

## A tale of two judgments

### Jonah 3:1–10

And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee. <sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey. <sup>4</sup> And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> ¶ 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. <sup>7</sup> 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: <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? <sup>10</sup> ¶ 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.

Once there was a stubborn and bigoted man whom God had called as one of His prophets. God sent this prophet to a great and mighty city, a city so big that it would take three days to cross through it on foot. But this prophet, Jonah, would not obey the will of his Father in heaven. He despised the word and commandment of the Lord. He refused to go to this great city, and thought to outrun God Himself in a ship. But God put an end to this foolishness, and caused Jonah to be thrown overboard, and swallowed by a mighty whale, in whose belly he remained for three days. There Jonah repented himself of his sin, and obeyed the word of the Lord. He entered into that great and mighty city, Nineveh, though he hated even then to do so, for he despised this people. He preached the words which God had sent Him to preach. He proclaimed judgment upon their sins. Behold the power of the Word of the Lord had a mighty effect! The entire city, who could easily have arrested Jonah and put him to death, instead listened intently to him. The king pleaded with his people to put on sackcloth and ashes, to bow down in repentance, to eat no food, to drink no water, if so be that God might be merciful unto them, and turn from the destruction which He would surely reign down upon them. Though their sins were as scarlet, yet they were made white as snow, for the Lord heard their cry, saw their penitence, and turned His heart toward them in mercy.

Once there was a mighty preacher, whose name was Jesus. He always did the will of His Father in heaven. When His Father said, "Go here," He went. When His Father said,

"Speak unto these people my Word," He ever spoke the Word of the Father. He did not travel far and wide to the great cities of Rome, Carthage, and Athens, which were surely very wicked. He preached only in his own land, and mostly only to his own countrymen. That land had a great city, a mighty city, a city which hated and despised him: Jerusalem. He was their own countryman. He loved them dearly, yet they sought to put Him to death. He had much to fear from them, yet He went even so. He preached peace unto them, declaring that their God was a gracious God, who forgives the sins of the penitent, and would surely wipe all their sins away also. He even prophesied that they would take Him, treat Him spitefully, and finally put Him to death. One of His closest disciples pleaded with him to turn away from Jerusalem, to not go where His Father sent Him, for they loved their Master. Yet Jesus rebuked his wrong-thinking disciple, Peter, and obeyed his Father's will. He continued to preach, and warn the people of the wrath of God to come, that if they did not turn from their wickedness, not one stone would be left upon another in the day that God visited them with His wrath. But the people did not repent. They took pleasure in their sins, and they crucified Jesus even as He knew they would. For three days, Jesus was in the belly of a tomb, but death could not reign over this one, in whom God the Father was so well pleased. He was raised again, to declare even to His rebellious city, and to all men, that God in Christ Jesus had found all the world to be righteous. Yet even then they did not repent, and so, after forty years, the promised destruction came upon them.

How is it that the city of Nineveh, a city filled with strangers to the household of God, could find mercy in God's sight, whereas His own people, Israel, were destroyed? It was never God's will that they perish. As the prophet Hosea declared, "Oh Israel, thou has destroyed thyself, but in Me is thine help." How our Lord grieves over the stubborn pride of His beloved city. The death they died should have passed over them, for their Lord Christ had already absorbed the debt of their sin in His own body, upon the cross. But God does not force His grace upon anyone. He does not drag any man kicking and screaming into heaven. His grace is a gift that can be, and usually is, refused. How could any man blame the Giver of such a perfect Gift as the Gift of Christ Jesus when it was *the people themselves* who refused the gift? Is it not offered in perfect sincerity? It must be, for have not the Scriptures already declared, "God was in Christ reconciling the *world* unto Himself?" Did not Jesus say Himself say, "God so loved *the world* that He gave his only begotten Son?" These are the words which the Father sent Jesus to preach. It was no mistake. He said *the world*, not *men from all over the world*. Who is man to tell the Father, "Not so, Lord! How could you indeed pay for the sins of those who deny your only begotten Son? That would be a waste, and would make no sense." Yet

that is exactly what God declares, 2 Pe. 2:1, that men would come into the Church and deny the Lord that bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. He *bought them* and yet *they are destroyed*, even as it was with His beloved city, Jerusalem.

Nineveh was saved, but Israel was destroyed. Yet not all of Israel perished. Most of His own did not receive Him, but not all. There were a few who rejoiced in His coming. They heard the call of His prophet John, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" and in sackcloth and ashes, they mourned their sins. The lame and the blind came to Him because their sickness reminded them every day of their sins. Those came who hungered after righteousness. Just as none could say that God had abandoned His people, so also none could say that they had done anything to deserve His kindness. Therefore in sackcloth and ashes they sat, for this was a fitting place for a people whom God had redeemed from certain death. They waited on the Lord if so be that He would turn away from them the evil end that they, for their sins, deserved. They did not wait in vain, for the Lord refreshed them in the waters of Baptism for the remission of their sins. He refreshed them through His absolution: Thy faith hath saved thee. Go in peace. And so not only was God's wrath turned away from them, but they knew the joy of Salvation.

All of mankind stands between these two judgments of God, that of Nineveh and Jerusalem. One or the other will be their lot. One or the other will be your certain end. The way of Nineveh is heard. The way of Jerusalem easy. Look at what a mighty city Nineveh was. They had much reason to be proud. But they also had much reason to be ashamed. They used their might to serve a wicked end. Who was any man to tell them that theirs was the way of death? They were doing just fine! Did they not with their own hands defend themselves from their enemies? Did they not cause labor and commerce to flourish? Were not their works the envy of cities throughout the land? But now comes the prophet Jonah, and they are supposed to count all their works, their might, as useless and vain? When a city is so great, it is a long way down to the dust and ashes of repentance. But though there be much pride to overcome, the Word of the Lord can overcome it. Nineveh received the Word of the Lord not because they were wise, but because God's word was powerful. Jerusalem, on the contrary, had far less actual greatness. They were small in comparison, but what they lacked in land and wealth they made up for in generational pride. They were the children of Abraham. God gave the Word to them, and not to the other nations. Why should they, of all people, bow down to the dust in repentance? Will yours be the way of sackcloth and ashes unto repentance? Or will the pride of your heart rule over even your understanding of the Word of God so that the wonderful things which He has spoken are hidden from your ears, and you cannot know them? For you cannot

have it both ways. Either you are a poor sinner who but for the mercy of God is Redeemed, or you are proud and seek no help or comfort from the Lord.

We all look up to certain family or friends whom we are privileged to know, who have set a wonderful example of faithfulness to their Lord. They speak often of the Salvation of Christ. They set a good example in word and life, following the commandments of the Lord. Some of them have passed on. Others are with us still. As we think on them, it is tempting to tell ourselves, "This is a different caliber of man. He is better than others. His words and deeds are pure. His heart is not corrupted like so many others. He is wise and good." Should we not think well on those who have set a great example of faithfulness? Indeed we should! But let none forget that no man comes to the Lord but by the way of Nineveh or the way of Jerusalem. If it is not in sackcloth and ashes that you came to your Lord, it can only be in pride and arrogance. It is no different for every man, even those whom we admire as great examples of faithfulness. When all is said and done, the greatest man is but a sinner whom God has brought to dust and ashes by the preaching of His Law, that He might lay His anger by, and grant them life and mercy.

It is through sackcloth and ashes that every man comes to know the grace and mercy of God. But God does not leave you there. Were He to abandon you in your mourning, you would mourn in vain. Your dread of sin and death would overwhelm you and drive you to despair. No, He lifts you up with the Word of his Son, "Be of good cheer, thy faith hath saved thee." With His merciful hand he lifts you up from the ashes, and gives you a better garment than sackcloth. He clothes you with the robes of His own perfect righteousness. He ends the death sentence which was yours and grants you life. So enduring is this life, that though your body returns to the earth as dust, from the dust and ashes of the earth you shall arise. For the Word of Christ will speak once more on the last day. He who was in the belly of the tomb for three days, will open your tomb also. And then shall you know sackcloth and ashes no more, for the glory of God will be upon you. May the God of Salvation so grant that we seek Him through the sackcloth and ashes of repentance, that the joy of Salvation which endures forever may be ours. Amen.