



# Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 74

Jonah and Nineveh

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,  
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,  
on Lord's day morning, 19th May, 1991**

**Text:** *“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. . . . Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” (Jonah 3. 5, 9).*

Jonah had been a very successful prophet. We only have one other mention of this man Jonah in the Old Testament, outside the book which bears his name. It is made very clear he was a very successful prophet. Perhaps he was the only one of the Old Testament prophets who prophesied pleasant things and they came to pass. In other words, unlike Jeremiah, unlike Ezekiel, unlike Isaiah, he was a popular prophet. We are told that in the days of that ungodly King Jeroboam, God commanded Jonah to prophesy that much of the territory which had been lost was going to be restored (2 Kings 14. 25). He was a successful prophet, a popular prophet. He had been commissioned to prophecy good things, attractive things. It seemed an impossible thing he prophesied, but it came to pass exactly as he said, according to the word of the Lord.

Then one day the word of the Lord came to Jonah. It must have been welcome. Was it going to be a repetition of his former errand, his former work? “The word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it.” It must have been a solemn shock to Jonah. It was not going to be a very attractive thing. After all, the Assyrians were the most cruel people on the face of the earth, and Nineveh, their capital city, was given over to cruelty and wickedness. “Lord, have I to go there and preach in that great city, and denounce them? And what might happen to me?” There was more than that, and this unfolds as we read through the prophecy. Jonah had a good experience of the Lord's mercy and love, and he knew that if God was sending him to this wicked city to cry against it, it was quite likely that God would show mercy. Now he did not want God to show mercy to Assyria, to Nineveh. He was afraid God was going to take His love and mercy away from Israel. Israel deserved that it should be taken away.

After all, there had been the solemn warnings mingled with the mercies, but Israel went from bad to worse in wickedness, sin and idolatry. Is God going to take His love away from Israel and bestow it on these wicked people? Jonah's heart and soul rebelled against it. There was another thing with Jonah, and this also unfolds as we read through the book. He thought, "Here am I, sent to announce that Nineveh is going to be destroyed, but I know God is a merciful God and in His love and mercy may spare it, and then my ministry will look utter foolishness."

It is very clear this was a shock to Jonah and that these were the thoughts and exercises of his heart. So what did he decide to do? Run away from God. Beloved friends, you cannot run away from God. Thousands spend the whole of their lives seeking to run away from God, but God will always catch up with them. God will always have the last word, either in judgment or in mercy. So Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He was going in the opposite direction. We understand that Tarshish was in Spain. He never got there. He ended up in a whale's belly. If you are running away from God, you do not know where you might end.

One thing is very clear throughout the whole of this book, and especially referring to chapter 1. Jonah was a godly man, a servant of the Lord, a God-sent prophet, but he was acting wrongly, in his own spirit. That is very clear. But nowadays, people on every side are faltering one way or the other. Here is a godly man; he makes some mistake. Here is a godly man; he acts wrongly. Here is a godly man; he is left to fall. Half the people say, "Look what this man has done. He cannot be a godly man." And the other half say, "He is such a godly man, it must be right what he is doing." Now here was a godly man. There was no doubt whatsoever of his godliness and grace. But he was certainly sinning, certainly acting wrongly in the first chapter.

But you cannot run away from God. And more than that, if the Lord is leading you in some pathway, you will have to go in that pathway. You cannot shrink from it. You cannot flee from it. "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it." And despite all Jonah's schemings and all his fleeing, he did have to go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it. Be clear, God's word will stand. God's purposes will stand – not only with Jonah, and not only in the Word of God, but in your

life and in my life. If God has a purpose to fulfil, if you are embraced in that purpose, then you will have to do His will, even if you have to go in the belly of a whale before you do it. The Lord dealt with Jonah by terrible things in righteousness. I do not think any child of God was ever brought into such extremity as Jonah was. But he was fighting against God, and he found God was too great, too mighty for Him.

Now I want you to notice one thing, and I want you young people, you girls and boys especially to notice it. Jonah was sinning against God. Jonah was acting wrongly. Jonah was fleeing from God. What happened? Everything went right. Everything seemed to be in Jonah's favour. Everything seemed to be prospering. Sometimes we turn aside from God's will and way and purpose; we are determined to go our own way, and what happens? Everything goes right. We begin to think, "Surely I am going to prosper in this. Surely everything is going to be all right. Surely God is smiling upon me." Let me explain. Here is this man Jonah. He is clearly sinning against God, clearly fleeing from Him. He is determined he is going to go to Tarshish. He goes to the nearest port, and there is a ship there ready to set sail for Tarshish. It is like you going tomorrow to Luton Airport deciding to go to Peru, and there is an aeroplane waiting for you. Everything was going Jonah's way. Ancient history says that probably they only sailed about once a year, but everything is going right for Jonah. There is a place waiting for him; it was not completely booked up. In those days, it must have been a tremendous cost, and Jonah could not have been very rich. He had the fare ready, and we are told he paid the fare and got into the ship to go to Tarshish. *He never got to Tarshish.* Neither will you get to Tarshish. You young people, you may be planning your lives and deciding what to do, and everything may be going right. Every door opens, everything going right, not a hindrance in the way, not a closed door. You say, "Surely the Lord is smiling upon me." Jonah never got to Tarshish. He ended up in the whale's belly.

God will always have the last word. You cannot flee from the presence of God. So you find this terrible storm. "All creatures obey His command." He gives a command. The wind blows, the storm arises. Poor Jonah, thrown into the raging ocean, and then swallowed up by this great fish! And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. I do not think any child of God ever came into such great extremities as Jonah.

“Then Jonah prayed.” O if there were time this morning, how many things could be said about the nature and the privilege of real prayer! It does not matter where you are, whatever your state, whatever your condition, however impossible. “Then Jonah prayed,” and one thing which struck me in reading through the chapter this morning was that he “prayed unto the Lord *his* God.” The Lord was still his God, despite all his sin and all his rebellion. If ever there was an impossible prayer, if ever there was an impossible place! “All thy billows and thy waves passed over me.” “Out of the belly of hell cried I.” “The waters compassed me about, even to the soul.” “I went down to the bottoms of the mountains.” I wonder if there is anyone there this morning in your soul’s feelings. It may be the aggravation of it is as it was with Jonah. You say, “I deserve it. It is the result of my sin. It is the Lord’s chastening hand.” I wonder if there is anyone there this morning.

“Ye dying souls, that sit  
In darkness and distress,  
Look from the borders of the pit  
To My recovering grace.”

There is no place where you are beyond God’s mercy or beyond the reach of His almighty arm. But is there anyone here this morning, and you feel cast out of the Lord’s sight? It may be you thought everything was going right for you, and suddenly everything was going wrong. It may be in providence you feel the Lord’s hand is turned against you. It may be in providence you feel the darkness, the bitterness and the distress.

“Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God.” It was prayer, and it was prayer answered. Here is a word for you tried, tempted ones this morning: “When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord.” Now may you remember the Lord, even if your soul is fainting within you. “And my prayer came in” – that is what we want to happen to our prayers, isn’t it? “My prayer came in unto Thee, into Thine holy temple.” Well, those of you who feel in darkness and distress, who feel far off, who feel without hope and mercy, who feel your case is not only hard but impossible, those of you who are saying, “I am cast out of thy sight,” may you know that wonderful *yet*, one of those gospel *yets* – hold it fast! – “Yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.” That second look, that last

look. It seemed to be black despair, but it was not a despairing look. It was a looking out of despair.

“Ye dying souls, that sit  
In darkness and distress,  
Look from the borders of the pit  
To My recovering grace.”

That second look, that last look: “Yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.”

Now one interesting thing: Jonah belonged to the northern kingdom. It is thought the place he came from was close to Nazareth. “Yet will I look again toward Thy holy temple” – at Jerusalem. He did not look to anyone, anything in the north. But the holy temple at Jerusalem to a godly Israelite meant everything. It was the place where mercy was shown, where grace reigned, where the lamb was slain, the sacrifice was offered, where the blood was shed. “Yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.” What was Jonah’s prayer? In a gospel sense it was,

“Mercy, through blood, I make my plea;  
O God, be merciful to me!”

“Then I said, I am cast out of Thy sight; yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.” “And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land” – somewhere on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. What a mercy and what a deliverance! “Salvation is of the Lord.” “The Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.” Just as the sea and the wind obeyed the Lord, so this great fish obeyed the Lord. The Lord only needs to speak, and all creatures obey His voice. “The Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.” So Jonah did not get to Tarshish. He never did get to Tarshish.

“And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time.” O the mercy, the love, the restoration! But beloved friends, if the Lord is leading you in a pathway, if He is giving you a command, and you refuse to obey it, you flee from it, you will have to go back. You will know the chastisement, the forgiveness, the deliverance, but God will not leave His word. Now this is a different Jonah, a chastened Jonah, a divinely-taught Jonah, a forgiven Jonah.

“So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.” He had to go. “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.” It is clear that God had given him a time to set upon this warning as he went through the streets of Nineveh. It was not easy for Jonah. But the Lord commanded him, and he had to go. You think of a minister today being sent to a foreign city and having to walk through the streets of that city denouncing it, announcing God’s judgment upon it, saying it was imminent, just over a month’s time. “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.”

And then you have one of the most amazing words in the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation: “So the people of Nineveh believed God.” I have been trying to ponder over this. We think about the Apostle Paul. We think of great preachers like Whitefield in more recent times. I wonder if Jonah was the most successful preacher that God ever sent forth. “So the people of Nineveh believed God.” It does not say they believed Jonah: they believed God. It seems so impossible. This was a vast city. We are told it would take three days to journey through it from one end to another, and modern archaeology agrees with this. It was a very prosperous city, a very strong city, a very wicked city. And here is this preacher, who comes and he cries, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” The whole city, from the king downwards, believed what he said and they repented. It is one of the most amazing verses in all Scripture. You think, if some foreigner came to our town of Luton and walked through the streets and said that in forty days, in a month or so, Luton was just going to be destroyed. I think people would laugh at him, wouldn’t they? Noah was commissioned to preach a similar message to Jonah, and he preached it for one hundred years, and we do not read of one person who believed him. So it was with Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah. Not a single person believed him. But Jonah said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” “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.”

Of course, eastern people were more demonstrative, and sackcloth and ashes were put on whenever there was real sorrow or grief. “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. 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: 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.” Now it seems almost unbelievable, almost incredible, this Jewish prophet, going through the streets of this vast, wicked, powerful, cruel city of Nineveh, repeating over and over again, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” And the whole city repented, from the king downwards.

On the question of whether this was gracious repentance unto salvation, I am not going to enter this morning. Whether there were some of them who were really wrought upon with gracious, gospel repentance and are now in heaven, whether there were many like that, or whether it was only national repentance, we are just not told. One sad, solemn thing is that in later years there was not any gracious witness in this city, and Assyria and the city of Nineveh went from bad to worse in their wickedness and idolatry. But at this particular moment, they believed what God had said. They believed God’s word and they proclaimed a fast. They cried not to their idols, but to the true God. Violence and cruelty were the great sins of Nineveh, and they put them away from their hands. God answered their prayer, honoured their repentance, and delivered the city of Nineveh. It did not fall. It was not destroyed.

“So the people of Nineveh believed God.” We are told in Scripture that faith always works. You cannot have faith, you cannot have belief in God, and that faith not working. The people of Nineveh believed God, and immediately that faith began to work. There was a fast, the sackcloth and ashes, putting aside their violence, calling on God. Faith always works. In the hearts of God’s people when they are really blessed, faith works by love. But faith also works by fear. In a gracious way it does as well as in a legal way. Here at Nineveh, faith worked by fear. The people of Nineveh believed God, and they feared. They feared His threatening, feared the danger, feared the destruction. Usually in the beginning of the work of grace, when the new birth takes place, faith works by fear. You see your danger, your sin, your ruin, a deserved hell, the judgment day. You see



you deserve God's vengeance. And you believe God, what He has said. So faith works by fear. Like this:

“What shall I do, or whither flee,  
To escape the vengeance due to me?”

Be clear on that point: in the beginning of a work of grace, faith usually works by fear. You believe what God has said, and that causes you to shrink, and fear, and tremble. Then it is this: if only I might find a refuge; if only I might find a hope; if only I might obtain mercy. So there is repentance, and the outward sign of repentance. There is a separation from an ungodly world. There is a separation from your ungodly past life. There is a fleeing for refuge to the Lord Jesus. There is a pleading for His mercy. So the people of Nineveh believed God, and there was all this repentance, and forsaking of sin, and crying to God. And God showed mercy and compassion, and spared Nineveh, and delivered Nineveh from destruction.

Now just a point here in passing. People sometimes say that God threatened a judgment here, and we believe what God says will come to pass; God clearly said Nineveh would be destroyed, yet when the time came, Nineveh was not destroyed. Let us be clear, in all these threatenings of the prophet, and in all the threatenings of the New Testament, when God speaks an awful word of admonition or an awful word of destruction, there is something implied: that is, if the sinner, the city, the nation continues in sin. There is also the opposite implied: that if there is repentance, turning from sin, a forsaking of it, then the threatening will not come to pass. It is so with a word like this: “The wicked shall be cast into hell.” All of us are wicked. Does this mean that the whole human race will be cast into hell? The Lord there implies these two things: the wicked, if they continue in their wickedness, if they live and die in their wickedness. The Lord also implies the opposite. The wicked, if they realise their wickedness, repent of it, forsake it, seek mercy, then they will not be cast into hell.

“So the people of Nineveh believed God.” Really, the opposite, unbelief, is the greatest of all sins. Why so few really repent, really forsake their sin, really forsake the world, really flee for refuge to the Saviour, is because of the unbelief of our wicked, carnal hearts. Why do we not repent? God says we are wicked, but we do not believe it. We

think we are all right, not as bad as others. God says that one day each of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account. But by nature we do not believe it. If we did, we should tremble, and fear, and flee. Unbelief is the root sin. Why can a congregation sit year after year unmoved, untouched by the solemn warnings and threatenings of God's holy law? Because of the unbelief of the natural heart which does not believe what God says. So really, when the new birth takes place, the seeds of faith are immediately planted. Then we believe God, and believing God, faith works by fear. Realising our danger, we must have a refuge.

“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.” And what was their language? “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” Now the Lord Jesus in the days of His flesh referred to Jonah and to the people of Nineveh, and He said this, that in the great day, the last great day, the men of Nineveh shall rise up as a witness against those who have heard the preaching of the gospel and who have never been affected with true repentance. “The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.” How the Lord Jesus once or twice brought up this subject of Jonah and Nineveh – Jonah preached, the men of Nineveh repented! “And, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.”

But this was their language: “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” They had not got any promise of forgiveness. They had not got any revelation of mercy. They had not been told anything about compassion, or anything of the love of God. But they repented on the strength of three words: “Who can tell?” But there is something which the Lord Jesus brought out very clearly. He said that Jonah being three days and three nights in the whale's belly was given for a sign to the men of Nineveh (Luke 11 30). What did He mean? How was Jonah being three days and three nights in the belly of the whale a sign to the men of Nineveh? Well, it is very clear that as this man Jonah went through the streets of Nineveh preaching, the story of these remarkable happenings had followed him. It was being whispered around: “You see this man who is preaching, this strange man with this strange message, do you know what happened to him? He disobeyed his

God, and was swallowed up by a whale for three days and three nights. Yet he was delivered alive.” In other words, Jonah was given to the men of Nineveh for a sign, a sign of two things: the judgment of God and the mercy of God. So as he preached, it was not just his words but *he* was a sign, that God is a God of judgment, and does punish sin. But also God is a God of mercy. He does deliver. On the ground of this, the people of Nineveh said, “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” They did repent, and God did turn from His fierce anger, and they did not perish. “Behold, a greater than Jonas is here.” Now the Lord Jesus not only said that Jonah’s being three days and three nights in the belly of the whale was a sign to the men of Nineveh, but He said that Jonah is also a sign to us, a sign of God’s judgment and God’s mercy, and also a wonderful type of the death and burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Well, what about those of you here this morning who feel your sin and your need and your guilt and your lost condition before the justice of God? May the Lord bless you with that “Who can tell?” That means one thing: it is not black despair. How many of God’s dear saints, in relating their experience, have been in black despair, and then there has been just a little gleam of mercy. There has not been any deliverance, but they have found this supporting them, a little “Who can tell?” Beloved friends, a “Who can tell?” of salvation, never rest in it, but never despise it. It is a forerunner of greater things; it is a forerunner of greater blessings.

“Who can tell if God will turn and repent?” You are saying, “I shall never find mercy; God will never forgive me; I am never going to have the blessing.” Who told you that? God did not tell it to you. “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” If you can rise no higher than that this morning, beloved friends, may you be able to lay hold upon it by faith.

The men of Nineveh did not have any promise of forgiveness, any gospel, any revelation of Christ and Him crucified. They did not know the Lord Jesus had come from heaven to save sinners. They had never heard of His precious, sin-atoning blood. But they still said, “Who can tell?” But you have heard of all these things, the precious promise, the gospel, an almighty Saviour, precious blood that cleanses from all sin. Well, may the Holy Ghost enable you to lay hold of this, not despairing, not without

hope: “Who can tell?” If you cannot reach any higher than this, may you be able to lay hold on these three words: “Who can tell?” It is like the harbinger of the dawn. It is like the day star which first appears and which tells us that night is past and the day will soon be here, a little foretaste of blessings that are to come. “Who can tell?”