

May 15th 2011: Jonah #3 'A Most Amazing Event': Jonah 3:1-4:1
"Miracles Come No Bigger Than This!"

The story of Jonah is one of those well known stories that catches the imagination of the churched and non-churched alike. There is something truly fascinating about a man being swallowed by a fish. What may surprise a lot of people however, is that Jonah's sojourn in the fish's belly is far from the greatest miracle recorded in this book.

For that, one needs to turn to chapter 3 and the account of the repentance of the people of Nineveh. What an immense miracle that was. Surely there can be no greater, for Nineveh was an exceedingly huge and highly populated city. God Himself calls it great in 1:2 and again in 3:1.

Archeologists inform us that it was in fact three independent provinces that combined into one major city that spread for about 60 miles from one end to the other. From the mention in 4:11 of it having more than 120,000 infants who are not old enough to distinguish their right hand from their left, scholars have suggested a total population of over a million.

Yet after the preaching of God's Word of coming judgment, the whole city turned to the Lord God for mercy, and repented of their evil, showing their sorrow for their sins by wearing sackcloth and fasting.

The miracle began with the people in the street, and then it reached the king himself. It affected him in the same way showing that God is no respecter of persons, and he, broken and humbled in spirit, clothed himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued the following proclamation:-

Jonah 3:7-9

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

And we are told that Almighty, Sovereign, Holy God, looked down upon the inhabitants of Nineveh, and v10 goes on to record what God saw:

(When) God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways,

Here is the miracle, and it is amazing simply because of the extent of it. In modern terms we would call it a 'revival'. A movement of the Spirit amongst

a whole community that generates an incredible response to the Spirit of God, that leads to repentance and renewal. Miracles Come No Bigger Than This and the wonderful thing is that they can still happen today.

In 1979 on Elcho Island, off the coast of North Queensland, a quietly-spoken Aboriginal man, Wirriyi, had a vision from God. From that vision a revival broke out amongst the Aboriginal people that moved across the land to Warburton. Then groups from Warburton travelled to such places as Leonora.

One missionary wrote this about their meetings in Leonora: ...there was much opposition. Shouting, fighting, rocks flying and police carting away drunks. Then the Holy Spirit took over. There had been singing, a simple testimony and message from God's Word. Then, as the group stood there softly singing, an appeal was given - not an emotionally-charged oration, but a simple appeal to turn and trust the Saviour. A hush descended on the town - a quietness you could almost touch, the peace of the Spirit of Peace. Many, who minutes before had been causing trouble, now came forward in tears to kneel at the front and confess their sin and need of the Saviour.

This continued throughout the week. First the camp people came, then the townspeople the jails became empty, crime ceased and the pubs reported a 20% drop in sales. A report from the West Australian newspaper on the 10th of April 1982 declared, 'Since last December more than 1000 Aborigines... have committed their lives to Jesus Christ. The impact on law and order has been astonishing... violence has subsided and hardened drinkers have thrown away the bottle.

As in the case of Nineveh, God worked a mighty miracle.

This morning however, it is the Miracle at Nineveh that teaches us so much about God's way of working. It reveals that:-

1. **It TOOK human involvement to make it happen.** God could have done it without Jonah but He chose not to. Instead He chose to use

Jonah, whose attitude towards the task was far from right even on his best day.

Jonah's obedience was there, but even the most favourable judge would have been hard pressed to give him better than a 5 out of ten, but God still used Him. And that gives me so much encouragement because I know that on some days I may be doing what God wants me to do, but not very enthusiastic. I may be obedient but I know my heart is not 100% in it.

Do you have days like that?

Jonah had at least three days like that when he went preaching through Nineveh, yet God was not restricted by Jonah's attitude. He still used him greatly, and His promise is that as long as we put ourselves forward, He will use us too.

2. **It especially TOOK the proclamation of God's Word.** Jonah may not have been his most enthusiastic or obedient but he did proclaim God's word to those people. He may have stuck to the script more than was necessary, deliberately stressing their sin and God's wrath, and giving them little hope of forgiveness, but that was still the Word God had given him to proclaim.

And the encouragement for us is that if we give out God's Word—even if we stumble with it—God's Word has the power to achieve God's purposes.

At Craft last Thursday I shared in my devotional segment a story from Africa told by the Bible League about the power of God's message.

It concerned a Somali scholar, an expert in the Qu'ran, who was on his way to work one day when he was approached by an 11 year old Christian girl who told him, "**Jesus loves you.**"

Day after day, she stopped him with the same words. He first became annoyed, then downright angry—until one morning her words changed. "**I'd like to become a Muslim!**" she said, much to his delight!

But there was a catch. "I'll become a Muslim under one condition," she said, "**that you show me in the Qur'an where it says Allah loves me.**" The scholar searched and searched, but nowhere in the Muslim holy book could he find those simple words. It was an omission that stirred his mind and haunted his heart—and that's when the miracle happened. He had a vision. He saw a cross floating in front of his eyes. He ran to the nearest Christian church where the pastor was a trained Bible League International worker!

The pastor explained God's plan of salvation, and that day, he accepted Jesus Christ as his Saviour and received his first Bible. But the story does not end there. He too was discipled and trained by Bible League and is now leading his own Bible studies for Muslim seekers.

"It's so important to me," shares this former Muslim, "to have Bibles and study materials, so that I can show them directly from the Scriptures the truth that a little child once shared with me-God loves them."

3. It took a believing response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

As I mentioned previously, when Jonah started to proclaim God's judgment against the people, he stuck rigidly to the script. He himself had a fair, and to him, alarming idea about God's forgiving nature, and you can be certain that he made sure he didn't let that information slip out in his preaching. Because Jonah didn't want them to escape condemnation.

But the king of Nineveh and the people somehow felt that if they repented they had a chance of experiencing God's mercy and compassion rather than His wrath and anger. Now they definitely didn't get that idea from Jonah, so where did it come from?

The Holy Spirit—revealing the depth of their sin and the way to gain forgiveness and pardon. Many years after this Jesus talked about the work of the Spirit as convicting the world of guilt, in regard to sin, and righteousness and judgment. Here I believe we have a foretaste of the Spirit doing that. Thankfully the Spirit was at work alongside Jonah, taking God's word and making it effective. Stirring the hearts of the people and calling them into repentance and belief. And that's a work we can trust Him to be doing today. Whenever we speak the Word of God we are not relying on our power to convince or convert. The Holy Spirit will be doing the major work in His way and in His time.

4. It TOOK the compassion and Mercy of God. That's a given really, but it does need to be mentioned. The hope for God's mercy and compassion is never ungrounded. It doesn't matter how wicked and sinful a person has been. How guilty and despicable they feel about themselves. God's compassion is so great that He turns nobody away. Lamentation 3:22-23 says it so well:-

***Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.***

²³ ***They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.***

It is because God's compassion is so great, and it is because God's mercy and love is for everyone, that we have the emphasis in this fellowship on Missionary work. The people of Nineveh were completely transformed by the power of God's Word. Consider how often in the book of Jonah the word 'wickedness' or 'evil' is used to describe their pre-repentant days. Look at Jonah 1:2

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

Then in 3:8 the king's decree calls them to give up their 'evil' ways and their violence, and v10 saw that they had turned from their evil ways. This people were a bad lot, and yet they changed dramatically when the Lord touched their hearts.

God is still at work throughout our world today changing families and communities amazingly through the proclamation of His Gospel in word and deed. And the wonderful thing is that we all have a part to play in that. It is the Body of Christ that goes and we are all part of the Body. Let us each make sure that we are doing what God wants us to do so that this great miracle of conversion will happen more and more before our Lord returns in glory.