Running With God: Nineveh's Deliverance

Introduction

Charles Finney, a pastor in the 1800s, recorded in his autobiography an account of a spiritual revival. This revival occurs in a small town called Rome in New York in the 1820s. He records, “we were in the midst of revival - a tremendous moving of God's Spirit in the town of Western, New York. People from the nearby town of Rome began coming to the meetings in large numbers. I could see that the powerful effect the Word was having upon those coming from Rome clearly indicated that the work would soon be spreading to their town.”

“We found a very extraordinary state of things. Convictions were so deep and felt by everyone that we would sometimes go into a house and find some in a kneeling position and others prostrate on the floor. There was a spirit of solemnness throughout the whole place, and an awe that made everybody feel that God was there.

As the work progressed, almost the whole population of the town became involved. Nearly every one of the lawyers, merchants, physicians, and almost all the principal men - indeed, nearly the whole adult population of the village, were saved, especially those who belonged to Mr. Gillett's congregation. He said to me before I left, "So far as my church is concerned, the millennium has come already. My people are all converted. From all my past labors, I don't even have one sermon that is suited at all to my congregation, for they all are committed Christians." Mr. Gillett afterward reported that during the 20 days that I spent at Rome, there were 500 conversions in that town.

The pastor can’t use his old sermons anymore, because everyone is converted now in his congregation. The moral state of the people was so greatly changed that Mr. Gillett often remarked that it did not seem like the same place. Whatever of sin that was left was forced to hide its face. No open immorality would
be tolerated for even a moment.

But the Spirit's work did not stop there. Finney goes on to tell how it immediately spread to Utica (where Sheriff Bryant was converted). And then from village to village, city to city, the revival spread throughout the length and breadth of the land, until there were whole counties where there could hardly be found an unconverted soul. How grateful we are that Jesus Christ is able to change lives like this, and that He wants to enable His people, if they are willing, to be such vessels of His truth and power. "You shall find Me," He says, "when you seek for Me, with all your heart!" -Jer. 29:13

In church history, what happened in that small town, is the beginning of what the historians called the Second Great Awakening. Jonathan Edwards, an English pastor once wrote the five distinguishing marks of a genuine and legitimate work of the Spirit of God. This work of God (1) Will cause a greater esteem for Christ, (2) will operate against the interest of Satan, (3) will cause a greater regard for Scripture,(4) will lead persons to truth, convincing them of those things that are true, and (5) "operates as a spirit of love to God and man. When you look at Jonah chapter 3, you see a similar work of God occurs in the city of Nineveh.

1. Greater regard of the word of God (v1-5)

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 3:2, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." 3:3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. 3:4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." 3:5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

At the beginning of Jonah chapter 3, we see Jonah has now a higher regard of the word of God. Previously he did not want to obey the word of God, and chose to flee to Tarshish, which is exactly the opposite of where God wants him to go. But this time is different, it seems that he has learned some lesson of God’s mercy in the fish’s stomach. In verse 1 we learned when the word of the Lord came to him a second time, Jonah obeyed the word and went to Nineveh. In the author’s mind, it is not important how long does it take for Jonah to arrive at Nineveh. He didn’t care Jonah how many months or days to go there, he only
cares that Jonah obeys the word of God. Neither mentioned is Jonah’s attitude, based on chapter four it seems that Jonah did not want to Nineveh. But the author has described what Nineveh is like. In verse 2, God describes the city, the great city. Verse 3, a very important city, a visit required three days.

Historically, as described, Nineveh is an important city. It is the last capital of Assyria, and it represents the Assyria Empire. Not only its size and population is important, it is also a city God regarded as important – God cared about this city.

We are not sure exactly what a visit required three days mean, it could mean it took 3 days to march from one end of the city to the other, or it could mean, it took three days for a prophet to preach the message in different sections of the city in order for most to hear the message, but historically it is about five kilometers wide. In chapter four we learn that the population is at least 120,000. Therefore it is safe to conclude that it should take Jonah a long time for the message to be delivered. Yet, on the first day, already lots of people responding to his message.

Verse 5, the Ninevites believed God. Similar to Jonah, they now have higher regards of God’s word. They are now willing to change. A series of actions are followed.

What does it mean by high regard of the word of God? It means whether happy or not we will obey God’s words. A revival will not occur without high regard of the word of God. We can be emotionally very high, and give us an appearance of revival, but true revival only comes when the word of God works in people’s heart. Fake revival could attract a lot of people, if Jesus only wants to attract people he can continue performing miracles, keep on making fish and bread, but his true intention is for people to learn that he is God, therefore he withdraw from people. If there is one great treasure you can pass on to your children, it will be the bible. Not only how the bible should be understood, but how the bible should be lived out.

When one man obeys the word of God, it could be a catalyst, triggering lots of reactions. Even though
Jonah didn’t like it, and it may be risky to proclaim the warning, but once he obeyed the word of God, even though he himself wouldn’t admit it, he becomes a blessing to those in Nineveh.

2. True repentance with actions and prayer (v.6-9)

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 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. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

1. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. At the time people put on sackcloth when moaning for the dead, or some disastrous situation. They are moaning for their sins.

2. The king changed too, not just sitting there and do nothing, but 1. Get up, 2. Took off his royal robes. 3. Covered himself with sackcloth 4. Sat down in the dust. 5. Issue a decree of fasting.

3. The extend of these actions – from the greatest to the least, from the king to even the animals. Nationwide – do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything. No eating and drinking. Therefore it is not only the king and those who heard it, but the entire empire is changed. Not just fasting for food, but fasting for water.

4. Call urgently – pray earnestly. The decree calls everyone to call on God. Similar to the sailors in chapter one and Jonah in chapter two, they are in a dangerous situation. The only one who can save them is God. In all the revivals, you see people willing to devote to a faithful prayer life.

5. Give up their evil ways and their violence. Moral changes – operates as a spirit of love to God and man. The king doesn’t just call them to pray, but a change of behavior. And did they change, yes, they did, because verse 10 God saw what they did and how they turned away from their evil ways.

The entire city did so much, from inside out, in true repentance, and perhaps they can be sure that God will not destroy them? Verse 9 tells us, they did all that because they know God is a merciful God, but they can never be sure whether God will carry out his punishment. The king knows, God is a sovereign God, it is
not up to us to decide what God do. Who knows? God may, but God may not remove the punishment, but human has to repent, in order to have even a slight chance. In the king’s mind, no repentance no chance, true repentance some chance. He doesn’t have the thought to query God: look God, we repent already, come on, don’t punish us. This kind of repentance is not true repentance. True repentance let god be god, let man be man, let God decide what to do, not man.

Wouldn’t you want to see this kind of awakening in your life? Wouldn’t you want to see people knell down in front of God? Wouldn’t you want to see groups of people praying on the street? People willing to love one another and sacrifice for one another? People stop lying and stealing. This is not impossible, it happens before, it will happen again. In the second great awakening people in particular are concerned about Jesus’ second coming. To them, Jesus will come back and thus we have to be prepared. I guess it is true, if you believe Jesus will come back in a month, how can you still act as if you don’t care? Brothers and sisters, where is your sackcloth? Where is your moaning? Where is your love for brothers and sisters? If in forty days God will punish those who are lukewarm, will you still sit there and do nothing?

Last week I received an email. It is from a non-Christian accusing a Christian for telling a big lie. Since this Christian is both of our acquaintance, he asks me to speak to this man. This non-Christian said to me, this is the best example of a hypocrite. And he urges me to ask this man to repent in order to save his soul. I couldn’t judge if someone is going to heaven, but if what I heard was true, this Christian does deserve to rethink about their faith. This non-Christian challenged, wouldn’t him be guilty about things? Shouldn’t he repent, and I can really tell this has been one of the hindering blocks for him to become a Christian. Morality and faith cannot be separated. True faith comes with true actions. Let’s pray that God change our church, that we have a repenting heart, and we have true actions flowing from this heart. Pray that everyone who enters this church, they see God through us.

3. Relying on God’s mercy (v.10)
Did God change his mind in his dealing with Nineveh? From verse 10, it appears originally God wants to destroy Nineveh after forty days, but after their national repentance God had compassion and did not bring them the destruction. So did God really change his mind? From one point he does, because he did announce the judgment. But on the other hand this change of mind is embraced in his unchanging character. God is love. The merciful God is abundant in love, and according to his loving character he does not actually change. Second, in Deuteronomy we have seen how God gives Israel decrees, if they obey they will be blessed, if they don’t they will be punished. God has announced the consequences to Israel his will, not necessarily changing, but depends on man’s responses they will receive different consequences. That is the reason why Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh, because he knows if they repent God may forgive them. Not only Jonah knows God’s nature, the king of Nineveh sees that too, therefore he hopes through their true repentance, repenting not only in heart but with real actions, they can see God’s mercy.

As Christians, we have a firmer hope in Christ. Jesus is greater than Jonah. We have full assurance in Christ, if we repent, if we turn back to God, God will forgive us. We have a different assurance now, our assurance is the blood of Jesus, his life. Nothing can take that away from us. Spiritual enthusiasm is not something Christians can opt not to have. It is something we must have, because our status is not earned by us, but by his blood. If we are lack spiritual enthusiasm, we must pray for revival.

J. Edwin Orr, a professor of Church history has described the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Welsh Revivals of the nineteenth century. As people sought to be filled with the Spirit, they did all they could to confess their wrong doing and to make restitution. But it unexpectedly created serious problems for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years workers had stolen all kinds of things, from wheelbarrows to hammers. However, as people sought to be right with God they started to return what they had taken, with the result that soon the shipyards of Wales were overwhelmed with returned property. There were such huge piles of returned tools that several of the yards put up signs
that read, "If you have been led by God To return what you have stolen, Please know that the management forgives you and wishes you to keep what you have taken."

Is it too much for us to ask for a revival, like what happened in Nineveh? Is it too much for us to ask for Sydney to be transformed, if in history New York, England and other countries have been revived by God’s Holy Spirit. If God can save Nineveh who in people’s eyes is so evil, God can also save us from our present situation. Everyone of us should respond to God’s love according to the measure that has given us. Are we fully utilize the spiritual gift God gives us to build up the church? I hope, in my life, God can give us an opportunity to see him at work in people around us, do you wish to see that? We can pray, and may God have mercy on us. When we finish today’s service, I wish that you may take sometime to pray, pray for revival of our church. May we have more willing jonahs, and eventually a church of great blessings to people.

One of the greatest revival occur in US.  http://www.matthew548.com/newyork.html

Why forty? Conceivably as a typical waiting and testing period: compare Israel’s forty years in the wilderness and Jesus’ forty days. Is there a hint of Moses’ forty days of supplication before God in Deut. 9:18, 25? Mention of the delay builds a bridge between the decree of destruction and the surprising narrative that follows. The “tension-laden interval” between the delivery of the message and its fulfillment was to be understood by the Ninevite listener as “a time when it would be possible for him to bend himself to the will of the one who sends the message.”

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