

# PITY NINEVEH!

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## Introduction

One book, and one book only in the Bible, ends with a question. Does anyone present here this evening know which book that is? No? It is the book of Jonah.

Since we believe the Bible to have been inspired by God, we can assume that the Spirit of God must have had a special reason for ending this particular book with a question – to leave it suspended, as it were – incomplete.

Why should God do this? Surely the reason must be that the story of Jonah is incomplete without our participation. God wants us to think, and to think deeply, about the story, and then respond to it. In this way the story of Jonah functions much like the parables Jesus told.

And yet I would suggest to you that it is not the whole story of Jonah that God wants us to ponder. Rather, it is just that final query. And what is that query? Let us review it, the last verse of the book, Chapter 4, verse 11. It reads,

“And shall I not pity Nineveh [that is, have compassion on], that great city in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

When God speaks of 120,000 people who cannot discern their right hand from their left – that is, 120,000 infants and toddlers under two years of age – God is emphasizing the greatness of the city, for 120,000 infants implies a population exceeding one million – a huge city for the times in which Jonah lived.

## Jonah's Reaction to the City

Now the reason God left Jonah to ponder this question is because Jonah hated Nineveh. You recall he had not wanted to go to Nineveh in the first place. That whole business about Jonah and the big fish occurred precisely because Jonah was trying to flee in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

And when Jonah finally arrived in Nineveh, having decided to obey God's command to evangelize the city, he arrived reluctantly and went about his evangelistic task grudgingly.

Even after his evangelistic effort succeeded beyond his wildest expectations – the entire city repented, from the king right down to the lowest serf – Jonah could not accept the result with grace. He went outside the city and waited, hoping that God would somehow change his mind [that is, repent] and destroy Nineveh in spite of its repentance.

Why was Jonah so antagonistic to Nineveh? Because he saw it as the epitome of evil, the fountainhead of oppression, the source of most of the misfortune that had befallen himself and the people of Israel.

## Our Attitude toward the City

When you think about it, our attitude toward the city – whether it is a middling size city such as Paterson, where I now live, or a giant metropolis like New York City or Los Angeles – is not much different than Jonah's.

Modern American Christians tend to see the city as the epitome of evil, a place where drugs are rampant, unemployment is high, housing is degraded, education is sub-standard, and morals are lax. A place where the losers of society congregate.

And like Jonah, modern American Christians have fled the city. The process began around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues to this day.

One can hardly blame the Christians. Who does not dream of a pleasant home in the suburbs, where one can live in peace and privacy, and give one's children a decent education and a share in the American dream? Yet as reasonable as this seems, it raises another question, namely, whether our attitude toward the city reflects God's attitude.

## God's Response to the City

What is God's response to the city? To answer this question, we must consider the biblical revelation as a whole.

It is not that God is oblivious to the evil that characterizes urban life. On the contrary. In the opening chapters of the Bible, Cain murders his brother and, asserting his independence of God, proceeds to build a city.

Soon the citizens of an early metropolis in the Tigris-Euphrates valley construct a tower, arrogantly defying heaven. Next, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah create a lifestyle that the Bible describes as one of "pride, surplus of food, and prosperous ease" and one that fails to "aid the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49).

No wonder the Old Testament prophets protest! "The voice of the Lord cries to the city, 'Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city! Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked?'" (Micah 6:9-10).

And again, "The land is full of bloody crime and the city is full of violence...the land is full of blood and the city is full of injustice" (Ezekiel 7:23 and 9:9).

New Testament authors present their profiles of the cities in much the same terms. According to some of them, Athens is idolatrous, Corinth is debauched, Ephesus is money-mad, and Rome is "the mother of harlots...drunk with the blood of the saints" (Revelation 17:5-6, where Babylon is a code word for Rome).

## A More Positive View

But the Bible does not present the city in exclusively dark tones. In fact, the opposite is true. As one progresses from Genesis to Revelation one finds the city becoming the very symbol of God's gracious future for all humanity.

Early in Israel's history, God directed that certain cities be set aside as places of refuge. Psalm 107 describes the city in terms of stability and spiritual blessing. Eventually Jerusalem is honored as the site of God's very presence.

According to the Bible, human history as ordained by God, is the saga of humanity's inexorable progression from pastoral, rural settings to urban conglomerates. The city is the natural product of human beings striving to fulfill the mandate of Genesis to "fill the earth and subdue it."

The very worst – but also the very best – in human civilization is evoked as women and men merge their personalities and talents in the maelstrom of the city. The city is capable of becoming the social expression of any extremity – good or evil – that human beings themselves are capable of.

This ambiguous, even paradoxical, view of the city is the one the Bible sets forth. Yet the Scriptures do not leave the paradox unresolved. The Bible teaches that the ultimate destiny of redeemed human is urban. There will be no return to the Garden of Eden!

The final chapters of the Bible portray a holy city, infused by the presence of God...nourished by the tree of life...devoid of all sorrow and oppression...and enhanced by the artistic and technological achievements of society.

This is why God phrased his question to Jonah in terms of infants. The future of our country depends on how we treat "the least of these." (Compare Matthew 25:40, 45.)

As Jacques Ellul has famously observed, the story of humanity begins in a Garden but ends in a City. And that observation brings us to our final question: What is our attitude toward the city? The whole book of Jonah is designed to raise this question.

### Our Attitude toward the City

The flight of American Christians from the inner city to suburbia is a sign of our times. On the one hand, we have already noted good reasons for it. On the other, we have seen that it contradicts the basic thrust of God's plan for world redemption as revealed in Scripture.

It is the story of Jonah re-enacted in our day.

I believe this flight of Christians from the city is a misapprehension of the nature of our pilgrimage. It is a flight from biblical realism and biblical mission. It is a confusion of the American Dream with the Kingdom of God.

For that reason God's word to Jeremiah is stunningly relevant to us today. To Jeremiah God said, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7).

In the plan of God, the very seat and citadel of human sin is also the locus of God's redemption. This is the insight God was trying to get Jonah to discover when he posed that question to him. And it is the insight God wants us to perceive today.

New Jerusalem is our ultimate destiny. But for now, the great cities of America and Europe, of Asia and Africa and Latin America – cities filled with the harassed and helpless that Jesus spoke of – must be the arena of our commitment to the Great Commission.

## Conclusion

Am I suggesting that suburban Christians pack their bags and move back into the cities? We, in the light of what we have discussed, that possibility should not be ruled out for some. The well-known evangelical leader, John Perkins, has said that relocation must precede reconciliation. And for some of us, obedient discipleship will require such a move.

But for most of us, such a move is not realistic. What then should our response be to the question, "Shall I not pity Nineveh?"

It may be that the Lord is calling us to a radical re-orientation on the basis of his Word. And so we may need to explore additional ways of developing partnerships with people who live in the inner cities. I commend that possibility to you, for I am convinced that, as God told Jeremiah, somehow the long-term welfare of suburban Christians is inextricably linked to the welfare of the inner city.