

The first time God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh he refused and tried to run away. God used a storm at sea and a huge fish to bring Jonah back to himself. Jonah was given a new birth, a new start. Once again God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeyed, but ^{only} with great reluctance. He went to Nineveh and walked through all the streets, stopped at all the corners and cried monotonously, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed." *It was an unconditional declaration of judgment.* He said nothing about repenting. He held out no hope of salvation. He said nothing about forgiveness. He simply went and preached judgment. And I think Jonah enjoyed that role. He didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place but if he had to go he would simply preach judgment. Jonah wanted Nineveh destroyed. What he said ^{wasn't} ~~was not~~ calculated to elicit a popular response.

But the shock and surprise, so characteristic of this book, is that the people repent. (As though primed by some divine hand) the people immediately respond to Jonah's preaching; they believe in God and turn aside from the evil which was their daily diet. Those who heard and repented pass on the prophetic message to neighbors. Like a brush fire whipped by the wind, the message travels quickly through the streets and right into the palace. What began as a peoples movement was strengthened by a royal decree. The royal proclamation required not only fasting and outward cleansing, it also called for a change of heart, for a turning from evil and violence. And they do all this without any guarantee of God's grace. ^{"who can tell..."} They had no promise of deliverance. They could only hope that God might turn aside his wrath and spare the city.

And when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, *God repented* of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he didn't do it. When Nineveh repented, God repented. This is a surprising

thing to be said of God and yet the Bible quite frequently talks about God repenting. For example, we read that the Lord repented that he had made Saul king. In another place we hear God say, "If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them." God decides to do something and then events change and people change. So God changes his mind. He repents.

It's important to understand that the same Hebrew words are not used for the repentance of Nineveh and God's repentance.

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Nineveh repented by turning from their sin. But God doesn't sin. He doesn't plan to act wickedly. He doesn't need to repent of sin. When we read that God repents of the evil he planned to do *it simply means that God changed his mind and decided not to send judgment.* God is affected by our actions and our repentance. He isn't the God of the philosophers who sits far off unconcerned and unaffected by his creation and the consequences of their actions. He threatened Nineveh but when they believed and repented that was enough for God. He called off the avenging angels. He changed his plans for destruction.

Now, by doing this, *God runs a risk.* God runs the risk of not having his word taken seriously. ^{After all} If you can't believe the word of God what can you believe? If God says, unconditionally, that in forty days he's going to destroy Nineveh and then Nineveh isn't destroyed people might not believe God will ever send judgment when he has said he would. If God says you will reap what you sow but the seeds of sin that you have sown never come to harvest you might be tempted to sin some more. But God is willing to run the risk of having his word doubted. God is not, however, willing that

any should perish. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that they may turn from their sin and live. Ninevites, however, didn't know that God is merciful but they repented anyway.

There's something almost unjust about God's change of attitude towards Nineveh. Today, if a convicted murderer were to repent and say, "I'm sorry I murdered. I promise never to do it again. Please forgive me." We could hardly expect the judge to say, "Fine! I won't sentence you. You're free to go since you are penitent." But God, unlike a human judge, repents of the evil which he said he would do to them; and he did it not. God is not a hanging judge. He never was. He never will be. He isn't even a fair and objective judge by human standards. He gets too emotionally involved with the guilty party. He loves them. He's slow to anger and plenteous in mercy.

God has often withheld his judgment when a nation repents. Historians have said that England was spared a bloody revolution like they had in France and Russia because so many people repented at the preaching of men like George Whitfield, John Wesley, William Wilburforce and John Newton. Slaves were freed. Alcoholism diminished remarkably. The efforts of the church to alleviate the oppression of the poor were largely successful. Men like Ebenezer Scrooge repented. The Christian socialism of 18th century reformer, Robert Owen, became a model for evangelical Christian social involvement. The preaching and the application of the gospel brought a social revolution to England which spared it much of the bloodshed experienced by France and Russia.

But what if Nineveh had not repented? What if England had not repented? What if the United States does not repent? What if we don't repent? When we turn away from God's commands, when we fail to do

what he commands and when we do what he forbids our sins contain within themselves the seeds of destruction, of judgment and hell. What if we cross land and sea to make one proselyte but ignore the cries of the refugee fugitive in our own cities? What if we build larger arsenals but ignore the injustices the palestinians have suffered for forty years? What if we condemn Russia for Afghanistan but go on with what we are doing in Nicaragua? What if we support missionaries around the world but ignore the unchurched in our own neighborhoods and ~~steadfastly~~ ^{adamantly} refuse to support with our time, energy and money the most effective forms of evangelism? Judgment will come and God ~~will not~~ ^{want} have to send it. When God judges a person or nation or church he merely has to leave them to themselves.

So many of the problems that threaten to destroy the United States, the church, or ourselves can be traced to a failure to apply the teachings of Jesus and the prophets to society;

terrorism, unemployment, inflation, drug abuse, sexual anarchy, racism, the inequitable distribution of wealth. All these things ~~are not only~~ ^{carry within themselves} ~~their own judgment~~ ^{problems but judgments as well.} All contain the seeds of a nations

destruction. Yet a nation may be changed, reformed, and saved if we, as modern day Jonah's would speak and act persuasively all that God has given to us. *And we as individuals may also be saved if we repent. Repent to some extent or be damned to some degree.*

God has called us into the church and into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He has done this not simply to save us from hell and to take us to heaven, but because he wants to use us, like he wanted to use Jonah, to save the larger world around us. He doesn't save us only to have us turn our backs to the world and become lost in our private religious reveries. Rather he calls us to arise, go to Kenmore, to Buffalo, and proclaim the message he gives us.