

DOES ANYONE CARE
Great Revivals
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The scripture is 2 Chronicles 7:14 “My people who are called by name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

I’m conscious that in the history of America we’ve been blessed more than perhaps any other nation with the moving of God’s Spirit in reviving his people. The Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, the ministry of Charles Finney and Moody and Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. The camp meeting revivals, the revivals in churches, the revivals in individuals. The deep hunger in my own heart of revival in my own life and our own church and community.

Before we look specifically at our text for today let me relate four words that are involved in the idea of what revival is.

Revival involves restoral. It involves repair. It involves renewal. And it involves the word revive. All four of these words are part of the Old Testament vocabulary for describing the moving of God’s Spirit upon His people. To restore is to bring back something, which has been decayed or lost. When we look at our own lives we have to examine them and see what needs to be restored as God’s Spirit speaks to us.

Is there an area of our life, which needs repair? 2 Chronicles 15:8 describes a revival under king Asa where he put away the abominable idols and repaired the altar of the Lord. Broken relationships. Broken ideals. Broken disciplines in the spiritual life needing repair.

The idea of renewal also is there. David cried out in Psalm 51:10 “Renew a right spirit within me.” That right spirit had been sapped away from him because of his sin against God and with Bathsheba and against Uriah. It is now a return to a right spirit, which he had had before he sinned.

The idea of revive is there as well. 1 Kings 17:22. The word that is used for revive is in a very physical way. “The Lord harkened to the voice of Elijah and the soul of the child came into him again and he revived.” It’s a resurrection from death.

If you feel dead spiritually or if you feel the church is dead spiritually it is a prayer to God that we might come to life individually and as the people of God.

The Bible, by the way, does not encourage us to expect revival or renewal by simply following a formula of ten easy steps which are outlines for us and if you do these presto and there’s revival. However the scriptures do outline for us guidelines by which God has worked in the past with his people. We will be continually looking at these guidelines as we share on this theme.

The book of Jonah is under purview today. The key text I want to read is the last verse of the book. It’s a short book some four chapters. It’s one of the few books if not the only book in the scripture that ends with a question. God speaking, saying to Jonah, “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120 thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left hand and also much cattle?” Should I not pity?

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The revival under Jonah. Perhaps for many moderns Jonah is the Old Testament equivalent of Jaws. When you think Jonah people think immediately of a fish or a fish story. But the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is not the fish. The greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is that Nineveh repents. Unless you think that what is reflected in the book of Jonah is myth, I would just like to shore up with an illustration this whole thing.

Dr. Archer's book Introduction to Old Testament Survey. He draws an instance out of a book, which was published around the turn of the century called 63 Years of Engineering. It reports an incident carefully investigated by two scientists. "In February 1891 the Whaling Ship *Star of the East* was in the vicinity of the Falcon Islands. The lookouts sighted a large sperm whale three miles away. Two boats were lowered and in a short time one the harpooners was able to spear the creature. The second boat also attacked the whale but was then upset by a lash of its tail so that its crew fell into the sea. One of them was drowned but the other simply disappeared without a trace. After the whale was killed the crew set to work with axes and spades removing the blubber. They worked all day and part of the night. The next day they attached some tackle to the (by the way the whale is still in the water.) to the stomach which was hoisted on deck. The sailors were startled by something in it which gave spasmodic signs of life and inside was found the missing sailor doubled up and unconscious. He was laid on the deck and treated to a bath of seawater, which soon revived him. At the end of the third week he had entirely recovered from the shock and resumed his duties. His face neck and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment. The sailor affirms that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved because he lost his senses through fright and not through lack of air."

The book of Jonah records the only great revival in the Old Testament, which took place strictly on foreign soil and strictly among the gentiles. It is a real far cry from the general tenor of the life of the Hebrew people reflected in the Old Testament for the book of Jonah is pushing out the concepts of God, showing them that God is not simply the God of Israel but the God of all nations.

As we look briefly at the book today I want you, as we go chapter by chapter, to examine with me the four responses of Jonah to God's call upon his life. Then we'll have a chance to apply these responses to our own walk with God and witness to others and to the theme of revival.

The first chapter tells us that Jonah fled. The call of God came to him. We know nothing about his background other than a reference in Kings that he was from Gath-hepher a town within an hour's walking distance of the town of Nazareth through Galilee. "The word of God came to him saying arise go to Nineveh that great city and cry against it for their wickedness has come up before me." And Jonah goes the other way.

We're not initially told why he fled from God's call. We may do some surmising. We find out the reason when we come to the fourth chapter. Nineveh we know to be the capital of Assyria, the great military power of the 8th century before Christ, the time in which Jonah lived. Eventually in 722 B.C. Israel the northern part – the ten tribes – will be overrun by Assyria. Jonah is called to go to a foreign capital of mighty nation far more powerful than his own and announce that God's judgement was coming down on the city for its wickedness.

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Nineveh was known as a violent and militaristic type of society. One writer has described Nineveh as scorching its enemies alive to decorate its walls and its pyramids with their skins. To such a society Jonah was called. Well might we wonder if he didn't fear to go.

Before we condemn Jonah for fleeing God's call we might well try to put ourselves in his own skin.

But the text tells us that nothing about his fleeing from God was because he was afraid to go to Nineveh. In fact later this will appear to be discounted as a reason. We are told that he flees to get away from the presence of God. Thus instead of going the 750 mile walk, much of it across desert land to the northeast to Nineveh, Jonah goes the exact opposite way to the seaport town of Joppa to take a ship to Tarshish which is located on the southern tip of the country of Spain. God called him to go 750 miles northeast and he's about to go two or three thousand miles to the west. As far as he could get from God.

It's striking to see that the text of Jonah indicates to us that when we flee from God given responsibilities that fleeing is understood by God as a fleeing from his presence. Jonah upon **paying** to get on a ship finds himself in a storm, which the Lord hurled against him and he is sound asleep. Sound asleep in the storm. What a picture of a man who is totally unconcerned with the call which God has placed upon his life, with the commission that God has given to him. Jonah has no idea what it is like for God's judgment to break upon a people. God could be moved to wrath against the wickedness of the world, Jonah may simply go to sleep.

Jonah is kind of a parable at this point of every person in the church of Jesus Christ who can go to sleep in a day, which is alive with the prospect of God's judgment. No one sleeps more soundly than a backslidden Christian. No one could be more oblivious to the need of a dying world. While men are fighting for their life and while a city hangs on the edge of destruction Jonah can find a place where he is sound asleep.

To bring Jonah back to his responsibilities God hurls the storm and Jonah is thrown out of his safe place. His first response to the call of God is to flee.

The second chapter of Jonah finds the second response that Jonah has. That is he prays. Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish. How contrasting is chapter 1 with chapter 2! In chapter 1 Jonah can leave God and be so comfortable with leaving God as to not be disturbed in the slightest. He can simply fall asleep. But how differently he feels when he senses that God has really left him. When seaweed is wrapped around his head and he realizes what it is to ask for absence from the presence of God.

One thing to walk off and become cold in one's spirit toward God. But then to have that rude awakening which often comes in a pressurized, extreme situation like Jonah faced that indeed God threatens to withdraw his presence. What an irony.

Jonah looks for a place where God was not. And the place that he found was the belly of a fish. With his options exhausted he turns to God. God takes seriously the cry of his prophet who is in distress. Jonah has a conversion which occurs to him when he is in extremity.

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Sometimes persons feel that if they cry out to God in a foxhole type of way that it is being hypocritical if they have only turned to God as the last resort. If they didn't have the good grace to turn to him when days were better then they shouldn't be such a hypocrite by calling upon him when things are so bad. The tremendous thing about God is that he absolutely seriously takes the prayer that we pray from the foxhole or from the belly of the fish and when we realize finally that all of our options are exhausted, God is humble enough to receive our prayer and to answer it at that point.

This in chapters 1 and 2 is a parallel in the book of Acts, that the Lord gave the church the Great Commission. Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel. Go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the world. Several years went by and they hadn't yet made it out of Jerusalem.

In chapter 3 Jonah has a third response to God. He preaches. "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.'"

I think sometimes in Sunday school days we have the picture that Jonah got thrown up on the seacoast and walked about 2 miles into the city and there began preaching to the city of Nineveh. But look at the map and you'll find that Nineveh was not a seaport town. When Jonah got thrown up on the coast he still had several hundred miles to walk to get to Nineveh – perhaps to let his parchment skin dry out a little.

When he arrived in the city of Nineveh an incredible thing happens. He is not seen as a revolutionary to be executed. He is not seen as a maniac to be locked up. He is not seen as a social scientist or an expert to be simply debated in regard to what he is saying. But he preaches the decision of God to the city. "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." We may guess as to who was on the thrown of Nineveh or Assyria at this time. Nineveh may have been peculiarly prepared by God to receive the message of Jonah. In 765 B.C. the city of Nineveh had been hit by a great plague and on the June 15, 763 B.C. there had been a total eclipse of the sun. In 759, 6 years after that, there was another great plague. It may well have been that alarm may have already been created in the city, which made it receptive to Jonah's message. The striking thing is when he comes to the city of Nineveh he preaches the decision of God. Not his own viewpoint. Not his own ideas of who God was or what God would do. But simply what God had announced.

In a very real way the church of Jesus Christ stands in the world today much like Jonah. We too are aware of an impending decision of what God has on the world. The world shall be destroyed by fire and its elements shall be burnt up. It must have been as difficult for Jonah to proclaim that message to Nineveh as it is for us to say to our world "A day of judgment comes."

Jonah was not a person who was evidently moved upon by any spirit of compassion or prayer for Nineveh. He appears to be the most reluctant preacher ever. If God can work in a town with an unmoved prophet, imagine what he can do where the people's hearts are moved toward him and toward the message that he presents.

The people believed God in response to Jonah's preaching. They exercised no easy believeism. There was no simple mental assent to Jonah. But they make some dire reactions. Humans and

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beasts fast. Humans and beasts put on sackcloth. From the king down to the least person in society there was a clothing and a fasting and a sitting in ashes.

Another description of their hunger for God for his punishment to be diverted from them was the fact that they pledge in 3:8 to turn away from violence. And Nineveh was an example in ancient society of violence.

Finally they hoped for the goodness of God. It is a true characteristic in all revivals that when the people hear the word of God and truly believe there are no easy conversions. There is something simply more than mental assent. That there is deep conviction of sin. A deep thing happens in the heart, which looks at how we have failed God and failed our responsibilities toward him and toward other persons and cries out to God with deep repentance, "God forgive me! And if possible spare me from your judgment."

Nineveh cries out to God.

In chapter 4 of Jonah we find Jonah's fourth response in this revival at Nineveh. He pouts. He is the elder brother of the story of the prodigal son, which Jesus tells in Luke 15. He is a real contrast with the patriarch Abraham who fought with God for the welfare of the city Sodom. Can you imagine Jonah at Sodom? If the Lord said 50, he'd have said how about 5000? He was never an Abraham to get it down to 10.

The real reason for his fleeing God comes out in 4:2. "He prayed to the Lord and said, 'I pray thee Lord is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish for I know that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and bounding in steadfast love and repents of evil.'" God, the real reason why I felt is that I knew that if I went to Nineveh you would give Nineveh your mercy if they repented and I didn't want to be a part of your mercy on this foreign capital. Talk about a nationalistic spirit! The concept of a tribal God is right there in the book of Jonah.

Jonah didn't have much of the Bible as a reference. Most of the prophets weren't written when Jonah is in existence. The Pentateuch is there. The New Testament isn't of course written and Jonah has very little scripture. But incredibly he knows the little scripture he has. When he says to God in verse 2 "I know that you're a gracious God," he quotes straight out of Exodus 34:8. For God in respect to Israel had given it another chance and in God's great revelation to Moses when Moses saw the glory of God, God revealed his nature as a God who was slow to anger and full of steadfast mercy toward his people.

Jonah was the person who was willing to see the grace of God in his own life but unwilling to see it demonstrated in the lives of others. He pities the plant as the end of chapter 4 will indicate but he cannot pity people.

We think of this as part of the message we as the people of God have in the world today. We are people who live between the times. Between the time of Christ's first coming and the time of his Second Coming. Sometimes in prophetic circles there can be a certain kind of glee which announces that God is judging the world and eagerly anticipates when World War III is going to break out and who's got the biggest bomb and who's going to drop it and when the holocaust is going to come and all of these sorts of things.

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All of that is said with the kind of unmoved heart of Jonah. Little is said about the fact that God carries the return of Jesus in order that the world might come to repentance. Little is said about the prospect that God might yet spare for a while his people and his world from judgment if there is repentance. There are so many prophets of gloom that are saying that in the next few years America as a people will go down and we'll lose our existence as a country. That may well be true because judgment hangs over all the world and America is included in that. But in the book of Jonah is running a thread of hope, which says, "If my people will repent I will hear from heaven. I will stay my hand." God longs to be to us the God of mercy and the God of steadfast love. What God feels for the world he feels for us as an individual person. He has not wished that "any man enter into judgment with him but that all might come unto repentance."

Should not I pity Nineveh? Could you if you believe that God cannot have favor or grace upon you insert your name? God saying, "Should not I pity George Wood?" Is that not God's word of grace to each of us. I think it is.

What were the keys to revival at Nineveh? The keys essentially were three. God cared, God always cares. Even when his prophet doesn't care. Even when his people don't care. God cares. That is an essential ingredient of all revivals. God cares for the world.

The second essential thing that happens at Nineveh is that the word is proclaimed.

And a third essential thing that happens is there is repentance. May we sense and build upon these things. In the coming weeks we look more specifically at various revivals as to what God wants to accomplish in our lives and in our church.

We are so used to the themes of repentance we sometimes don't realize what it means for a person who has never heard of your judgment or of your grace to really respond when the opportunity is given. With much hearing our hearts can become dull and insensitive even as Jonah's was. I pray that from the message of the revival at Nineveh there would come into our own hearts and into our church a concern for others. A concern the opposite of someone like Jonah who seeks to flee from your presence lest the community repent. But that there will be from us a cry in the inner most being of our lives that you will stay your judgment and that you will allow us to have the opportunity yet one more time to speak your word to our friends and families, community and world. We thank you for this great missionary book which we have in Jonah. We pray, Lord Jesus, that our hearts will be stirred and arrested by applying its message to our lives. We ask this in your name. Amen.