

WHEN GRACE ENDS

Speaker: Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

Date: 07-05-2023

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-3, 3:

I want to talk to you today about two prophets who prophesied in Judah 100 years apart. One was Jonah in 700 BC; the other was Nahum in 600 BC. We rarely put these two minor prophets together although their message and the content of their message is towards one specific group. Both preached to the same group – the Ninevites.

Jonah 1:1-3,

¹The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against it, because their wickedness has come up before Me.” ³But Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship that was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and boarded it to go with them to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord.

(We must ask the question: Why did Jonah run in the opposite direction? We really get an answer to that in chapter 3, after he was brought back to Nineveh and vomited out of that fish and smelled ‘wonderful’; he began to walk around the city of Nineveh, and it says)

Jonah 3:4-10

⁴Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; (and Nineveh was actually three days walk, so he still had some ways to go) and he cried out and said, “Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

⁵Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, removed his robe from himself, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the dust. ⁷And he issued a proclamation, and it said, “In Nineveh, by the decree of the king and his nobles: No person, animal, herd, or flock is to taste anything. They are not to eat, or drink water. ⁸But every person and animal must be covered with sackcloth; and people are to call on God vehemently, and they are to turn, each one from his evil way, and from the violence which is in their hands. ⁹Who knows, God may turn and relent, and turn from His burning anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their evil way, then God relented of the disaster which He had declared He would bring on them. So He did not do it.

Jonah 4:1-3

We wonder why Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh, and we that that in the fourth chapter. Out of his own mouth comes these words: *“But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.”* It greatly displeased Jonah that the people relented, had repented when he told them that destruction was coming. *“Then he prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Please Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? There, in anticipation of this, that You would relent and forgive these people, I fled to Tarshish since I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in mercy and One who relents of disaster. So now Lord, please take my life from me. For death is better to me than life.’”*

Strange words! That a prophet would have so much of feeling and emotion as he talks to God, that at the end of it, he can say: I'm done with life. I don't want to live anymore. Because what You've done is something that I knew You would do. You'd send me there, and then they would repent, and then You would forgive. I can't bear this.

Makes you wonder what was going on that he had such feelings about Nineveh and the fact that God was forgiving them. If you look at the background on Nineveh – the Assyrians were an extremely cruel people. In fact, their cruelty had become legendary. Graphic accounts of the cruel treatment of captives have been found in ancient Assyrian records. Very, very cruel!

Not fast forward a hundred years and another prophet stands up. He foretells three things in three chapters that are found in this short book of Nahum.

Chapter 1 – talks about the destruction that was decreed on Nineveh. God has spoken. I have had enough. This wickedness is too much and so destruction is predicted.

Chapter 2 – the prophet describes the kind of destruction that there is going to be.

Chapter 3 – the prophet justifies this destruction. He talks about why it was necessary. Why God did this!

Again it makes you wonder: what happened in this in-between 100 years from the time of Jonah to the time of Nahum. Let me give you a short history lesson.

722 BC: Sargon II was the king at that time and he took the northern kingdom of Israel. If you remember, Israel had split into two – the northern kingdom of Israel which had ten tribes and whose capital was Samaria; and the southern kingdom of Judah with two tribes, and the capital was Jerusalem. In 722 BC, Sargon II razed Samaria and treated the children of Israel with such cruelty. In 701 BC, he almost came to Jerusalem, and then around 669 or so, King Ashurbanipal extended the influence of Nineveh all across the world.

Nineveh became the mightiest city on earth. I want you to consider this. Think of a city, think of Nehemiah and Ezra and how much they wanted to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The walls of Nineveh were 100 feet high. Can you imagine a 10-storey building; that's how high the wall around Nineveh was. Not only that, it was also 100 feet wide. It is said that 3 chariots could race on those walls without any problem. Then, outside Nineveh they had a 150feet wide moat which was 60 feet deep. It is said that Nineveh could withstand a siege for 20 years without a problem. One of the ways battles were fought in those days was to have a siege about a city. That's why the wall was so important. That's why the gates were so important. That's why Nehemiah wanted to complete building it. because the pride of a nation was the ability to withstand a siege which you couldn't if you didn't have a wall. For 20 years they could self-sustain – that's how powerful they were.

But Nahum predicts that this city will fall. In 1:8 he says: But with an overflowing flood He will make a complete end of its site. Do you know what happened? The Tigris River overflowed its banks and the flood destroyed part of Nineveh's wall. The water flowed underneath, making the wall crumble, and the Babylonians entered through the breach in that wall, plundered the city and set it on fire. This seemingly impregnable city was reduced to nothing but dust and ash.

Nahum predicted something else. He said: You too will become drunk, and you (talking about the city of Nineveh) will be hidden; you will not be seen. Do you know that after the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC, it was never heard of till 180 years ago, in 1840 when it was discovered that this was the

place where Nineveh stood. You will not be seen again. That was the destruction that God brought on them.

From Jonah to Nahum! In the book of Jonah, we have a picture of a loving God wanting His people to stop the wickedness and turn to him. Grace and judgment were both offered at that time. a chance to repent and still the threat of judgment. Forty days and they took the period of grace. They repented. But then in Nahum, there is not period of grace; just judgment, finite judgment. Cold, clinical. It came swiftly without any offering of mercy or forgiveness.

It makes us wonder that this God whom we believe in, serve, love, that while He is loving. And extends this period of grace that we live in, His word is also out there about judgment. "For the wages of sin is death," but during this period of grace, the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. grace extends. We are living in a period of grace. The ability to repent, to seek forgiveness, to experience His mercy – all of that is available to us.

What do we learn from these two prophets and what they went through, their predictions? One or two things I'd like to place before you for your thoughts.

A Period of Grace

Luke 12:48 reminds us: From everyone who has been given much, shall much be required. Nineveh was given so much. They were the mightiest. To be able to build that kind of fortress must have taken huge resources. Given much, but did not use it wisely. In fact, they were a cruel people.

We leave Jonah and Nahum in the pages of antiquity and we look at ourselves and say, "What have I got much of? What has God given me? Am I using it well? is it something of kingdom use or has it become a tool in the hands of Satan? What can we have? Maybe we are called to leadership. And what we can learn from this is that there is an accountability. There is a period where grace will end and we have to give an account. How did we lead? Did we lead well? Or maybe God has blessed you with a lot of things – wealth, a good job, and yet the question here is: are you a good steward of what you have got? Are you stewarding that money well?

I honestly believe that while we sometimes look at people and say how much God has blessed them, because the blessing is visible. I believe that every one of us here receives God's blessing. With some it is not as visible as others, but we all do, because we serve the same God and He gives generously to His children. but what he gives, He will ask one day what we did with it. And how we used it. Or even if you have influence, how well are you using that influence? You have people under you, children under you. Are you influencing them to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness?

When Grace Runs Out

The second thing that struck me was that grace runs out, that there will be a time when grace will not be offered anymore. And beloved, when that happens, then judgment comes. We live in this period of God's grace. The ability to go to Him and repent for things that we indulge in that are not in accordance with His will. But we live in this period of grace. God offers His Son as a way of salvation. Have we made use of that? do we know Him? Have you allowed the penalty to be taken? Have you appropriated the penalty that Jesus paid on the cross? We live in this period of grace which can suddenly end. Suddenly, without any warning!

Isaiah 55:6-7 puts it so poignantly.

Seek the Lord while He may be found. (In other words, there will be a time when He may not be found, when that opportunity is not there). *Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked abandon*

his way and the unrighteous person his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord. and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

The writer of Hebrews says: Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.

The repentance of the Ninevites was not genuine, not sincere. They slipped away from God after all that, being in sackcloth and ashes, but it didn't last. I think that during this period of grace, it's a good time for us to ask the question: Is my repentance genuine? Am I living the kind of life that God wants me to live, that I said that I would live when I started out on this journey? Or have I slipped?

I think it was Dwight L. Moody who was posed this question. Somebody asked him – if you knew that Jesus was coming today, what would you change in your schedule? And he answered – Nothing. I will do exactly as I had planned to do and when He comes to take me, I go.

How many of us can say that I'm ready to go this instant? Or will we need to say I need time. I'm not yet ready. We look at this little child that we are going to dedicate, and we imagine the things that he will become or grow into. We need to ask ourselves whether we are reflecting the things that he will want to imbibe. Are we showcasing the things that he will want to model himself? Will he see Jesus in us, that at the earliest age he will say, "I want to know Jesus"? That is the responsibility that all of us have, beyond the parents.

I've had a piece of paper that I've printed and put on my office bulletin board; been there since the last 25 years. It says: "Whoever wants the next generation the most will get them." Do we want that generation? Do we want our kids to grow up in the nurture and stature of God? Are we doing everything that we can for them, because that is our responsibility? Because if you don't want it the most, Satan wants them. And you've got to want Jesus for them more than he wants them. So today as we look at these two prophets from Jonah to Nahum and the 100 years in between, we see the period of grace that ended with judgment.

We need to look at ourselves too and ask the question: Am I living the life that I ought to be living as a son/daughter of the most high God? Am I living that kind of life? The beauty is that we are still in the period of grace. If the Lord tarries another 10 minutes or 15 minutes as we come to the Lord's table, we are reminded that there is complete access into the presence of God. The veil was rend in two. We are reminded as we partake of the juice that there is nothing that you could have done that the precious blood shed at Calvary cannot wipe clean. So we get an opportunity today to hit refresh and say, "Lord, I haven't been living the way I ought to be living. But Lord, would You help me? Here are things that have just crept up and become a part of me, but Lord, would You let Your Holy Spirit come and wash those things away. Take it away Lord. I give You permission.

Jonah to Nahum – 100 years in between. But a slide from repentance to judgment that didn't go for them. Beloved, let's just take a leaf out of those two prophets and turn the spotlight on ourselves and say: Lord, would You show me what I need to do today. Amen.