

## LEARNING FROM THE NINEVEH OF JONAH'S DAY

The book of Jonah, as Rev. Matthew Henry points out, “is recorded chiefly for the sake of Christ, of whom Jonah was a type”. Hence we read in Matthew 12:39-41 Jesus’ inspired commentary on Jonah:

“But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas 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. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas *is* here.”

So we see in Jonah a type and foreshadowing of Jesus Christ, and we see in the Nineveh of Jonah’s day a type and foreshadowing of Jesus Christ bringing repentance and reformation to the Gentile nations.

### **The Biblical Record of Nineveh’s Response to the Preaching of Jonah**

We have the response of Nineveh and its civil magistrate recorded in Jonah 3:5-10:

“So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered *him* with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused *it* to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that *is* in their hands. Who can tell *if* God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did *it* not.”

### **Excerpts from Rev. John Calvin’s Commentary on this Response**

“...Jonah seems here to explain how the Ninevites were led to put on sackcloth. He had before spoken briefly on the subject, but he now explains what took place more fully; and we know that it was commonly the manner of the Hebrews — to relate the chief points in few words, and then to add an explanation. As then Jonah had said in the last verse that the Ninevites had put on sackcloth, and proclaimed a fast, so he now seems to express more distinctly how this happened, that is, through the royal edict. And it is by no means probable that a fast was proclaimed in the royal city by the mere consent of the people, as the king and his counselors were there present. Inasmuch then as it appears more reasonable that the edict respecting the fast had proceeded from the king, I am therefore inclined so to connect the two verses, as that the first briefly mentions the fruit which followed the preaching of Jonah, and that the second is added as an explanation, for it gives a fuller account of what took place...

Jonah ... states the reason why the Ninevites proclaimed a fast; it was because the king had been apprised of the preaching of Jonah, and had called together his counselors. It was then a public edict, and not any movement among the people, capriciously made, as it sometimes happens. He says, that it was an edict published by the authority of the king and his council, or his nobles...

God does not indeed work alike by the preaching of his word, he does not always keep to the same course; but, when he pleases, he so efficaciously touches the hearts of men, that the success of his word exceeds all expectation, as in the memorable example presented to us here. Who could have said that a heathen king, who had ever lived according to his own will, who had no feeling as to true and genuine religion, would have been thus in an instant subdued? For he put aside his royal dress, laid himself in the dust, and clothed himself in sackcloth. We hence see that God not only spoke by the mouth of Jonah, but added power to his word...Christ, at this day, proclaims the voice of his Gospel; for though he is not here in a visible form among us, he yet speaks by his ministers. If we despise his doctrine, how can our obstinacy and hardness be excused, since the Ninevites, who had no knowledge of the true doctrine of religion, who were imbued with no religious principles, were so suddenly converted by the preaching of Jonah?...

It deserves to be noticed, that the king of Nineveh commanded the people to cry mightily to God; for we hence learn that they were really frightened, inasmuch as he speaks not here of ordinary crying, but he adds mightily...Jonah then expresses something uncommon and extraordinary, when he tells us that it was contained in the king's edict, that men should cry mightily to God; for it was the same as though he said, "Let all men now awake and shake off their indifference; for every one of us have hitherto greatly indulged ourselves in our vices: it is now time that fear should possess our minds, and also constrain us to deprecate the wrath of God." And it is also worthy of being observed, that the king proposes no other remedy, but that the people should have recourse to prayer. It might indeed have been, that Jonah exhorted the Ninevites to resort to this duty of religion, etc. We may, however, undeniably conclude that it is a feeling implanted in us by nature, that when we are pressed by adversities, we implore the favor of God. This then is the only remedy in afflictions and distresses, to pray to God. But when we, taught by the Law and by the Gospel, use not this remedy, whenever God warns us and exhorts us to repentance, what shadow of excuse can we have, since heathens, even those who understood not a syllable of true religion, yet prayed to God, and the king himself commanded this with the consent of his nobles? Hence this edict of the king ought to fill us with more shame than if one adduced the same doctrine only from the word of God: for though the authority of that king is not the same with that of God, yet when that miserable and blind prince acknowledged through the dictates of nature, that God is to be pacified by prayer, what excuse, as I have said, can remain for us?..."

### **Questions for Us Today**

Are we going to be an "adulterous generation" that ignores and rejects the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are our civil magistrates going to refuse to "kiss the Son" and honor Him in their governance? Or are we going to repent and reform as Nineveh did in Jonah's day? Will we support civil magistrates like the rulers of Nineveh in Jonah's time who lead the people to bow to God as Lord and Savior, and call upon Him mightily in prayer? Is it our destiny to be condemned by God or praised by Him on Judgment Day?

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