

"THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS"

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Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Dear People of God,

The ancient city of Nineveh is located just outside Mosul in northern Iraq, on the east bank of the River Tigris. Not far to the north is Mt. Ararat where Noah's ark came to rest. And a short distance to the south is the supposed location of the Garden of Eden where God created and placed Adam and Eve. And further south was the great Babylon, in the vicinity of today's Baghdad. No area of the world has greater historical significance than this cradle of civilization.

Nineveh was once the capital of the Assyrian Empire, one of the most powerful cities of the Middle East. Considered the hub of the ancient civilized world, its culture was the most advanced on earth. In size, it was as we see in our text, "an exceedingly great city," with a population in six figures (4:11). The city covered 1,700 acres, and with the sprawling suburbs, it would have taken a traveler three days to walk its perimeter. There were wide boulevards, large squares, parks, gardens, a library and many works of art. The city wall had 15 gates, each one named after an Assyrian god.

Today only mounds of ruins mark the location of the original city. On one of the more prominent mounds stands the Mosque of the Prophet Yunis, which the Muslims have named for the Biblical prophet Jonah. Prior to Jonah's arrival the people worshiped many false gods. Again today they have turned to a false god, a non-existent deity named Allah.

The Assyrian kings who ruled Nineveh were cruel and ruthless. The inhabitants were thoroughly pagan, self-indulgent, immoral, and willing accomplices to the exploits of their warlike leaders. This nation invaded and pillaged the homeland of the Israelites, God's people, on numerous occasions. And this did not escape God's notice as we see in His command to the prophet Jonah in 1:2: "Arise, go to Nineveh...and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come before Me."

Jonah was familiar with Nineveh. This was the homeland of the enemy. He knew the rulers and the people were evil and adulterous, and their cruel treatment of captives was legendary. Jonah would much have preferred to see the city and its inhabitants all destroyed, not saved! So the prophet initially disobeyed God and literally went the opposite direction!

Hopefully you're all familiar with the outcome of his ill-fated attempt to run away from the mission God called him to carry out! If not, you'll find it all in chapters 1 and 2, preceding this text...quite an astounding story!

"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you'" (v. 1, 2). This time, no doubt reluctantly and with considerable apprehension, Jonah went (v. 3). He entered the city, and right away, on the first day (v. 4), he began to preach: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" He was not behind a pulpit, not in a church or synagogue, but on the streets, in public hearing, crying out the message God had given him to deliver. He shouted the warning to all within range of hearing!

We consider that the man, woman and child on the street were no different than those we find in a public place today—except there were no Christians among them! They could well have been quite hostile. Like Paul and Silas and other disciples of Jesus, Jonah could have been threatened, arrested, jailed, tortured, even killed. The people could have just ignored him, thinking he has lost his mind!

There's an important lesson for us in the manner in which Jonah proclaimed the Word of God! He was (finally) obedient to God. He did have faith. He was not ashamed of God's Word. He was bold. Hard as it

may have been, he set aside his fears and simply did what the LORD told him to do! Humanly speaking, his mission was doomed to ridicule and failure. But, Jonah was never once alone or on his own. God's promise to Joshua was for Jonah, too: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage" (Joshua 1:5, 6).

We might also think on these words found in Isaiah, "...My word...that goes forth from My mouth...shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (55:11). Today we have this added encouragement and promise as we proclaim the words God gives us: "The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit..." (Hebrews 4:12). God's Word will have an effect on the rebellious and unbelieving heart!

It certainly spoke to the hearts of the Ninevites! Verse 5: "So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them." Notice what the text does NOT say. It does not say they believed Jonah; they "believed God"! Jonah spoke God's words, not his own. And God's Word had the power to bring literally tens of thousands of people to their knees in contrition and repentance! To put on sackcloth was a sign of mourning because of their sins. They humbled themselves before the mighty hand of God, admitted their iniquity, and begged His forgiveness!

Now comes the really good part and the focus of this message on this Sabbath morning. God saw their change of heart and the way their lives changed; He heard their plea for mercy! We read, "...God relented from the disaster that He said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" (v. 10)! This is grace in action! This is an act of a God of love "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4)! *This is forgiveness!* The LORD God had every right to carry out His threat, to destroy a nation of pagans, manifest sinners who had turned to false gods, or served only themselves! But He didn't! He spared them! He gave them a new life, a fresh start, an opportunity to be children of the one, true God and become heirs of an heavenly inheritance! This is love, and The Power of Forgiveness!

The apostle John wrote in his first epistle, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:8, 9). This is what the LORD did for the Ninevites. To show the depth and completeness of God's forgiveness, we find in both Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 10 this assurance: "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." This is the essence of forgiveness; the sin is erased, absolved, forgotten, removed from the record, never happened, forever gone!

A gracious God did turn away from His fierce anger toward the Ninevites. He did not carry out His edict that they should be destroyed! All because the people believed what God's messenger preached! They repented—that means confessed and turned from their sin—and began to do works pleasing to God!

Dear people, when we repent of sin—and we're all guilty of it according to Scripture (Romans 3:23)—when we renounce wickedness and obey the commandments of our LORD, when we believe that for the sake of the suffering and death of the innocent Lamb of God atonement was made for our sins, we experience The Power of Forgiveness! The prospect of a fiery hell is replaced by the certainty of an eternal glory! Through a living faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit makes His righteousness ours, and we will never be overthrown, not by man, not by the devil, not by God! We will live and reign with our Lord in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness! And we will be happy and want to share our joy!

If you are burdened by sin this morning, however great or small, Jesus is talking to you. "Believe My Word; believe in Me. Love Me as I have first loved you. With broken and contrite heart come to Me, and I will give you rest; I will forgive you!" Except for the rejection of Jesus, there is NO sin that cannot be forgiven. The Ninevites were guilty of all manner of sin, but God spared them when they repented. He will you, too! Jesus died and rose again for every sinner; for them, for you and me. Every soul is precious to Him! This morning He offers His broken body and shed blood as a sign and seal of the forgiveness that is ours for the asking! "Come my soul, with every care..." we sing.

When we do, we experience The Power of Forgiveness. Our burden is lifted. Our past becomes just a memory of a lesson learned. Our present is filled with peace and hope and joy! And for the future here we begin to see unlimited opportunities to love and serve, and even find enjoyment in our toil! Then there is that eternal destiny in which promise is fulfilled, hope rewarded, and our fellowship with the one, true God secured as we transition from this life to the next!

We need to pray that The Power of Forgiveness be brought to bear in our relationships with one another as well. We need to do for others the same thing God did for the Ninevites! In the verses immediately following the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 Jesus said this: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (vv. 14, 15). Not only does forgiveness have the power to save our souls and reconcile us to our Lord, but it also has the power to erase the hurts of the past and reconcile people! "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). And in Colossians 3, "...as God's chosen ones...(be forbearing toward) one another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (vv. 12, 13). This includes forgiving ourselves...

When we do this, then there is peace. Burdens are lifted, relationships restored. Grudges fall by the wayside, and guilt is removed. The past is forgotten, and the present becomes a joy to live! Heaven's gate is opened wide for all who forgive and are forgiven, who forget the hurt and turn away their anger from another person.

This is The Power of Forgiveness! This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus! This is the way to avoid what otherwise would have been disaster! Repentance and forgiveness are the one, sure way to turn away the wrath of God and know the untold blessings of His grace! Likewise, anger between people can be changed to lasting friendships!

Jonah testifies just a few verses beyond our text, "For I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm" (4:2). Hopefully, you can say the same this morning! The Spirit of the living Christ is always present to help you, to lead you in the path of righteousness. God may not be calling us to go alone into a big city and cry out as Jonah did, but He is calling us to believe in Jesus, repent of our sins, and be forgiving to one another. Then His anger, caused by our sin, is turned away, and all that He promises to His redeemed will be ours!

More than anything else pardon, not wrath, reveals the heart of God. For Jesus' sake our loving heavenly Father has forgiven you! And may others see in us the heart of God as we, too, forgive, and forget the sins of others! It is forgiveness and God-pleasing works, *rooted in love and faith*, that bring to us the greatest enjoyments in life now, and rewards in the life to come!

God grant each of you a full measure of the power of forgiveness! In Jesus' name, and for His sake, Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will keep your hearts and minds through a living faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

