

(Jonah) a City on Fire

by John Vissers

The sermon emphasizes the importance of true saving faith, repentance, and the populist character of true revival, as seen in the story of Jonah and the city of Nineveh.

Duration: 38:21

Scripture: Jonah 3:5

Topics: "Jonah", "Repentance", "Revival"

Description

John Vissers preaches on Jonah 3, emphasizing the transformative power of faith and repentance as demonstrated by the people of Nineveh. He illustrates how the entire city, from the king to the commoners, responded to Jonah's message of impending judgment with genuine belief in God and a collective act of repentance. Vissers highlights that true revival is marked by a deep, communal change in the moral fabric of society, driven by the Holy Spirit's work in people's hearts. He calls for prayer and action to seek a similar revival in contemporary cities, particularly in Toronto, urging believers to trust in God's mercy and the potential for urban renewal through faith. The sermon concludes with a reminder of God's compassion and the importance of turning to Him for healing and transformation.

Transcript

Our scripture lesson tonight is from Jonah, as we continue in the Old Testament. Book of Jonah, the prophet. Jonah chapter three tonight, reading at verse five.

Jonah chapter three, reading verses five to 10. Let's hear then from Jonah chapter three at verse five. The Ninevites believed God.

They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached to the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in the dust. Then he 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, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God.

Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows, God may yet relent, and with compassion, turn from his fierce anger, so that we will not perish. 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.

Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. Let's pray together, shall we, as we look to the Lord's word together. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence this evening, and we pray that your word would be our rule, that your Holy Spirit would be our teacher, and that your greater glory would be our supreme concern.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray, amen. As most of you know, the theme of our missions conference here in Knox Church for this year, for 1996, the missions conference just passed, was For God So Loved the City. And our speakers talked about God's concern for the city.

They challenged us to take the good news of the gospel to the cities of our world. They reminded us about the urban development, about the changes taking place in cities. And we also thought about the mission of Knox Church here in the city of Toronto.

One of the questions we might well ask coming out of that conference is, what would a city look like if it were really touched in a profound way by the gospel of Jesus Christ? What would Toronto look like today, this secular, urbanized context in which we exist as a congregation? What would Toronto look like today if the winds of revival swept through the streets of this city? What would an urban revival, an urban renewal look like, where the gospel is preached, where people receive it? What kind of a difference would it make in the fabric, in the culture of the city? What difference would it make to life in the city? Well, in Jonah 3, I want to suggest to you tonight, in the passage that we've just read, verses five to 10, we are given just such a description. A description of an urban revival. A description of a city taken over by the gospel.

The last part of Jonah 3 paints a picture of a city on fire. Not on fire with judgment, not on fire with destruction, but on fire with faith and on fire with repentance. And as we saw last week, Jonah was given a second chance to go to the city of Nineveh, to go and bring God's message to the city there, and this time, Jonah obeyed the call of God, and he proclaims the message of judgment given to him by the Lord.

He goes to the city, he goes to Nineveh, and he proclaims the message. Now, it's hard to imagine, as we think about working into this passage this evening, as we recall what we saw last week in the first part of chapter three, it's hard to imagine going in that Jonah could be effective in his mission. I mean, after all, the challenges are immense.

Think about the challenges that he's facing. Nineveh, as we saw last week, was a large city. It had satellite suburbs.

It was a walled city within which the business existed, the king and the nobles lived, the kind of upper crust of society, and then out beyond lived the workers in these kind of satellite suburbs, an immense city, tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people, and Jonah, of course, is there by himself. He doesn't go in with a team. He goes in by himself, a stranger in a foreign country walking the streets of the city absolutely alone.

Furthermore, he has a very unpopular message to deliver, a message of judgment, a message that in 40 days, God's going to destroy the city, and given the situation, the size of the city, the foreign language, the decadent culture, we read that it had degenerated into a kind of culture of violence and crime. We consider Jonah's initial reluctance to go, he wasn't the most eager of prophets, and the unpopular message that he had to declare, it doesn't seem, really, to be a strategy designed for success. In fact, I suggest to you that Jonah's mission to Nineveh and the strategy as it unfolds here probably would not make the top 10 list of the most effective ways to reach a city, the way to reach unreached urbanized

peoples.

He doesn't have a demographic study of the city. He doesn't have an advanced team to go in ahead of him. He doesn't have all of the contacts that he needs with the media, with the power brokers of the city.

He just goes in on his own and proclaims the message. One is reminded of Billy Graham's famous comment after his New York crusade, where after many, many weeks of preaching, they certainly had an impact, but when he talked about the difficulty in reaching a great city for the gospel of Christ, he said, the impact is like a mosquito biting an elephant. You really don't make much of an impact.

But Jonah goes and he enters the city and he preaches and what happens? Well, against all odds, the people believe. The city repents and the people pray for mercy and the result, the city is saved and God relents from the impending disaster that loomed on the horizon. And Jonah 3, verses five to 10 teaches us, it seems to me, what can happen when people respond to God's word in faith and in repentance and in obedience and in prayer.

A city can be turned upside down. And so this evening, as we think together into this passage, I want us to think about what that might mean for us as God's people in this congregation, as those who, having just considered the importance of reaching the cities of our world for Jesus Christ, the importance of reaching our own city, our own community, here at the corner of Harvard and Spadina, what does all of this mean for us as God's people seeking to be faithful in the commission that God has given to us? Well, the first thing I want us to notice as we look together at this passage is that the response of the people is very simple and very straightforward. The people of Nineveh believed God.

Now, Jonah's message was really pretty blunt. He didn't really go in with good news. He told the people of Nineveh that God was so fed up with them that they had 40 more days until they would be destroyed.

And there's no evidence at all that he tried to sugarcoat the message or tried to make it more palatable or tried to make it more acceptable to the people that he preached. Now, the people of Nineveh, presumably, could have responded in any number of ways, and one can imagine the kinds of responses that might have come. Most obviously, of course, they might have simply ignored him.

They might have responded with apathy. I mean, what did this great city of Nineveh this cultured city, this city of commerce, this city of business, this city of wealth, this city of sophistication, what did the great city of Nineveh have to fear from a pesky little prophet named Jonah from Israel? Or on the other hand, they might have ridiculed him. I mean, one can imagine as he's traveling through the streets of the city of Nineveh proclaiming this message, telling perhaps about his experience about how God rescued him from the ocean.

They might simply have ridiculed him. Hey, Jonah, tell us that story about how you were swallowed by a great fish again. Yeah, that one.

Three days you were inside that fish? Uh-huh, do you want to tell us a bit more about that? You see, they might have ridiculed him. They might have made a mockery of his prophetic message, or they might have arrested him as a public nuisance, put him into prison, and condemned him to death. But notice that that's not what happens.

Verse five says that the people of Nineveh, the Ninevites, believed God. Now, the phrase here is very interesting because it doesn't say that they believed Jonah, although presumably that's implicit in the

comment. They received Jonah's message, but they received Jonah's message as from God.

They listened to him as a true prophet. They believed the message God had given Jonah. It's as though they've been primed by some divine hand to respond to Jonah's preaching.

The sovereign spirit of God has been at work in the very hearts and the lives and the very fabric of the peoples of this city, the city of Nineveh, prior to Jonah's arrival to prepare the way for the preaching of the message. And so they respond by putting their faith in God. God would do what he said.

They believed. They believed God. They believed the message that had come, and God is the object of their faith.

They believed the word of God, and they trusted in what God said he would do. And the first lesson that I want us to see here and what I want to suggest to you this evening is that true saving faith is that kind of faith. It is faith in God.

It is faith which has its object as God himself. And it is faith born out of the preaching of the word of God. Faith offered in response to the message of God.

And often, in fact, always, it is faith prepared in our lives by the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit. The Westminster Confession of Faith says it this way, that the grace of faith whereby we are enabled to believe to the salvation of our souls is the work of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the word. It goes on and says, by this faith we are enabled to believe to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word for the authority of God himself speaking therein.

Now somehow, when they heard Jonah speak, when they heard Jonah bring this message, they knew that they simply didn't have to do with a man, that they didn't have to do with a prophet, simply someone who was sort of there to deliver a message that he himself had thought up, but they realized that they had to do with the very word of God itself. And I wanna suggest to you that one of the things that happens in true saving faith is that the Spirit of God works in the lives and hearts of people in such a way so that they read Scripture and they hear the word of Scripture as it really is the word of God, the Holy Spirit speaking to them through the Scriptures. Now there's no way to explain this rationally.

There's no way to argue this out logically. You can't prove to someone that the Bible is the word of God, but nevertheless, when the Spirit is at work in a person's life, they hear that word as it truly is, the Spirit speaking through the Scriptures. And one of the marks of true revival is this kind of faith.

The great revivals in the history of the church have been characterized by real faith in response to the preaching of the word of God where people were taken up with the fact that this really was God speaking. And it happens, it seems, spontaneously as the Spirit of God attends the preaching and the reading of the word of God in the lives of people. And people who once did not believe and people who made a mockery of all that God is suddenly now, without explanation, believe God.

We need to be praying for that kind of work of the Spirit of God in our day because that's how renewal and that's how revival will come. But notice that they also repented of their sin. The text says they declared a fast and they put on sackcloth.

Now fasting and sackcloth are signs of repentance, signs of mourning. In the Bible, people who do this do it out of remorse. In the ancient world, this was the way that you showed that you were going through a

period of grieving, a period of mourning, a period of remorse, a period of sorrow.

And so they do this out of sorrow and there is a genuine experience of being sorry for something. And that's what repentance is. It's a turning away from sin.

It is a godly sorrow for one's sin together with a resolution to turn from it. It's more than simply being sorry for getting caught. It's more than simply kind of being sorry in an emotional sort of sense, but it's a deep godly sense that things have to change.

And it's a change of mind with respect to God. And saving faith always includes this kind of repentance. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that repentance is wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and the Word of God, whereby out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of our sins, and upon apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, we so grieve for and hate our sins that we turn from them and we turn to God.

Now, what we have here in this experience of the people of Nineveh is a very good example of what the Bible calls saving faith. A saving faith is a believing faith, trusting in God, but saving faith is also a repentant faith. Repentance and faith belong together.

A turning from self-repentance and a turning to Christ. And that's simply, my friends, what the Bible means by conversion. It is a change of mind with respect to ourselves and our actions and a change of mind with respect to God and who God is.

We don't hear a lot about this in today's church, even in today's evangelical church, sadly. We hear a lot about meeting people's needs, but we hear very little about the need for saving faith, for repentance. And unfortunately, sometimes we cheapen the gospel of God's grace by not remembering, by not realizing that there is this dimension of saving faith, a repentant faith, which in fact needs to shape our lives.

That's why this morning, as we thought about forgiveness, we thought about the reality of the freedom of forgiveness that all of us require, that all of us need to live whole and healthy and full and free lives. Conversion is this kind of repentance and faith a decisive turn from and a decisive turn to Jesus Christ. And then notice that all of them believed and repented.

The text says, verse five, from the greatest to the least of them. The revival touched everyone in the city. I've described it in the outline as a kind of popular, populist revival in character.

And the great revivals in the history of the church have been like that. They sweep up young and old, rich and poor, uneducated and educated. All of them are swept up in the furnace of renewal.

And everyone, presumably in the city of Nineveh, was talking about what happened. And one can imagine the kind of day-to-day chat that went on in city streets and in public places. It was on all the news shows, on talk radio had it been a part of our experience today.

Everyone was touched by what was happening. Everyone believed and everyone repented. We hear a lot about revival and renewal today in various parts of the world and even here in our own nation.

And I wanna suggest to you that one of the marks of true revival is not only saving faith, faith and repentance, but also this populist character. That it touches everyone from the greatest to the least. Everyone is touched in some way.

Certainly that's the pattern throughout the history of the church and it's for that that we need and ought to pray in our own day. But let's move on because not only did the people of Nineveh believe, but also the king of Nineveh responded personally to the news in verse six. The king received the news.

Now again, one might well ask, what would his response be? Well, one can imagine in our own minds the kind of responses that are possible. One can think, for example, that he might have seen the revival as a threat to public order and sent out the National Guard to squelch it. I mean, political leaders have been known to do that.

I mean, after all, you can't have religious fanatics running around upsetting the social, economic, political order of the day. And so, in fact, he might have seen it that way and tried to squelch it, but he didn't. He might have seen the people's religious faith as a means of maintaining public order and co-opted the revival without really believing in it.

In our own day, political leaders have been known to do that in other places in our world. In Latin America, in Africa, in some countries, in Asia, political leaders have been known to use religion for their own purposes. They see a revival, they see a religious revival taking place, and they try to use it and manipulate it for their own political ends and for their own political gain.

And how sad it is when that happens and when religious revivals can be co-opted for political purposes. Well, the King of Nineveh may have tried to do that, but he didn't. He might have seen it, of course, as a quaint experience which could do no real harm, a kind of harmless distraction for the people of Nineveh as they were living in this city of crime and all of the turmoil that was there, crime and violence.

He therefore may simply have indulged it. He didn't see it, however, as a threat. He didn't try to co-opt it for political purposes, and he didn't simply patronize it.

He didn't respond in any of those ways. What he did is he got up from his throne, he took off his royal robes, he covered himself with sackcloth, and he sat down in the dust. And all of those actions are put in the text in such a way so as to describe very clearly that the king himself was touched by this revival.

He acts with humility. He joins his people in repentance of their sins, all of their sins, from the least to the greatest. And again, one of the marks of a true revival is that it influences the power brokers of a city, the political leaders of a culture, of a nation.

People in positions of power and influence begin to act differently. They begin to think differently. They have a change of mind with respect to those things that are important, and ultimately with respect to God.

And they too are touched by the spirit of God. They too are converted. They too begin to look at life differently.

And I suggest to you that that's one of the reasons why the Apostle Paul in the New Testament enjoins Christians to pray for political powers and civil authorities. In 1 Timothy 2, for example, Paul urges us to offer prayers and intercessions and thanksgivings for everyone, for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. Now the most that you want to pray for and the most that you hope for is that the political leaders and that those in powers of authority, places of authority, those who have positions of power that make a difference in justice and peace in our world will indeed be touched so profoundly by the spirit of God that they will begin to act differently.

And think differently. And treat the agendas of life differently. That's the most for which we ought to hope and pray and for which we ought to long.

But at least we ought to pray for the fact that we are given, that we ought to be given political leaders who rule wisely and justly so as Paul says that we may live quiet and peaceable lives, godly and respectful in every way. So the apostle Paul enjoins us, not particularly for political purposes, but nevertheless he enjoins believers to pray for our leaders. The King of Nineveh was touched in a very powerful and in a very real way by this revival and it's one of the marks of revival.

And then thirdly, notice that the kings and nobles issued a public decree in verses seven to nine. Now the King of Nineveh could simply have rested in his own personal experience. I mean here he had been touched by this revival, by this renewal.

He came to believe it would seem, he repented at least, he mourned, he identified with his people. And what he does is he calls the nobles together, the other power brokers in the city and together they issue a decree. Now under normal circumstances, this would not have been an easy thing to do.

I mean can you see the king trying to get his advisors, his councils, the nobles who held power, perhaps even the balance of power, who perhaps even threatened the king's own power, can you see trying to get all of them together and the kind of dynamics that would unfold as they together try to agree on a public statement that's going to order a radical change in the daily life of the city? I mean our experience is that most city councils can't even agree on the price of parking meters, let alone come to some agreement on this kind of a profound statement that's radically gonna alter the very fabric and daily life of the city. But again we see evidence that the spirit of God is at work in a powerful way and they issue a decree which in fact states that the entire city is to be shut down, that everyone is to fast, that everyone is to call urgently upon God in prayer. Presumably there are concerts of prayer and gatherings of people all over the city.

People are to give up their evil ways and their violence. There's a call for public righteousness and there is a hope expressed that they might yet be saved. And so they enter together as a city corporately into this spirit of true repentance.

It's not filled simply with gloom and pessimism but it is filled with hope, hope that things can be different from the way that they are. And I wanna suggest to you that what happened here in Nineveh has happened numerous times throughout the history of the church, that when the spirit of God comes, when there is true faith and when there is true repentance, when there is true revival, one of the things that marks true revival is public righteousness. A change in the moral fabric of the culture.

Think for example about the Puritan or the Methodist revivals in England. The change, the very moral fabric of the culture. I mean, Methodism impacted England in a way that is hard to imagine.

A nation in the 18th and 19th centuries taken up with prostitution, taken up with child labor, taken up with the oppression of the Industrial Revolution and all of the fallout of that and into that came the spirit of God and it transformed the very social fabric, the very nature of what the culture and what the society was about. And the revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries spawned not just religious fervor, but leaders who took it upon themselves to give leadership to change the way that life was lived. So much so that in the 19th century, one of the great evangelical leaders led the movement for the abolition of slavery.

It was out of that spirit, out of that need. And one of the tragedies of course in our world today is that we often see revivals and we see renewal sweep across the church. But the question we need to ask ourselves, is there this dimension of the revival and the renewal taking place? Does it really change people in such a way that they are called and committed to changing the way that they live and the world in which they live? Are we praying for this kind of a revival that would change the very fabric of our culture, the very spiritual fiber of our city? It's not by might nor by power, but by my spirit says the Lord.

And what I wanna suggest to you is this, that if we are going to see the outpouring of renewal and revival fire in our day, it's going to come not by carefully planned programs to influence power brokers, but it's going to come as an outcome of the outpouring of the spirit of God. But an outpouring that doesn't simply stop with the transformation of people's lives individually as important and as powerful and as necessary as that is, but one that overflows and changes life itself. That brings the reality of Jesus into every sphere of life so that as Rob reminded us earlier, his lordship will be seen and his lordship will be recognized in every sphere of life as the kingdom of God breaks into our world.

And then finally, what happened? Verse 10, God responded with mercy. The city of Nineveh did not get what it deserved. In wrath, God remembered mercy.

God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, the text says, and had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction that he had threatened. Now, just stand back, particularly those of you who've been with us throughout this whole series, just stand back from Jonah for a minute and see what's happened. In Jonah chapter one, God has mercy upon the heathen sailors and they are converted.

In Jonah chapter two, God has mercy upon Jonah and Jonah is converted. And now in chapter three, God has mercy. God has mercy upon Nineveh and the people of Nineveh are converted.

The Lord had compassion on them, it says, and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. Now, why did God change his mind? Well, God saw their faith. God saw their repentant spirit.

The people of Nineveh really believed God. They were truly sorry for their sin. They truly repented and God saw their obedience and God then had compassion on them.

Now, does this mean that God changes his mind at the drop of a hat? Is it possible that the sovereign God of the universe can be persuaded against his better judgment to give the people of Nineveh another chance? Well, the answer to that question is both yes and no. On the one hand, the God of the Bible is sometimes portrayed as someone who seems to change his mind. I mean, think of Abraham bargaining with God for Sodom and Gomorrah.

Although in the end, of course, he loses the argument that as Abraham does and Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. But the point is that the mystery of divine providence and the sovereignty of God in the midst of life is not easily explained and for whatever purposes in the plan of God, God encourages us, God invites us, God commands us to pray and to respond to his promises in such a way that it seems to make a difference. Prayer does make a difference in the purposes of God.

And at the same time, of course, we must remember that God always accomplishes his purposes in the end because the promises of God are invitations for us to respond and the threats of divine judgment as in the case of Nineveh are invitations for repentance and response. And so God doesn't follow through on the original judgment that Jonah pronounced, not because God is capricious, not because God is

indecisive, not because God can't make up his mind, not because God is easily swayed by popular opinion or by the polls, but rather because God desires that all women and men should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And that, my friends, is what happened in Nineveh.

And so we need to understand that the God who sent Jonah to preach judgment to Nineveh is the same God who says in 2 Chronicles 7.14, if my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their evil ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin. And what's the last part of that text? And will heal their land. The God who saved Nineveh is the same God who says to us through the prophet Isaiah, seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near, let the evil forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts and let him return to the Lord and he will have mercy upon him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon.

And as we consider what happened in Nineveh, let us pray that we too in our own personal lives, individually, in our life as God's people here in Knox Church at the corner of Harvard and Spadina and in the great city of Toronto, let us also pray and consider as we think about our own city and its vastness and the nation in which we live, may we pray that the experience of the people of Nineveh would be our experience, that we might believe God, that we might trust in the word of God and that we might see the marks of revival and renewal manifest themselves in our day. That's what we ought to be praying for, the kind of renewal and revival that's described here in Jonah chapter three, verses five to 10. And if God in his sovereign grace should answer our prayers in our day, we would have the privilege of seeing a revival and a renewal that would change, that would turn us upside down, that would turn this church upside down and that would turn the city in which we live and even beyond, all of it upside down for the kingdom of God.

May that be our prayer this evening. Let us pray. Father, we do bow before you this evening and pray that you would increase our vision, that you would increase our faith and that you would increase within us a spirit of repentance, that you would increase within us a concern for prayer, that through it all, by your sovereign grace, you would work in our day.

For the sake of Jesus, we pray, amen.

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