challenges those who have

heard the gospel for so long, been brought up in a Christian home and yet have never responded to the gospel's message - then someone comes in from a life ignorant of God, lived against God and it seems that on their first hearing they are converted, come to faith in Christ.

We saw last week that God intended to show His purpose for all mankind to hear of Him and turn to Him, so the turning of the Ninevites would be a picture which points us most clearly to what God did in the NT and as He is still doing today. We must all turn to God through the salvation freely offered in Christ, turning away from reliance upon any supposed good we feel we have to our credit, and certainly turning away from those wrong words, thoughts, deeds and lifestyle. The Jews of Jesus' time felt they were OK, yet Jesus used Jonah's preaching as a warning - for the Ninevites repented at Jonah's preaching and yet that generation did not at Jesus' preaching. We have greater privileges than both Jonah's and Jesus' generation for we now know more fully of Jesus, His work and life, all that He accomplished there on the cross of Calvary. If we do not believe on the Lord Jesus, we will be condemned not just by God, but by pagan immoral Gentiles - the Ninevites.

The commission of Jonah was a royal commission, it came from God Himself and the message he gave was God's. I come to you with God's word and in a far lesser sense I have God's commission upon me, for I am His ambassador, to speak on His behalf - 2 Corinthians 5:20 *"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God"* - which is true of every Christian, as we are sent into the world to make disciples of every nation, to proclaim the gospel, to urge

people, of whatever age or morality, to follow Christ. We do not do it because it is easy, or to earn merit points to show how good we are, but to tell all that our God is the Lord and there is forgiveness to be found in Him, that "*Salvation comes from the Lord*". Every believer is commissioned by God and we must obey and not run away from His call. It will involve much self-discipline to be true and faithful to Him who called us, but it is right that we serve Him having such a great, personal commission.

We have to speak of our God as presented in His word - tell the bad news and the good news - that there is a hell awaiting everyone unless they make peace through the only Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to speak God's word as it is and not compromise to what people would like to hear.

2. The city of Nineveh.

Nineveh is described as a great city. It was great in a number of ways. It was great in its age - it was an old, ancient city, first mentioned in Genesis 10:11-12; it was great because of its power - the capital of the Assyrian Empire and as such it was great due to its wealth, culture, influence, learning and power. It was a huge city in terms of its size and ancient writings speak of it as being a huge oblong, walled all around. It had a vast population and we are told in 4:11 of 120,000 who could not tell their right hand from their left and these we assume are young children, toddlers and babies. If we assume 2 parents to each child we're well on the way to half a million, let alone all the others not included by such a simple calculation. There would have been nothing like Nineveh before. The builders and people must have felt the city would endure for ever and never be destroyed.

Many people imagine they are like Nineveh. We may not feel that we are great or supreme, or may not voice it at least, but we can be centred upon self, self-importance, self-concern, self-satisfaction in so many ways. It may be because of our venerable age, because of our youth, because of our vigour, it may be that we have positions of power and influence in work or society, or at home, school, class, family and we feel we've arrived, should be noted and admired by our contemporaries. Maybe we are proud of our finances, wealth, culture, learning and academic successes. Perhaps we are not, but we may then lay great stress on being a simple, an uncluttered, unaffected person, who thrives on basics. However we feel about or view ourselves, we are easily full of self and think that we will go on for ever and our worlds will not change. There is a sense in which each of us feels we are like Nineveh and think, and may even say, "*I am great*". We are to realise that despite all the greatness of Nineveh, God sent, commanded one to preach His word there and in doing so exposed:

3. The condition of the city.

As great as Nineveh was, it was exposed by God's verdict here. Heaven's estimation of her is given as God declares that "*its wickedness has come up before me*". Here God showed her true condition before Him. Here was this great city, oblivious of the God of Israel, no thought of Him, never seen Him or been spoken to by Him, never worshipped Him, some never hearing of Him and yet this Invisible Unknown God knew them, knew their actions, words and thoughts. He not only knew about them, but it was as if their wrongs and evil doing had been carried out in front of Him, in His presence. Yes they may have been hundreds of miles away from Israel, had no background in the

Jewish religion, nor thought or tradition of Jehovah in their lives or culture. They may have lived as they pleased, even excused their behaviour as the norm for their day. Their power and influence also made them trendsetters, influencers for others; they were imitated and copied, lived with a disregard to God, lived as they wanted, governed by their idols, gods and what was expected there. Yet God's appraisal of them was told to Jonah.

I wonder what God's appraisal of our condition would be this evening. Perhaps we think little of God, or we may have a little or a lot of a religious or church background. We may have a nominal belief in God; we may have lived our lives with no thought or reference to Him; doing as other people do because that is the norm. We excuse our lives and behaviour as part of society and therefore it must be ok to go on doing it. We are not to be deceived for God sees, not only society's' wrong and evil as a whole, but He knows and records ***the wrong that we individually do, say, desire or think***. That should be a wake-up call to us, for as Nineveh's wickedness came up before God, so does our own wickedness. We can argue that we are not wicked, that we may not be perfect, but we are not wicked. That shows that we don't see that the wrong we do, even if it seems just a little bit wrong to us, what it really like to God - it is sin and wickedness. One nice, little sin by us is a stench in God's nostrils and is an eternal offence against Him and His very nature.

Just as Nineveh was unaware that God was angry with them and presented His judicial statement on their condition, so we are to realise that all of us are under God's judgement and condemnation now. That is a startling thought, a serious thought and it is true. Our wickedness, sin, has come up before God and

it all is recorded before Him, witnessed by Him and there is a case we must answer to Him. Each one of us throws down the gauntlet before God daily, we have all challenged Him, His holiness, His justice and His love. The thought about God's love shows us something of the seriousness, the awfulness of sin, for this God who is love, has to react in such a way against our sin and our sin produces in Him indignation, wrath, hatred against our sin which underlines the awfulness of sin, that the God who is love cannot excuse or overlook it. We are now not like Nineveh - ignorant of God's assessment of our situation before Him, but through His word we have learned that all have sinned and come short of God's glory and deserve God's wrath and judgement. We see this was:

4. The cry against the city.

Jonah was commissioned not to cry and preach against the Ninevites as just a man, but he was commissioned as a herald. It was a royal commission from the King, a righteous commission from the Judge. The evidence was there before the Lord, the legal papers had been prepared and now the messenger with a summons was to be sent. No error had been made, all the evidence was correct, in order and the summons to God's tribunal was to be made by Jonah. The gauntlet thrown down was to be used in evidence against them, to show their rebellion and treason against the King of heaven. The Ninevites may have felt they could escape human condemnation and punishment, but they were to be assured they could not escape God's. Jonah, as a herald, had to say God's message and not his own.

This evening I stand before you not just as a man, but as a preacher, as a herald of God. I have to tell all that we will all have to give an account of our lives at the judgement seat of

God! God will know all the evidence against us that no one else knows. Such evidence is recorded, the tribunal date is set and the judgement is certain - for our wickedness has gone up before the holy and Almighty God. That should cause us great concern. God will examine everything about us - we will be examined in His presence and will be compared to, placed alongside His holiness and purity; these things will be seen in the light of His holiness. How do we think we will fare then? This is going to be true of all people whether they are moral or immoral; religious or irreligious; sincere or hypocrites. All mankind will have to face the holy Almighty One and His judgement. If our sin and wickedness has not been dealt with, we will be condemned to a real, everlasting place called Hell. This is what we all deserve.

Surely Jonah would have been pleased to proclaim the destruction of Nineveh, of the wicked Nineveh. Yes, he would have been, but he also suspected that God had another purpose in sending him to preach in Nineveh - for he knew what his God was like (4:2) - that salvation comes from the Lord (2v9b). We all deserve hell, but this God has made a way for us to be saved from it. Our sin, the wrong things we have done cannot be ignored or excused by Him, but must be punished. They cannot be overlooked or excused by God as sin is totally against His being. For us to be saved, rescued, someone had to bear the infinite, eternal punishment and anger of God against our sin in our place. It would need to be someone who had no sin, someone who could take infinite eternal punishment without being destroyed. No one on earth could be found, no angel, no created supernatural being could do such, but One stepped forward - the Son of God, His only and beloved Son and, in the Council of Redemption in eternity, He undertook to be the

Substitute for rebels like you and me. This amazing plan reached its glorious pinnacle on Calvary; the Son of God suffered and was afflicted by God because He was made sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.

Would we want all our sin and guilt before God dealt with? Then the Bible tells us we must turn to God and truly turn away from our sin in true sorrow (repentance) and trust the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. We are to go to God realising we have no other hope other than trusting the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. God says in His word, the Bible, that whoever goes to Him will receive everlasting life, for Christ will not and has never turned away anyone who has truly gone to Him for forgiveness of sins and salvation.

Nineveh did not deserve any chance from God, neither do we! Yet this night, whoever we are, whatever we have done, whether we are very moral or have lived a very rotten life, we can trust in the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour, have peace with God and that means God is no longer our Judge, but our Father in heaven; we will have eternal life and be right with Him forever. I come as a herald of the God of heaven to tell you that your wickedness has come up before God, and that God Himself declares a royal pardon is freely available for you personally and you could know your wickedness and its guilt dealt with when you trust the Lord Jesus as your Saviour. That is a great free offer of a wonderful grace transaction which you can know in this life and know much more wonderfully when this life ends. It is yours to freely receive such from God. Do not be a fool to neglect or reject it and miss out on all God will most certainly do for you.