

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Jonah 3:1-10 **“How To Spot A Revival”**

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(1st Sunday of Advent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIAB: JONAH 3:1-10 "HOW TO SPOT A REVIVAL"

Warnings Precede Judgments: Red Lights = Stop

IIA: 3:1-3a THE SECOND CALL OF GOD: JONAH IS OBEDIENT (// 1:1-3).

Begin Second Half Of The Book

1) v.1 Repeated Formula Of Revelation To The Prophet Jonah.

Second Chance, Peter! //1:1-2

Jonah Is Back Where He Started: Dry Ground, Chaos → Order

1 a Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah *a second time*, saying, Rare, Deja Vu, Same Call Again, *A Do-Over*
Jonah Gets A Second Chance, Nineveh A First Shot

2) v.2 Oracle Of Yahweh: 3 Parts.

No Reference To Failure, The Call/Commission Narrative Resumes

God Works Through Agents: Angels, People

2 b "Arise,/ go to Nineveh, that great city, / Concern For Cities, No Negotiation! Jonah Is Given A New Appointment!
and proclaim *to* it the proclamation that I tell you."// 2:9, Play On Words, God Controls The Message
Not *against* As Before, But *to*, From *condemn* To *proclaim*

3) v.3a Jonah's Compliant Response: 2 Parts, No. 3 in vv.3b-10.

8 MARKERS OF REVIVAL

1 Cor. 2:1-5, Jonah Remains Free, Not Want To Repeat Earlier Experience

3 b' So Jonah arose/ and went to Nineveh,/ Jonah Learned He Cannot Manipulate God's Judgment, Even Of Himself
a' according to the word of the LORD./ 550 Miles, Silently Compliant, No Verbal Objection Yet (See 4:1-4)
Boundaries Crossed, Now God-Directed, But Jonah Is Not Yet Reformed!

IIB: 3:3b-10 THE SALVATION AND REPENTANCE OF THE NINEVITES (//1:4-17).

Jonah Received Mercy. Will He Extend It?

1) vv.3b-4 Destruction Of Nineveh Prophesied By Jonah.

A PREPARED PEOPLE & VOICE (1)

Did Jonah Abbreviate The Word? No, "Thus says the Lord"

4 Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city, three days journey in breadth. 1 Mile Wide, Invokes Death/Destruction
Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he proclaimed, PROCESS OF WARNING (2)
"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall *be overturned*!" Gen. 19:5, Ambiguity = *Destroyed or Changed?* 2 Options, 5 Words
Gen. 6-9, Exod. 34:28, 1 Kgs. 19:8, Mt. 4:2 Testing, Limit Set, Destroyed In 612BC

2) vv.5-6 People, Then King Repent With Fasting And Sackcloth.

Preparatory Grace

10 Verbs:

High Receptivity, Oracle Of Doom, Movement Started With The People

5 1-3 a And the people of Nineveh *believed* (trusted) God; //Ex. 14:32, Gen. 15:6, **TRUST GOD'S WORD (3)**
they *proclaimed* a fast, Mt. 12:41, Bottom Up, Not Top Down = Divine Action
and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. SYMBOLIC ACTIONS (4)

Signs Of Status Are Removed: *Overturn* Hierarchy

6 4-8 b Then tidings (the message) *reached* the king of Nineveh, Not From Jonah Himself, Effects To The Rulers
1 and he *arose* from his throne, 4 Humble Verbs, Symbols Removed By Symbolic Leader
2 *removed* his robe, God Visited A City-State
2' and *covered* himself with sackcloth Dress Of Needy Slaves, God *Overturned* The Culture, Total

He Looked Just Like One Of The People, Life Is Leveled Before God!

1' and *sat* in ashes. X = a (people, v.5), b (king, v.6) // b' (king, v.7), a' (people, vv.8-9)

2') vv.7-9 Repentance Confirmed And Sealed By The King's Proclamation: 4 Actions.

Secondary Level: King Institutionalizes Ethical Reform

7 9-10 And he *made* a proclamation and *published* through Nineveh, State Policy, Royal Proclamation
"By the decree of the king and his nobles: Communal "We" Acts, National Emergency
Ecc. 3:19-21, Judith 4:10, Gen. 6-9, Animals Assist In Repentance

8 a- Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; Noah (Gen. 6-9), **FASTING (4a)**
Life Stops let them not feed or drink water, Dt. 9:9, 18 (Moses), Universal, Extreme, Short Term Measures
Non-human Creation More Responsive To God Than His People!

Symbol b+ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, All Creation Under Headship, **SACKCLOTH(4b)**
Prayer c+ and let them cry mightily to God; **DESPERATE, EXTRAORDINARY PRAYER (5)**

Unusual Ethical, Not Ritual/ Divination Response

Ethics d- yea, let everyone turn from his evil way **No Oppression, BEHAVIORAL CHANGE (6)**
and from the violence which is in his hands. Use Of Political Power For Ethical Reform: e.g U.S. Slavery
Mk. 2:15-17, King Was Responsible For Justice And Peace

9 e Who knows, God may yet repent (relent) and turn from his fierce anger, //1:6, **HOPE AND WAITING (7)**
Question so that we perish not?" Esther 4:14, King Got It! Open Future? //Captain's Plea In 1:6b
Jer. 18:7-10, Rom. 5:10, God Responds To Repentance Because Of Mercy

1') v.10 Destruction Of Nineveh Reversed In Response To Genuine Repentance.

27x O.T.

Mt. 12:41, Ex. 32:14, Gen. 12:1-3, Not Coerced: Offered Grace, Showed Mercy

10 When God saw what they did,/ how they turned from their evil way,/ 1:2d, Joel 2:13, Ritual + Reform, a-b // b'-a'
God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them;/ and he did not do it. **MERCY OF GOD (8)**

OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS IN WHICH GOD ALTERED AN ANNOUNCED COURSE OF ACTION

- Gen. 6:6 “And the LORD **was sorry** that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. “
- Ex. 32:14 “And the LORD **repented** of the evil which he thought to do to his people.”
- 1 Sam. 15:11 “I **repent** that I have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry; and he cried to the LORD all night.”
- Jer. 18:7-10 “If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, **I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.** And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, **then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it.**”
(It can go either way!)
- 2 Sam. 24:16 “And when the angel stretched forth his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, **the LORD repented of the evil,** and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Arau'nah the Jeb'usite. “

TEXTS IN WHICH GOD PROMISES NOT TO CHANGE A DECISION

- Jer. 4:28 “For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be black;
for I have spoken, I have purposed; **I have not relented nor will I turn back.**”
- Jer. 15:6 “You have rejected me, says the LORD,
you keep going backward;
so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you;
I am weary of relenting.”
- Jer. 20:16 “Let that man be like the cities which the LORD overthrew **without pity;**
let him hear a cry in the morning And an alarm at noon,”

Old Testament Revivals: Repent, Turn from idolatry, Obey the law of Moses, Sincere worship

1. Asa of Judah in II Chronicles 15 (esp. v.12).
2. Jehoash in 2 Kgs. 11-12
3. Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18 (esp. vv.4-6)
4. Josiah in 2 Kings 22-23 (esp. 23:3).

HOW TO SPOT A REVIVAL

"And Jonah proclaimed.... And the people of Nineveh believed God."

Where revival starts.

J O N A H 3 : 4 - 5

It is the summer of 2019, and it's been a challenging time for the Palmetto state. After three years of severe droughts that inflated food prices, after a riot and arson in inner city Charleston after three young men were killed, and after a second hurricane which exceeded Hugo and devastated the upper coast north of Georgetown, the legislature has again been called into special session for what's become a yearly event as the state treasurer presents a special report to a joint session. Lottery taxes have plummeted, as have taxes on alcohol. Vice revenues are in steep decline.

An offsetting factor is that in the past twelve months there have been fewer first-time incarcerations than any previous year in the last fifty. Recidivism is almost nil. The awakening and moral revival that's been percolating across the state since January of 2015 has found its way into the jails. Prison construction was halted last year, and two or three are soon to be moth-balled. Crime has dropped dramatically. A program has been instituted to use surplus SLED and Highway Patrol officers in schools to teach public safety. So effective have been the apprehending of dealers and their suppliers that large traffickers are now avoiding South Carolina because they fear exposure. They speak of *The Dome*, as if God put a shield of protection over this place. AA and NA meetings are expanding in every town to help newly sobered converts stay that way. Something strange and wonderful is happening; some historians are speaking of a Fourth Great Awakening with our state as the unlikely ignition point. Some areas have been more receptive than others, but no county is unaffected. Where the pastors meet to fast and pray, it moves quickly, and where they are still at odds, its still moves, but much more slowly as laity take the lead. The state's spiritual gatekeepers are waking to their cultural responsibilities.

A second offsetting factor is the DSS budget. Much of the gap in dealing with the poor and homeless has been taken up by the churches. Adoptions are up, abuse

down; there's actually a waiting list to be foster or adoptive parents. All abortion clinics in the state have closed because there are no more doctors and nurses willing to work them since the awakening of 2015 started. STD's and DUI's are way down. The sale of wedding licenses are way up, and the number of out of wedlock births has shrunk by fifty percent. Fathers are voluntarily returning to give support to the children whose mothers they once abandoned. A weight is lifting off the economy as healthy and reformed families do the social work only families are capable of.

The state regulatory apparatus is stalling from boredom. Polluters have stopped polluting. Nursing homes give more care than is required. The Department of Revenue has received thousands of checks from those who confess to cheating on taxes years ago and now desire to make restitution. All interest and penalties have been dropped because there's now such good will across the state. When people tell the truth, mercy comes their way. Much of the old partisan political hatred has evaporated. What do you do when companies are lining up to buy industrial sites because of the quality of the workforce and the fact that we're such a good place for families? It's a great time to be in commercial real estate. Hope is on the rise.

After the treasurer's report, two historians, one from USC and the other from Columbia International University, have been invited to address the legislature on the social consequences of the First and Second Great Awakenings in Colonial America, especially how the first prepared for the birth of a new nation and how the second raised the moral case against slavery.¹ How do you govern a people who now largely govern themselves? No one knows which way the budget will tilt. Such widespread social change is disruptive, and no one has an accurate map of what's ahead. An invisible hand seems to be shaping an agenda that's revealed more in prayer meetings than in government strategies and computer forecasting.

It's even affected the sciences. When the Greenwood Genetics Center had a breakthrough in autism diagnosis and prenatal treatments, the leaders and scientists-

¹ See *Christian History*, Issue 23, "Spiritual Awakenings in North America," www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/issue/spiritual-awakenings-in-north-america; J. Edwin Orr, "The Role of Prayer in Spiritual Awakening," www.watchmangospelsigns.com/resources; the audio lectures of Dr. Michael McClymond, "Spiritual Awakenings: Past Lessons, Future Hopes," www.cslewisinstitute.org/Spiritual_Awakenings_McClymond; Tim Keller, "Kingdom Centered Prayer," <http://sevenpdx.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/kingdom-centered-prayer.pdf>

many of whom were members of local churches- sheepishly admitted the insights of the long and tedious research crystallized so quickly in a cascade of insights that it awed them all with the sheer elegance of it. Lots of internationals are flying in, and the airport is soon to be expanded. Shuttles back and forth to Greenville are full.

It all began five years ago in Columbia when a inter-racial group of pastors met weekly for prayer and relationship building. Soon they cut lunch and added fasting. After six months fifty pastors took a three day prayer retreat together. What occurred is still a secret. It was then something similar happened in Charleston and soon up and down the coast before moving inland to close the gap with Columbia; only then did it move west. You could feel it when you walked into the churches, even onto the property. There was a new sense of presence, as if the Holy Spirit was hovering over congregations. First came a trickle, then a flood of conversions. Interdenominational baptismal services have been held for hundreds. Most churches have expanded their finance committees with a benevolence group to decide what to do with the money that fills the plates. So many come and pray at odd hours no church locks its doors any more. Testimonies start fifteen minutes before published service times.

Each week stories are told of marriages healed and of old grudges reconciled. Tears and laughter blend together with hymns and choruses. Baptists are still Baptists, Methodists still Methodists, Catholics still Catholics, but the old dividing walls and stereotypes seem irrelevant now. Black and white churches exchange pulpits and choirs regularly. To be *merely Christian* is the priority. Doctors are baffled at the physical and emotional healings which have become commonplace and are now being carefully documented. Downtown businesses now give employees an hour and a half for lunch on Wednesday, forty-five minutes to eat, another forty-five to attend one of the prayer and praise meetings which pack the churches mid-week.

An interesting pattern is being studied. In places where the fire of revival will not spread three factors dominate. It's been discovered that these towns are heavily infested with occult practices or else had some particularly heinous association with slavery. In still others the clergy have been involved in some sort of malfeasance, either moral or financial. By studying the spread of the revival you begin to discern a spiritual map of the state.² Where occult centers are exposed, where the historic

² See Peter Wagner, editor, *Breaking Strongholds In Your City* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993) for a discussion of spiritual mapping. Also George Otis, Jr. *Informed Intercession* (Venutra, CA: Gospel Light, 1999).

strongholds of racism are repented of, and where the clergy confess and repent, revival soon follows. Where hardness of heart predominates, the refreshing river of revival seems to flow right around them and on to the next community.

Come to think of it, it was when the pastor of First Baptist of Columbia (where the Articles of Secession were signed) made a personal appeal for forgiveness on behalf the church that the spark jumped from the churches to the community at large. When the remaining Klan groups in the western part of the upstate chose to disband because of the love they experienced from black pastors and churches, it was as if a dam had broken, as if some invisible and deeply embedded demonic stronghold had been defeated. The same thing happened in Charleston when a service of exorcism, repentance, and healing was held at the old slave market. One group of resistant clergy, *The Committee for Rational Religion*, continues to issue warnings about the emotional excesses of the movement and the possible entanglements of church and state, but for the most part they're ignored because nothing is happening in their churches, but even these skeptics are loved and prayed for.

Seven summers ago the droughts began; six years ago the riot erupted and burned a section of the old city; five years ago the hurricane hit that killed nearly a thousand and wiped out billions of beach property, but since then God's hand is hovering over the state. The deep wounds of the last three years and the chronic wounds of the last three hundred are being healed, as if by a skilled physician who knows the order of treatment. We've been crushed and humbled, but now there is new life. Our hope is II Chronicles 7:14: "... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." You see it on billboards all over the state. I recently saw a new one that made me laugh. It has an elderly church lady wagging her finger at motorists entering the state, and under it the words, "It's not safe to do evil in South Carolina."

What I've done in this introduction is risk thinking in the future tense, using a sanctified imagination to ask, What might it be like if it happened here? Is such a revival necessary? Yes! Is it possible? Jonah didn't think so either.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Jonah's Second Chance (3:1-3).

The Book of Jonah falls into two halves. Chapters 1 and 2 chronicle God's first call

and Jonah's disobedience which took him not *away from the presence of the Lord* but down: *down* to Joppa, *down* onto the ship, *down* into the lower decks, *down* into the ocean, *down* into the belly of the fish, *down* to the very gates of the netherworld and the realm of the dead, as *far down* as a soul could go, and from there his unlikely ascent in the belly of a whale. A descent of disobedience, an ascent because of God's mercy not to throw Jonah away, and as a bonus some Phoenician mariners turned from their many deities to the one God of the Jews Jonah so poorly represented.

Chapters 3 and 4 then narrate God's second call and Jonah's reluctant journey into the heart of a great and wicked city over five hundred miles away, which is a long walk with lots of time to think about life beyond the borders of Israel. The persistence of God is greater than the rebellion of Jonah. The Lord can out-wait and out-fox any human opponent, even those who are supposed to be on the divine team. The grace of God has a soft center and a hard, cutting edge. A near-death and symbolic resurrection are Jonah's recent experience. He's been preserved for a purpose, even if he doesn't like it, So we begin right where we started two Sundays ago. Same tune, second verse same as the first, chapter 3, verse 1: "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah *a second time*, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'"

Ours is the God of the second chance, a God who takes you back to the place of your disobedience, "Let's start over and start here and make some progress together." Jonah knows what divine speaking sounds like because he's been a prophet for some time now,³ and that- after all- is what those with this calling do: they hear God as if standing within the divine council as official ambassadors of Israel's God.⁴ We still have such people, *prophets* I mean, those with the spiritual gift of prophecy referred to in the New Testament,⁵ though not of the same authority as the canonical prophets whose words are preserved in Scripture. This voice has never left the church. Our God is still a speaking God, able to get specific information and challenge to people when required, as has happened to me several memorable times. Our mainline churches, because of our long allergy to the supernatural, don't know what to do with such people, so we largely leave prophecy to the more-experience oriented among our historical offspring, the charismatics and Pentecostals, but it is

³ See 2 Kings 14:23-27 for the only other O.T. reference to Jonah.

⁴ E.g. 1 Sam. 16, 1 Kgs. 17:1-8, 18:1, 21:7

⁵ See Paul's treatment of the gifts, and especially prophecy, in 1 Cor. 12-14.

Jonah 3:1-10 9

a diminishment to marginalize any of the Spirit's gifts to the church; we need all the tools to do all the work. When I speak on Sundays, it's based on the careful study of Scripture as a preacher. But when a genuine prophet addresses you, there's an immediacy that's hard to describe, like getting a text message from God. I speak about principles and patterns, insights and challenges, but prophets get specific. And when, in the middle of a sermon, a single sentence pierces someone's heart or illumines their mind, for them it's become a prophetic word through a pastor, and I never know it happened. God's speaks as he chooses. Years later someone says, "God used what you said to change my life," and when they give the details I can't remember a thing. It is God who manages the effects of his Word, not us.

At this point we wonder, What will Jonah do this time? The answer is found in verse 3: "So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord." Remember that, morally speaking, Nineveh stinks. "Their wickedness has come up before me," is the way it was put to Jonah.⁶ And it hasn't quit stinking; it's just taken the Lord a week or so to have a little *shock and awe* session with his wayward ambassador. Jonah is not convinced of the mission; he is, however, convinced he does not want another training session in the deep, so he obeys.

Twenty-one years ago I spent an afternoon with my Uncle Bill who was dying with Lou Gehrig's. A P-47 pilot in World War II, an executive with Milliken, a faithful Methodist, and- at age 69- reflective about his life and generation. With tears I told him he was one of my heroes. He looked at me eye to eye, and with what strength was left in his voice made a confession, "My generation has failed yours. We loosened the ties between God and government, between morality and common life, and I fear what's ahead for my grandchildren." His directness stunned me, but I now believe, from the perspective of two decades, that he was essentially correct.

Those who chart church history and the ebb and flow of spiritual renewals sometime speak of five stages or transitions. First an *era of stagnation*. The marks of the church in this state are spiritual complacency, doctrinal indifference and moral degeneration. The church fusses internally with structure and program and lives off the piety and prayers of an earlier generation. The reason the church is coasting is because the path is downward and takes so little energy. This is United Methodism of the seventies, and early eighties. When we talk more about our heritage than about our mission into the future, it's a sure sign we are well into *stagnation*.

⁶ 1:2b.

This leads to an *era of concern* as people note the decline. In the secular world there are calls for a *return to values* because a culture without the virtues of thrift and self-control and a people with little ability to delay gratification can quickly become unstable and dangerous. We know in our bones something's wrong. Foundations are cracking. Large sink holes open underfoot. Accumulated moral capital is frittered away with little to replace it. This can go on for decades, as it has for us.

Then comes a third marker, *an hour of decision* when something must give, either sin or the people, and in recent years mainline denominations have caved by letting the culture control them and demonstrating they are at their core not only *in* the world but *of* it, that they share the culture's deep commitments to radical autonomy and moral relativity at the expense of the wisdom of Scripture and tradition, which translated means *Whatever I want is what you the church must give*. For Nineveh the *hour of decision* was potentially forty days, but they did not need that long so quick was their response. This is the time for intense prayer and self-denial. And here the church is key to what happens to the culture at large. Note that God dealt first harshly *with Jonah* before dealing mercifully with pagan Nineveh. Judgement begins in the house of God. The hope of America is not this or that President, this or that program, but a church that will repent before God and thus reposition itself as a credible witness and alternative community. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to provoke a crisis. Robert Coleman writes of this third stage:

"Generally... spiritual crisis is interwoven with some momentous decision in the political and social life of the nation. National emergencies accentuate spiritual crisis, and many call on the resources of supernatural deliverance. Those who refuse God's warnings are chastened, and finally cut off. Those who obey God are revived."⁷

The fourth stage, if given, is *the visitation* itself, and it may take many forms. The common experience is one of immediate divine presence that undoes people. It lays bare the heart, the truth of one's inner world, and people either melt at the heat of divine love or leave hardened. The love and holiness of God weigh down upon his people offering new life and the power of change. There is an awareness of sin in all its deceptions and a desire to be rid of it, accompanied by a fresh appreciation of the beauty and truth of Jesus Christ. Evil is exposed and routed as Christ sits at the head of the table. Phenomena of the Spirit appear as spiritual gifts are restored.

⁷ Edited, "Revival: its causes and conditions," *ACMC Newsletter*, August 1991.

Then comes stage five, the *era of fading glory*. We look back and talk about how great it was in the old days, even if *the old days* were only a few years back. I sometimes catch myself speaking that way of *the Jesus* movement of the early 1970's which swept college campuses. People write books; historians analyze the effects. The work of God, like waves of the ocean build, crash in a burst of energy, leave their mark and eventually recede, leaving new insight and perhaps new forms. The crest of a revival's wave may last months, even years, but eventually the weight of sin and sloth take their toll as movements become institutions and momentum is lost. Such zeal is hard to maintain. No awakening or reformation lasts forever, but like rings on a tree they leave their mark and leave us with a question, Where are we now in God's purposes? If we see such in our lifetime, it's not a spiritual playground but a chance to see a church, a city, a state, even a nation given another chance at God's blessings, that God would push back his judgments and give us space to respond from the heart.

I am no prophet; I have no time line, but I believe an unfaithful church and a misguided nation are ripening for judgment because of our resistance to God, to objective moral law, and in the face of our blinding national pride and appeal to exceptionalism, which may once have been true but which I no longer find highly convincing. I see little awareness of our need for repentance and a change of heart and mind. So I ask, Are we as wise as Nineveh, and where are the prophets? Should they arise in this or the next generation, will we heed their cry, or will we miss an opportunity and embrace calamity? The church is threadbare and the nation looking a bit shabby. It's not only our roads and bridges that are in need of repair, it's the crumbling infrastructure of our lives and our loss of purpose. We need a great awakening, a deep restoration of holy living and of a people unashamed to follow Jesus in the private and public spheres of life, and for this we must prepare. What if we were one of a thousand places in this state that God lit a fresh fire?

I wonder what Jonah's are even now being dealt with by God in some narrow dark space away from prying eyes? How long before we come to our *hour of decision* and the trajectory of our destiny is reset? Verse 3, "So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD." That's over a five hundred mile trek across several national boundaries. Lots of time for Jonah to think. Imagine Jonah cresting a rise and viewing vast, rich, prideful Nineveh and its surrounding towns for the first time, not knowing what was ahead, all the while hoping the Lord would crush the enemies of Israel. Jonah will soon have a Word from God on his lips, but he does not have the mercy of God in his heart. He's a deeply divided man, obeying God out of fear if nothing else, thinking God a bully and hard employer.

Revival In Nineveh (vv. 3b-10)

It wasn't much of a message, only five words in Hebrew. A third of the way through the city Jonah opened his mouth, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." No glimmer of hope in his voice, just forty days and wham! That's what Jonah wants *overthrown* to mean. But the Hebrew is ambiguous; it can just as easily mean not *overthrown* in the sense of destroyed but *overthrown* in the sense of *upended* or *changed*.⁸ Jonah hears one meaning; God intends another.

Oh, Nineveh had plenty of religion. Ziggurats and priests and rituals all over the place, managing multiple deities and passing out lying oracles to the citizenry. But now the city will have to deal with the Lord God of Israel, and the threat of the fortieth day is designed to pack the preceding thirty-nine with intensity.

Forty is a special number in the Bible, typically associated with seasons of testing and destiny. It is a time *between the times*, a liminal period when the old is passing and the future uncertain. For forty days Noah and his family floated on the seas. For forty years the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness. For forty days Moses was on the mountain with God. For forty days Jesus endured the assault of the Evil One in the wilderness, and for forty days appeared to the disciples after Easter. Forty is a time for dealing with God and decisions that matter, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Sounds like a sure thing. A done deal. But is it?

I love Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. In the last nocturnal visit the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come shows Scrooge a vision of the Bob Cratchit family celebrating Christmas in poverty and mourning the death of Tiny Tim. In a quivering voice Ebenezer asks, "Are these the shadow of things *that will be* or of the things *that may be* only?" The spirit's answer was that this would be the outcome *if matters continued on their present course*. It was stage three, *an hour of decision*. Scrooge repented of his stinginess, intervened, and what would have been was not. The future was changed. The Cratchits prospered; Tiny Tim lived; Scrooge was a new man.

So it often is with prophecies of doom in Scripture. Many are conditional. Jeremiah 18:7-8 gives us the three stages of judgment averted:

- 1) "If at any time I announce that a nation of kingdom is to be uprooted,

⁸ Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 134-135, 142.

- torn down, and destroyed,
- 2) and if that nation I warned repents of its evil,
 - 3) then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned."

History is a dialog with God, a genuine give-and-take in which our responses matter. "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." It's a sure thing, *if* nothing happens. The future is announced; disaster is ahead, but only if things stay the same. What will Nineveh do with this Word from God through Jonah?

Jonah's words were a flaming match flicked onto the crunchy, brown needles of a parched pine forest. Everywhere he shouted the message, faith and repentance exploded like a firestorm, verse 5: "And the people of Nineveh *believed God*; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them." Even the king removed his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Jonah knew he'd been dealt with by God but had no idea the extent to which the Holy Spirit had been working in Nineveh before his arrival.⁹ The Word was with Jonah, but the Spirit had been working overtime in Nineveh long before he arrived. Observes are right when they pray that the next awakening be *a no name revival*, that it be everywhere at once. Let no preacher think their message is the cause, nor our prayers. Both are important as preparation, a gathering of kindling, but God remains sovereignly free to visit or withhold the fiery grace of awakening. Farmers plow, plant, and weed, but if rain comes, it's a gift from on high.

Something happened in the hearts of the Ninevites. They believed God; they trusted Jonah's word, and it was that opening of heaven that let them see clearly their precarious position before Jonah's God. So they repented in the way all cultures in that part of the world repent, by turning away from the pleasures of food and finery and sitting in the ashes of voluntary humiliation as a statement of just how serious they were. Faith may be an invisible operation in the heart based on God's appeal, but when crowds stop in their tracks, and when a sense of dread before God cuts across social classes, you know God is at work. It's time to humble yourself.

So crucial was this spiritual movement to the future of the city that the king made repentance mandatory. It was a *We* moment, not a *Me* moment, and it was even

⁹ On possible preparatory circumstances (e.g. omens, political issues, conscience) for the massive turning- none of which are mentioned by Jonah who ignores secondary causes, see Douglas Stuart, *Hosea - Jonah, WBC 31* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 490-491.

to include livestock. If they were on the boat with Noah, then we need their cries of pain as well. Let all creation cry to the Lord. Imagine the bleating and braying after their not eating or drinking for a few days? Nursing children screaming. The whole city shut down. Every heart and voice turned to God. And there stands Jonah, increasing perturbed by all the vast commotion ignited by his little prophecy.

Revivals are messy, often loud. Not as neat and predictable as well-rehearsed Sunday liturgies, necessary as they are between the times. For their lack of decorum, they're often criticized. No food, no water, sackcloth, ashes, the whole city crying mightily to God and led by a king who now looks like a commoner, the classes and the masses turning away from gambling and racism and crime and gossip and greed and theft and fornication and adultery and addiction and lying and violence and deception and a hard heart towards God and neighbor. It was an awesome spectacle as the Spirit used the reluctant words of Jonah as some great invisible hammer upon the people. I've seen this phenomena with individuals, never with a whole church. It's easy to work with people who know God is working with them; they're pliable. But it's hard to work with those asleep in Zion, who think being a good Methodist is enough. Never has been. Inherited religion, which I define as social church membership with a living faith and following of Jesus Christ, is the last hiding place for those who wish to avoid God. Where better to hide than in church?

To focus on the odd phenomena of awakenings is a mistake. When God shows up in the person of the Holy Spirit, unusual things are bound to happen.¹⁰ When God *busts* a person, it's rarely within the bounds of their comfort zone and sense of dignity. But the fruit is new people with new lives who change everything they touch: work, family, government, art, missions, business, industry, entertainment.

How long the intensity lasted is uncertain. An absolute fast without food or water could not have gone more than a few days. Robert South said, "Repentance has a double aspect; it looks upon things past with a weeping eye, and upon the future with a watchful eye."¹¹ Not preaching, not prayer, not even repentance can force God's hand, though these put us in the position to receive mercy should it be granted. "Who knows," the king wondered from his ash heap as he surveyed his realm in spiritual agony, "God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish

¹⁰ For a treatment of our own tradition, see Frank Billman, *The Supernatural Thread in Methodism* (Lake Mary, FLA: Charisma Media, 2013)

¹¹ James Hewett, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1988), 440.

not?" For the king to do this is to officially bow his knee to the God of Jonah.

It is a mistake to view God's change of mind in verse 10 as divine fickleness, as if God said, "Oops! I wanted to squash them, but now I have to forgive them." It is, instead, a revelation of God's desire to have genuine relationship. The God who has power to win every chess game is still interested in our chosen moves and in weaving them into the interim future. God has predestined that our free decisions shall be folded into the divine drama with real consequences. God's kingdom will come, but between here and there is room for many alternative pathways, some of which are better for us than others. God knows the past and present exhaustively because they are knowable, and God knows all the varied possibilities of the future, none of which surprise him and all of which he is able to respond to and bend to divine ends. Our freedom is limited because we are creatures and because we are in bondage, but it is not an illusion. Saying Yes to God is always a good decision.

Responding to God's grace sets up a positive trajectory; resisting grace sets up a negative dynamic of increasing velocity. If and How we respond matters. A time of decision is an invitation to new life. The kingdom of God will come, and Jesus will return as Victor and King, but much of the future between here and there is genuinely open. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be *overthrown*." Jonah hoped for one meaning, but God prepared for and invited another which is for Nineveh to be turned over from *wrong-side-up* to *right-side-up* with the whole city level before God, everyone in a posture of repentance. You could hear the wailing of men and women, donkeys and cows from miles away, one great groan ascending to heaven in hopes of judgment avoided. It was just the response God intended and enabled but did not force. The same was not true for Jonah; he was the merciless mouthpiece of a merciful heavenly Father. We have no record Jonah joined in the fasting, in the sackcloth, in the prayer. He was the match, but he missed the fire. How sad is that? To obey God from fear and miss the glory of divine mercy.

CONCLUSION

A prepared preacher- Jonah. A prepared people-the Ninevites. The prior work of the Holy Spirit. A miracle of sudden trust in an offensive message. Extraordinary fasting and prayer. A leveling of class and rank, a mass turning from evil and violence. These are signs of revival but cannot be turned into a program or strategy to force God's hand. They are not techniques to get leverage on the divine but signs God is already at work. We may even now be on the front edge of such a move. We have frittered away a moral heritage and lost the fear of God. The church is compromised

and too often unable to resist the culture's corruptions because of long laxity and feel-good preaching. Prophets are absent and pastors are become entertainers for audiences of religious consumers who are always comparison shopping. God says it stinks. Without God's grace we cannot find our way back to the narrow path of life. We teeter at the edge, and which way will we go?

At sixteen, Rodney Smith attended a Methodist meeting and was converted on November 17, 1876. He acquired a Bible, and began to carry it with an English Dictionary and a Bible Dictionary, trying to learn to read them. People laughed, but he replied, "Never you mind. One day I'll be able to read them, and I'm going to preach too," and he did, all across Great Britain and America. At a Salvation Army meeting a year later, General William Booth recognized him and said, "The next speaker will be *the gypsy boy*," and the nickname stuck.

Years later a man asked him how to have revival. Smith asked, "Do you have a place where you can pray?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Tell you what to do! Go to that place and take a piece of chalk. Kneel down, and with the chalk draw a complete circle all around you, and pray for God to send revival on everything inside of the circle. Stay there until He answers, and you will have revival." Gypsy Smith died August 4, 1947 at age 79, and his chalk story has gone round the world. So take a piece of chalk. Draw a circle around yourself. Ask God to send revival to everything inside the circle."¹² Revival starts with you and me.

The dreams we have for a spiritual renaissance at Main Street will not happen without some circles being drawn, then linked together in a growing chain. This week I found a simple little tool titled *Draw A Circle: a guide for seeking personal revival*.¹³ When I read the introduction there was a reference to today's text from Jonah, and I wondered, Is this God? It uses six topics of humility, honesty, repentance, forgiveness, scripture and prayer as a way to prepare us to welcome Jesus again. I want as many as will to join me in this experiment in personal revival. If you come forward during the hymn, you will be handed two items: a piece of chalk and a *Draw A Circle* guide. Do you need a personal revival? I do, so like the King of Nineveh I ask, "Who knows what God may do?" Will you draw a circle?

¹² http://bereanbibleheritage.org/extraordinary/smith_rodney.php

¹³ www.OneCry.com/DrawACircle.
