

Mission: Possible

Jonah 3:1-5

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. A missionary in Africa was once asked if he really liked what he was doing.
1. His response was shocking. “Do I like this work?” he said.
 2. “No. My wife and I do not like dirt. We have reasonable refined sensibilities. We do not like crawling into vile huts through goat refuse...But is a man to do nothing for Christ he does not like? God pity him, if not. Liking or disliking has nothing to do with it. We have orders to ‘Go,’ and we go. Love constrains us.”
- B. Why would love constrain him?
1. Because Jesus has provided a mission.
 - a. “Go . . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20).
 - b. Jesus says to the disciples: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24:46-47).
 2. Undoubtedly, to the Apostles this seemed like a “Mission Impossible.”
 - a. How were twelve men—thirteen, if you count Paul—supposed to take the Gospel of Jesus into all the corners of the world?
 - b. We quickly learn that the mission Jesus gave the disciples was a “Mission Possible.”
 - 1) The Holy Spirit came upon them & he empowered them to give miraculous gifts to others. The others were able—like Stephen & Philip—to preach to others before the Scriptures were completed.
 - 2) There was so much preaching, in fact, that Paul was able to write to the Colossians: “The gospel that you heard . . . has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (Col 1:23).
 - c. Not “Mission Impossible,” but “Mission Possible.”
- C. When God first calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah wants it to be a “Mission Impossible.”
1. Jonah attempts to flee from God’s command, for he wants Nineveh destroyed, not spared.
 - a. After God spares Nineveh, Jonah says to God, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (Jon 4:2).
 - b. So in fleeing to Tarshish, according to Jonah’s own words, the prophet wants his divine mission labeled “Mission Impossible.”
 2. However, a mission from God **cannot** be labeled “Mission Impossible.”
 - a. Jonah soon discovers that no mission from God is impossible.
 - 1) When the Lord first told him to go to Nineveh, Jonah tried to get as far away as possible. The Tarshish to which Jonah attempted to flee was likely the one in Spain, completely across the Mediterranean.
 - 2) Because Jonah is at sea, the Lord sends a great storm.
 - a) The sailors cast lots to see who had angered the gods.
 - b) The lot fell to Jonah & Jonah was thrown into the sea.
 - 3) Yet, the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, & this great missionary spent 3 days & 3 nights in the fish’s belly.
 - 4) After Jonah had spent 3 days & 3 nights in the fish’s belly, “the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land” (Jon 2:10).
 - b. It is at this point that we come to our text for this evening:
 - 1) READ TEXT.
 - 2) What is it that made Jonah’s divine mission, “MISSION POSSIBLE”? His mission included A GREAT COMMISSION, A GREAT CITY, & A GREAT CHANGE.

II. A GREAT COMMISSION, vv 1-2.

- A. “Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you'” (vv 1-2).
- B. Jonah's commission was GREAT, for it came from the GREAT I AM.
1. The text says that “the word of the LORD came to Jonah.”
 - a. It certainly wasn't Jonah's idea to go to Nineveh—he didn't want to go in the first place.
 - b. The word did not come from a friend of Jonah's; the word came from God.
 2. God is the greatest One who can give a commission.
 - a. Only God has the power to do what God has said.
 - 1) The message Jonah was to preach was: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (v 4).
 - 2) When Nineveh did finally fall in 612 BC, it was God who caused the city to fall.
 - a) The Book of Nahum contains oracles against Nineveh. About God's judgment upon Nineveh, Nahum says, “With an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness. What do you plot against the LORD? He will make a complete end” (Nah 1:8-9).
 - b) Jonah couldn't bring an end to Nineveh; only God could do so.
 - b. Only God had the power to know when Nineveh would be destroyed.
 - 1) Jonah goes into the city and proclaims, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”
 - 2) In Jonah's day, such a statement was preposterous!
 - a) Nineveh was the largest city in the world—there was absolutely no conceivable way that Nineveh was about to fall.
 - b) Jonah's preaching against Nineveh would have been like my going to New York City & proclaiming in that city that God was about to destroy it. People surely would think, “It's too big; it's too strong. This disaster cannot happen.”
 - c) While the city stood for about another hundred years, only the repentance of the Assyrians saved the city in Jonah's day.
- C. Jonah's commission is also great, for it was a universal commission.
1. Yes, the commission was only for Jonah to go to Nineveh.
 - a. However, this is the **only** example in the Old Testament where God sent a prophet to a pagan nation.
 - b. I'm sure that was partly the reason that Jonah was so reluctant to go to Nineveh—God did not send prophets to pagans. Yet, here God does that very thing.
 2. Think about the implications of that:
 - a. God does not just love his own people, but he loves the pagans, too.
 - b. God is concerned that people of every nation have an opportunity to come to him.
 - 1) We understand that truth in the modern era.
 - a) “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).
 - b) At Cornelius' household, Peter says, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35).
 - 2) Yet, for the Jews this was quite a startling revelation.
 - a) They were God's chosen people. God had decided to set his love upon them.
 - b) There was absolutely no way that God could conceivably love another country anywhere like he loved them. Yet, God does love nations other than the Israelites.
- D. Jonah was to preach against Nineveh the message that God gave to him.
1. Jonah did not even have a choice in the message that he was to proclaim; his proclamation was to be the words of God.
 2. Today, those of us who would dare speak in the name of God must speak the very words of God.
 - a. When Micaiah was encouraged to prophesy favorably to Ahab, he said, “As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that I will speak” (1 Ki 22:14).
 - b. “Whoever speaks [should speak] as one who speaks oracles of God” (1 Pt 4:11).

- E. A missionary once reported that when he was working in India, he entered a hotel dining room one evening & was seated with a naval officer.
1. The naval officer turned to the missionary & said, “Why don’t these missionaries stay at home & mind their own business? You can get all the converts you want.”
 2. The missionary said, “Suppose you were ordered to take your battleship to Constantinople tomorrow & I asked you why you didn’t stay here & mind here own business; that there was no sense in going to Constantinople?”
 3. The naval officer’s eyes flashes fire as he said, “I would tell you to mind your own business. If we are ordered to go, we must go even if every ship is sunk & every sailor killed.”
 4. The missionary replied, “Quite right, my friend; and I have marching orders from the Divine Government to go & preach the Gospel to every creature & the question is whether I am going to obey the last command of my Lord.”
- F. Jonah’s mission was “MISSION POSSIBLE,” for it was A GREAT COMMISSION from the Lord God.

III. A GREAT CITY, vv 3b-4a.

- A. “Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey.”
- B. At this time, Nineveh was the largest city on earth.
1. It was located on the Tigris River, at the site of modern day Mosul, Iraq.
 2. The city was likely about 60 miles in diameter & more than 120,000 people lived in the city in Jonah’s day (Jon 4:11).
- C. The author of Jonah refers to Nineveh as “an exceedingly great city.”
1. It’s impossible to know in what way the author means that Nineveh was “an exceedingly great city.”
 - a. Was he speaking of the geographic size of the city? Was he speaking rather of the population of the city? Was he speaking of the influence of the city throughout the world?
 - b. It’s quite possible, I think, that all three ideas are intended.
 - 1) The city was great in geographic size because of the population & because of the influence, many people wanted to live in the city. Thus, the 3 concepts are interconnected.
 - 2) If we were to speak of New York City as an exceedingly great city in the United States, we could have all three ideas in mind—It’s the largest city in population in the US, it covers a large area, & the city has great influence throughout the nation.
 2. God was concerned about this city because of its greatness.
 - a. At the conclusion of this book, God speaks of his concern for the 120,000 people living in Nineveh (Jon 4:11).
 - b. Because the city was so influential, God wanted to curb the negative influence of the city. The Assyrians living in Nineveh had great potential to influence the world for right.
- D. When we think about missions, numbers matter.
1. We often hear that numbers don’t matter.
 2. However, God’s speaking of his concern for the 120,000 people of Nineveh shows that God cares greatly about numbers, for numbers represent people.
 3. The NT church was greatly concerned about numbers; it was quite common for Paul & others to go to metropolitan areas where many people could hear the Word of God.
 - a. “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did” (Acts 8:5-6).
 - b. About Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, we read: Paul “withdrew from [the Jewish synagogue] and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:9-10).
 - 1) Paul strategically chose the location of Ephesus, so that he could train others who could carry forth the message.

- 2) Therefore, “all the residents of Asia” were able to hear the truth.
4. This doesn't mean that God doesn't care about the individual—Jesus talked with one lone woman by a well & Philip preached Christ to a lone eunuch.
5. The point is that God wants as many people as possible to come to salvation through his Son.
 - a. “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pt 3:9).
 - b. While the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents, God wants much, much rejoicing in heaven, for he wants many, many to come to salvation in him.

IV. A GREAT CHANGE, v 5.

- A. “And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.”
- B. Pagans believe what God has said; therefore, the people of Nineveh fast & put on sackcloth.
 1. Fasting & sackcloth were often used in the ancient world to portray deep remorse.
 2. Thus those living in Nineveh are shown to be changing—repenting of their sin.
- C. This great change is the purpose of preaching.
 1. To Agrippa, Paul said, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance” (Acts 26:19-20).
 2. It is this GREAT CHANGE that brings about the blessings of God.
 - a. To Israel, God says, “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:7).
 - b. At the end of this passage, we find that God decides not to destroy Nineveh because they repented: “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).
 - c. “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19-20).
 3. Do you know those blessings of God? Do you need to come tonight & change that you may have blessings from God?