Jonah: When a Nation Believed God

by Bayless Conley

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Hello, friend. Welcome. We are in the book of Jonah, and my, there are some amazing truths in this book. Jesus actually referred to the story of Jonah when some of the religious leaders of His day were wanting to see a sign from Him. He said, “Listen, a wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign. No sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Of course, Jonah was in the fish. Finally, he said, “God, I’m going to do what You want.” The fish spit him out. He went and preached to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Jesus, after dying for our sins on the cross, came up from the grave, and now the gospel can be preached to a lost and a dying world.

In this story we have about Jonah—he was reluctant. He didn’t want to go preach to Nineveh. In fact, he ran in the opposite direction. We’ve talked about that in detail in some of the previous messages. Finally, Jonah says, “God, I’ll do Your will.” God says, “Go to Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you.” Jonah gets up, and he goes to Nineveh. Jonah 3:3–4 NKJV says,

> 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. 4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

It was an exceedingly great city. Some people interpret that as, if you’re going to walk straight through, it’s going to take three full days to walk through. Some people think that what it meant was Jonah stopping and preaching the message in every suburb in the city was going to take three days. Some people, scholars, feel that it was a three-day journey around the city. It was surrounded by a 100-foot-high wall.

They could race three chariots of brass on the top of that wall. Only small parts of it have been unearthed, but it’s estimated that the wall could have been from 50 to 65 miles around. It was an exceedingly great city, and it was the heart of the Assyrian Empire. Now Jonah goes, and preaches the message that judgment is coming in 40 days. The response to his preaching we find in verse 4, Jonah began to preach. Jonah 3:5–10 NKJV,

> 5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?” 10 Then God

> saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

This is so rich. It says the people of Nineveh believed God. That is, they believed the Word of God that was spoken to them through Jonah the prophet. They believed, and they acted upon the Word. But they had no physical evidence that the city would be overthrown in 40 days. They had a 100-foot-high wall that surrounded the city. They were probably the most powerful empire at the time. To put it the way we might say it here in the United States, “They were the meanest kids on the block.” People were afraid of the Assyrians, and Jonah says, “God is going to overthrow this city in 40 days.”

Nothing in the natural lent itself to verifying that fact, yet they believed the Word of the Lord, and they acted upon it with no physical evidence whatsoever. Regardless of the fact that they could not understand how something like this could ever possibly happen. They believed it, and they acted. It’s interesting, when Jonah said the city will be overthrown, it means to overturn from the foundation; it denotes a supernatural event. It’s the same word used to describe what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Let me ask you a question. Is the Word of God, as revealed in our Bible, is it as sure as the word spoken by Jonah? Yes. God and His Word are one. Jesus is the Word made flesh. In the book of Revelation, I think it’s chapter 19, it says, “Jesus’ name is the Word of God.” Friend, the written Word you have is as sure—more sure—than the word spoken by Jonah. It’s not possible for God to lie.

We need to take God at His Word, even though there’s no way we can understand how a promise could come to pass. Even though it makes no sense to us economically or as far as circumstances go, we need to accept it, believe it, and act upon it. Even with no physical evidence to support the veracity of what God has stated or what God has promised. Faith is just acting like the Word of God is true. You need to take the promises, and you need to act upon them. I want to read something to you. This is from Luke’s Gospel, the 11th chapter, and I’m going to begin in verses 27–28 NKJV. Listen carefully to this because it relates to the story of Jonah. It says,

> [27] And it happened, as He spoke these things (talking about Jesus), that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, “Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!” [28] But He said, “More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

That is, that they do it. They obey it. More blessed are those who hear the Word. You have to hear it first and then act on it. He went on in the very next verses. Verses 29–32 NKJV,

> [29] And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, “This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. [30] For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. [31] The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. [32] The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.”

Now, first He mentions the Queen of the South. Speaking of the Queen of Sheba, she more than likely came from distant Ethiopia, the ends of the earth, as it was said there. You can find the story in 1 Kings 10 and Chronicles 9. She had questions, and she came to Solomon to inquire of his wisdom. The Word of the Lord came forth from Solomon and answered all of her questions. It is said that she communed with him of everything that was in her heart. She plied him with strong questions. His wisdom exceeded anything that she ever had heard, but all of the answers to her questions—the questions of her heart—she found answers to all of them. She came seeking the wisdom of God, and Jesus said, “A greater than Solomon is here.”

My friend, Jesus, is the Word of God. “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and His name is called the Word of God.”

Now, think of it: the Queen of the South, the Queen of Sheba, came from the ends of the earth seeking answers to her questions, looking to the Word of the Lord through the mouth of Solomon. But some of us can’t be persuaded to walk to the bookshelf, take a Bible and spend an hour seeking answers from God’s Word. I think that the Queen of the South is going to rise in judgment with some of us, and some people are shaking their fist at God and saying, “God, why?” There are answers in His Book. “God, I don’t understand.” There are answers in His Book. “God, I need help.” There are promises in His Book. She came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of God.

Jesus actually referred to the Scriptures as the wisdom of God, and He did that in the book of Luke. I want to encourage you, brother and sister—not condemn you but encourage you. Wipe the dust off of your Bible. I think it was Charles Spurgeon who once said, “There is enough dust on the cover of some people’s Bible to write the word, *damnation* with your finger.” Well, there should not be dust collecting on the cover of our Bible, or these days, if you have an electronic device, if you don’t have the Bible downloaded on it, get it downloaded and spend time in God’s Book.

Then Jesus went on and said, “The men of Nineveh are going to rise in judgment with this generation.” You see, they heard the Word of the Lord, and they kept it with no physical evidence to support what Jonah had said, but they believed it, and they acted upon it. Well, my friend, a greater than Jonah is here. Will the Ninevites rise up in judgment with our generation? Can we be persuaded to act upon the promises, to believe them, and to just act like the Word of God is true? Well, we should be. Let’s go back and talk about some more of these events that happened.

Now, God was not springing a surprise on Nineveh, nor does He spring surprises on mankind in the arena of judgment. God always gives warning about judgment. God sent Jonah to Nineveh to warn them about the coming judgment. From the beginning, God has always done that. Unrepentance of sin will always bring judgment, but God gives us fair warning. He warned Adam in the Garden of Eden what would happen if Adam disobeyed and ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. There was a warning before him.

Noah preached righteousness and warned of the coming flood, and it took him 100–120 years, whatever it was, something like that, to build the ark. All this time, he’s preaching, and people would not give heed to the warnings. We should not be surprised by God’s judgmental actions. Sin will be judged; it shouldn’t take us by surprise.

I read a story once about a guy whose wife was so angry with him, she just gave him a tongue-lashing, and he just stood there quietly and didn't say anything, which infuriated her even more. So, she took a bucket of water, and threw it on him. There, standing soaking wet, he calmly said, "Well, after a thunder and lightning storm like that, I sort of expected a shower." He wasn't surprised by his wife's actions, and we should not be surprised when judgment comes. God always gives people fair warning when it comes to the judgment and the consequences of sin.

My friend, preaching on judgment is not old-fashioned. The first message Jesus ever preached—the first word of that message was "Repent." He said, "Repent and believe the gospel," the first message that Christ Himself ever preached. Repentance is an inward change of heart, resulting in an outward change of direction. It is not the full message if we don't preach Christ. His answer is the way out from under judgment, that He is our Noah's ark. If we enter into the ark of salvation through faith in Christ, we can avert the coming judgment; we need to preach that part. But we shouldn't skip over the judgment part.

Some people want a God with no wrath and no judgment. They want a salvation with no repentance, and they want a Savior with no cross. It does not work that way. Somebody said, "Well, I don't want people to feel guilty about sin." They should feel guilty. The Bible says, "The whole world stands guilty before God," in Romans 3. Our sin will send us to a Christless eternity. In the book of Mark, Jesus said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who believes not, will be condemned."

The old English Bible that I won't say I was raised on, but that I read when I first got saved—the King James Version, the English word is a little stronger. "He that believeth not, shall be damned, will be damned to an eternity without God." That ought to get our attention. Like I said, the whole world stands guilty before God. It's not just because we're the offspring of Adam, that's certainly part of it. He's the one who opened the door of sin, but we have all personally sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But God is rich in mercy. He sent Christ to redeem us and to be our substitute, our sacrifice, and He paid the debt for our sin. But if we are unwilling to repent of our sin and put our trust in Christ, there's nothing to look forward to except for coming judgment. The good news is we can be saved.

Now it's interesting, there was nothing in Jonah's message that suggested these Assyrians could be saved. There was nothing in his message at all that suggested there was a way out. But the very fact that God sent him to them demonstrates God's mercy, that He cared. We are going to find out that Jonah's prophecy was conditional. They repented, and the destruction did not come to pass. It says that from all of the people, from the king on down, they put on sackcloth.

That was a rough, coarse, dark-colored cloth, usually made of goat's hair and sometimes other material. It was used for making sacks. That's why they called it sackcloth. When it was worn, it was a sign of self-abasement, of repentance in this case. It was an outward way to say, "I am humbling myself, and I am repenting."

Then they proclaimed a fast. The king fasted, and all the people fasted. In this case, they were demonstrating self-denial. Again, a statement saying, "God, we're denying ourselves, and we're turning to You." Then the king actually sat in ashes, another outward expression of inward sorrow for sin. Something interesting that we read, and I don't know if you caught it. Jonah started preaching on the streets to the common people, and word reached the king.

There's nothing in the account that says he sought an audience with the king. Jonah just went into the city and started preaching on the street. There are some people who say, "Well, I feel called to preach the gospel," but they don't want to do it unless they have their first meeting at the local convention center. No, if you feel called to preach, you need to go to the local pier where people are standing there fishing and go start passing out gospel tracts and talk to anybody who will listen.

You need to go to your local school, pass out some gospel tracts, and share. Go to your local gasoline station and share the gospel with the guy behind the counter there. You just need to start going to the common folks, the people who you interact with every day, and don't look for some big thing to happen. Don't be like the guy who says, "Well, I have this great message on humility that really is burning in my bones. I want to preach it." Someone says, "Why haven't you preached it?" "Well, I'm waiting for a big crowd to preach it to." No, we just need to start where we are, my friend.

It's interesting, they fasted, and it says, "They cried out mightily to God." If you're going to fast, and just a side note that will help somebody, you need to couple it together with prayer. If you fast without praying, all it will do for you is make you hungry. With fasting, we shut down the voice of our body, pray, and become more attentive to the voice of God. They cried out to God, and then they acted. They heard the Word, they prayed, and they acted upon it. Their action was turning from evil in this case.

It's interesting, the king declared that even the animals were to be made to fast. Why? Well, to put it in plain terms, they just wanted to show God that they really meant business. They were serious. They repented of the violence that was in their hands. That was the main sin of the Assyrians. That's the main sin they were guilty of, both as a nation and as individuals.

It says, "God saw their actions, their works; He saw what they did." If you really believe something, you will do something. If you really mean it, you are going to do something about it. They didn't know for sure that God would forgive them. In a real sense, if you think about it, they were just putting themselves into the hands of God. "God, we don't know what else we can do. We are repenting. We're crying out to You mightily. We are fasting. We're going to sit in ashes. God, we're going to humble ourselves, and we're just throwing ourselves on Your mercy."

There was no promise from God here that He would forgive them, that He would spare them, but they put themselves in God's hands with no guarantee. And God relented from the destruction that He had determined to bring upon them. It's not that God was thinking, "Well, gosh, I was wrong in the first place." God knew that He would do this. God did not destroy them, but God was not wrong in that He changed the direction that He had decreed that He was going to go, as far as bringing destruction to them. Let me read to you from Ezekiel, and this is just beautiful. Ezekiel 18:23 and 32 NKJV. God asks,

> 23 "Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord God, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live?"

In verse 32 NKJV, He says,

> 32 "For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord God.
> "Therefore turn and live!"

In Ezekiel 33:11 NKJV,

> 11 "Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'"

God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Yes, God knows ahead of time what people are going to do. He knows how you're going to respond, but that doesn't mean that God has predetermined that you are going to refuse to repent or that you are going to repent and believe. But I'm just telling you, God is merciful, and He has no delight in the death of sinners. But there will be consequences for sin because God is just.

Yes, God is love, but God is also just. Every one of us knows that those two things must go together. A God without justice—and someone says, "Well, God is just God. Why couldn't He just say, 'I forgive you all. You don't need to repent. I just forgive you all. Just don't do it anymore.'" That wouldn't be just. There needs to be a consequence for sin. If there's no repentance, there needs to be consequences for sin.

If you think about it, even naturally—and I've actually spoken about this a few times recently here at the church. We have some things going on in our country right now where some very liberal judges are letting hardened criminals go, and they're releasing them back into society. Even men who have committed sex crimes against children, people who have done violent crimes against women, and liberal judges are letting them go. Many times, they go back into society and commit the same type of crimes all over again. That, my friend, is an unjust judge.

Think of the family. A sex crime was committed against their little boy, and the person just says, "Okay, you just go back into society. Don't do it anymore. It's unjust, and it's cruel for us to keep you in prison." They go back, and they commit a sex crime against somebody else's child.

First of all, the family it happened to is thinking, "Where's the justice?" Then the second family it happened to thinks, "This is an unjust judge." We know that's unjust. If I show cruelty to an animal, if I'm cruel to a dog or a cat and I starve it or I hurt it, well, you can get in trouble with the law in our country. I know some places where you can be put in jail for cruelty to animals.

Well, so much more for cruelty to a person. There needs to be justice. We haven't just sinned against an animal or against a person; we've sinned against Almighty God. He is infinitely higher than a person. For God to be just, there must be punishment against that sin. In our heart of hearts, every person knows it.

So, God is just, but He is also love. Our sin has to be punished, or God wouldn't be just. But because of His love, God did something. Because of His justice, He could not overlook our sin. Because of His love, He would not overlook us. He sent His own Son, who willingly came and died in our place as a substitute for our sin.

He became the sin sacrifice, and all of the punishment, all of the justified wrath of God against our sin came upon His Son, Jesus. Jesus died in our place. After the claims of God's eternal justice were satisfied, Jesus was raised from the dead. Now, to any man, any woman, any boy, any girl who will repent and put their trust in Jesus, who will turn from their sinful ways and put their trust in Jesus as Savior, they receive eternal life. Forgiveness, but a whole new start. The Scripture says, "He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

Now, again, and I just want to close with this thought. They didn't know for sure. They had no promise that God would relent of the coming destruction, but they threw themselves on His mercy. How much more when we do have promises that if we will do certain things, that God will respond in a certain way. That if we will do this, God will cause this to happen. It is not that we're forcing God's hand; it's just that we get involved with the divine law. God's Word supersedes the law of nature. God's Word is the final authority on all things. When we put ourselves in line with God's Word, things happen. His promises are fulfilled.

How much more should we rest assured that when we act upon a promise, God will fulfill that promise for us? Whether it has to do with our family, whether it has to do with our own life, with our financial situation, with our health, with maybe a mental battle that we're going through right now, we can trust in the Word of the Lord.

I just want to encourage you, my friend, you need to have a love affair with God's Book. Walk humbly before the Lord your God, trust His promises, and act upon His promises. He will take care of you. He will meet your need. Let every man be a liar, but my friend, God is true. His Word can be trusted. It is forever settled in heaven, and we need to settle it here on earth that it is our final authority, that it is what we will act upon, that we will hold it higher than anything else.

My first allegiance is to God and His Word, before my wife, before my family, and before my country. I love my wife with all of my heart and all of my soul. I've been married 44 years, and I love this girl more today than I ever have. But my first allegiance is to Jesus Christ. My first allegiance is to God's Word. I love my family, but I love Jesus more. I love my country, but I love Jesus more.

If you put any of those things—Jesus said, "The one who loves father or daughter more than Me, the one who loves family more than Me, they are not worthy of Me." He needs to be first in our life. So let His Word be first in your life. Trust it and put it into practice. I want to take just a moment, and I want to pray for you, because I know there are some people who are watching, and you are so overwhelmed.

You can hear a message like this, and there's hope in it for you. But you are just so overwhelmed. You've been in the problem for so long. You've been treading water for so long. You say, "Bayless, I don't even know that I have strength to believe." I just want to pray for you. I want to pray a prayer that Paul prayed for the churches, that they be strengthened with might in the inner person by the Holy Spirit.

My friend, God is there. In the best way that you know how, let your heart agree with me right now, if you would. I believe God will help you. If you don't have a copy of a Bible, get one and start reading it. Start reading in the New Testament, and God will speak to you through it. Lay hold of the promises, listen to them, believe them, and act on them.

> Father, for that man, that woman, that person who's listening to me right now, boy or girl, that You would strengthen them with might in the inner person by the Holy Spirit. Lord, I thank You that You are present there with them, and it's not a coincidence that they're listening to my voice right now. I ask You to help them. I pray they would be strengthened. I pray that they would be lifted up. I pray that Your supernatural peace would come upon them, Heavenly Father. I thank You that You're with them. You'll never leave them. You'll never forsake them. Your Word is true, not just for me, but it's true for them as well. I ask You to bless them in Jesus' name.

We'll see you again.

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