

**"NINEVEH'S REPENTANCE:
ITS ORIGIN AND NATURE"**

Chapter XVIII

from
THE PROPHET JONAH:
HIS CHARACTER AND MISSION TO NINEVEH
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"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.

"Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance."--Acts 11:18.

The repentance of Nineveh is one of the most singular events in history. A great and proud city suddenly smitten into the most profound humiliation, from the greatest of its inhabitants unto the least of them--from the king on the throne to the meanest citizen--is a spectacle to which, I suppose, history affords no parallel. Cities, and countries, and communities have oftentimes, with not a little unanimity, given themselves to humiliation and fasting. But there is no event on record that can at all be compared with the fast and the repentance of Nineveh.

The repentance of Nineveh may be considered, *first*, in its essentials; and, *secondly*, in its circumstances. We confine our attention at present to the essentials. And here, the ORIGIN and NATURE of the repentance will call for our consideration.

I. The ORIGIN of Nineveh's repentance. It arose, in the first place, from their faith of the terrible destruction threatened; and, in the second place, in their hope of escaping it.

1. First, this repentance was prompted by faith. "So the people of Nineveh *believed* God, and proclaimed a fast." All originated in their faith. They heard the message of the prophet with astonishment, but not with incredulity. They received him as an agent commissioned of heaven to declare their coming doom. They believed him to be a messenger from God, and they believed his message.

Doubtless the hand of God is to be traced in this, and His power and gracious influence on their hearts. And a very wondrous work it is of the grace of God that a city such as Nineveh--great, and violent, and proud, and of a haughty spirit--should have been so greatly, so suddenly humbled to believe the message of God. Surely God's Holy Spirit was with God's holy word among them; and very powerful, though secret, were His operations. It is impossible to account for their faith without attributing it to the operation of God upon their hearts, and the sovereign mercy of God towards them.

Who could have expected that Jonah should meet with any such reception from a heathen,

violent, profligate, enormous community like that of Nineveh? What could have been looked for but that they should either treat him as a senseless dreamer (congregating in multitudes to laugh at him as he sped through the town with his ominous and unvarying cry about the coming calamity) or, irritated by his pertinacity, take steps to avenge the insult speedily? What wonder, though they had for a time amused themselves with the solemn aspect of the frenzied foreigner.

And then when they could no more maintain even to themselves the charge against him of being beside himself; when the persevering discharge of his sad commission and the wise and calm and holy aspect of the man forbade [them] to mock him any longer; [is it any wonder then that they] passed from laughter to wrath and subjected [threatened] him to some one or other of the deaths of torture which, alas! the sculptures of the Assyrian capital, now exhumed, prove to have been but too common outlets for their cruelty?

Assuredly, at least, it is very marvelous [surprising] that they did not unanimously treat the prophet as Lot was treated by his sons-in-law. When the angels had announced to that patriarch the dreadful visitation of Divine wrath under which the city of his habitation was to be obliterated, they said unto him: *"Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law, your sons, your daughters, and whomever you have in the city--take them out of this place! For we will destroy this place because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of Yahweh, and Yahweh has sent us to destroy it. So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, 'Get up, get out of this place; for Yahweh will destroy this city!' "* (Gen. 19:12-14, NKJV). You remember the reception which his mission of mercy met with? *"But he seemed as one that mocked."* They regarded him as beside himself. . . .

Is it not very remarkable that Jonah did not, in like manner, seem unto the men of Nineveh "as one that mocked"? Judging by sense, what forces were in action or in preparation to destroy them in forty days? From what quarter should the unexplained blow descend? And with a threat hung over them so utterly indefinite (indicating nothing of the source or nature of the coming ruin), what wonder if, like Lot's sons-in-law, they had heard the threat with unmingled incredulity? But in perfect contrast with the state of mind which these infatuated relatives of the holy patriarch exhibited . . . an utter stranger to the men of Nineveh meets with credit at their hands though he delivers a message as stern and terrible. Surely this was of the Lord. Surely His Spirit was striving powerfully and successfully with the Ninevites, else [otherwise] Jonah had appeared to them as one that mocked. When the Ninevites believed God, was not this a faith which was "not of themselves"? Was it not "the gift of God"?

Let us observe how their faith wrought--for "faith works." Faith is a most energetic principle. It leads a man to work. Saving faith--that particular distinguishing faith which receives the saving love of God in Christ and Him crucified--saving faith "works by love." For it embraces an infinite, sovereign, undeserved, most tender and eternal love on the Saviour's part; and it works by gratitude, admiration, and love in return. Generally, faith works; and it works according to the nature of that which is believed. If that which is believed be something dreadful and alarming, it works by *fear*; and if any possibility of escape seem left, it prompts to the embracing of whatever means may realize it.

Of faith operating in this manner, namely, by fear, and prompting to what steps are needful to the secure deliverance from dreaded evil, Noah is an eminent instance. *"By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house"* (Heb. 11:7). What Noah believed was in its nature dreadful. He had no evidence of its

truth, but the alone word of God. The "things" of which he was warned were "not seen as yet." But he took the word of God for truth. And "faith," or the word of God apprehended by faith, "is the evidence of things not seen." To Noah, therefore, as in every case, his faith was, as it were, a new sense. Giving him an undoubting preception of things not otherwise perceptible, and accordingly perceiving the advent of dreadful evil, he was moved with fear; and being moved with the fear of evil he took means to avert it. He built an ark. By faith Noah built an ark. It was his work of faith.

And precisely thus did faith work in the case of the men of Nineveh. They believed God, speaking to them by His messenger. "Warned of God of things not seen as yet"--of a destruction of which no sign nor symptom of any kind appeared, for which they had no evidence whatever but simply the message of the prophet, which they received as the word of God--they believed God; and their faith wrought in a manner suitable to the position in which they now found themselves placed. "They proclaimed a fast."

It is to be observed that faith operates differently according to the matter believed. When faith looks to the love of Christ--the redeeming love of Christ--faith works by *love*: "We love Him who first loved us." When faith looks to the infinite wrath of God--to the inexpressible and eternal ruin of lost souls--faith works by *fear*; and we "flee for refuge to the hope set before us" (like the manslayer speeding to the refuge city because he sees the revenger of blood dogging his heels). When faith looks at Christ bearing in His love the wrath from which He calls us to flee, faith works by *grief*; and "looking on Him whom we have pierced, we mourn." And all these operations of faith--love, fear, grief--enter into that repentance unto salvation which true faith produces.

The element of fear was the great and leading element in the repentance of the Ninevites. "*Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?*" The dread of "perishing," the dread of the "fierce anger" of the Lord operated powerfully. They were filled with fear. They were "moved with fear."

This is the least noble of the elements that enter into true repentance, or produce it. Saving repentance--repentance unto life--certainly has constituent principles in it more exalted, more pure, more generous; lively grief for offending against God, our Creator, Preserver, Saviour; ingenuous [sincere] shame in contemplating the moral loathsomeness of sin; inexpressible gratitude and admiration in beholding the rich grace of God in the gift of His dear Son as our sacrifice and intercessor; generous and self-forgetting ascriptions of glory, and praise, and righteousness to Him against whom we have unreasonably rebelled.

But in exalting the more generous and noble features of repentance, let not the commonplace principle of fear be overlooked. While we call upon you to be grieved and mourn for your provocations against God, we are by no means to omit calling to you to be alarmed at the danger of being overtaken by His wrath. The principle of self-preservation--the combined desire of happiness and dread of evil--is a principle to which Scripture frequently appeals, which it seeks to awaken and to enlist. The rightness and reasonableness of repentance are to be preached; but the plainer and more commonplace theme is also to be preached, namely, the danger to yourselves in continuing impenitent. The high spirituality which would press only the loftier and purer class of motives, omitting all reference to those that seem allied to self-love, is not countenanced in Scripture. In dealing with the impenitent, the Lord speaks copiously of the bearing of their impenitence upon themselves, and seeks to awaken and alarm by the threats of terrible destruction from the presence of the Lord. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise

perish." "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye *die*?" "Fear Him that is able to destroy both body and soul in hell."

A slavish fear of God, or a mere physical terror or dread of evil, have little in them to evidence a state of grace. But in the first awakenings of the careless transgressor, they may oftentimes serve no small beneficial purpose. Anything is better than the listlessness, the indifference, the deep slumber in which multitudes of sinners are steeped. Insensible to the finer motives which might lead them to be ashamed of their ingratitude to God, it were well if the threatenings of God's wrath would sting them out of their unfeeling and hardened condition. "Can your hands be strong, can your heart endure, in the day that I will deal with you, saith the Lord?" "If I whet my glittering sword, and my hand take hold on judgment; I will render vengeance to My enemies, and reward them that hate Me."

What is it that can account for the careless sinner living unmoved under threatenings and warnings such as these? It is a very sad conclusion to come to, but it is inevitable: He does not believe God. He does not give God and God's word the credit which he would give to a fellow creature and *his* word. Practically, he treats the threatenings of God as if there were no meaning, no truth, no reality in them. He does not know, he does not consider, he does not believe [that] God has threatened to cast him into hell-fire prepared for the devil and his angels, to laugh at his calamity and mock when his fear comes, to abandon him throughout all eternity to the unmitigated effects of his wickedness and to his own depraved desires, to the companionship of those who have ruined themselves along with him, and to the retribution of His wrath and curse without relief and without end. God has further assured him that as the tree falls so it must lie; and that He may at any moment, without warning, call him to His judgment seat and assign him his portion of intolerable and unending ruin.

And yet in the face of all this the careless sinner can eat, drink, and be merry; can buy and sell and get gain; can pursue his worldly objects of ambition and desire with the whole unbroken strength and vigor of his mind. Can it then be thought that he believes the Lord? Impossible. However sad the conclusion, it is obvious that the negligent and prayerless sinner is, to all practical ends, an atheist. He is practically living in a state of infidelity and atheism; and however much he may revolt from admitting this, it is impossible for him by an appeal to his conduct to refute it. So thorough and intense is the depravity of human nature! And so true is the inspired declaration that we are by nature "without God in the world"!

It is the quickening and wakening up of a new sense, or feeling, or sensibility, when the sinner begins to take the word of God concerning his state and danger for real and true; and acts upon the supposition of its truth, exactly as he would act on the supposition of the truth of some statement affecting his temporal affairs. Apply to your eternal concerns and to what affects them, we might say to him,--apply to *them* the same line of thought and action that you apply to temporal interests. And, on the supposition that what God says to you is true and is by you dealt with as true, you will become altogether another creature. If the prospect of a temporal calamity bestirs you to escape it, you will not fold your hands in the prospect of eternal perdition. If the displeasure of a superior troubles you, you will not sit at ease under the wrath of the Supreme. Believing the truth as to your condition and prospects will work a mighty change in your feelings and procedure. What will you then give in exchange for your soul?

Can anything more clearly prove the necessity of our being born again than this amazing infatuation that leads us to deal with God's words as if they were empty wind? Must we not be

corrupt in the whole man, in very truth spiritually dead, ere we could be capable of anything so marvellously [astonishingly] wicked? The Ninevites will rise in judgment against us, for "they believed God" and "repented at the preaching of Jonah."

2. We are not, however, to imagine that a belief and apprehension of terrible evil denounced upon them was the only impelling motive to the repentance of the city. Certainly an element of hope mingled, to bestir them to exertion. A slender hope it must have been at the best, yet still most valuable. The absence of hope excludes the possibility of repentance. Despair seals and quickens the sinner's enmity and hatred to God. And it would have done so eminently in the case of the Ninevites. Had they viewed their doom as utterly inevitable, they would have been either paralyzed or infuriated. They would have been still more estranged from God. But some hope, evidently, in their apprehension still remained. The word among them was, "*Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, and we perish not?*"

Now what room was there, in their case, for entertaining this hope? Did not the strait threatening--unconditional, unqualified--run in these terms: "Forty days, and Nineveh shall be destroyed"? And how did this leave room or scope for any hope of mercy?

There were two things from which the Ninevites might gather hope.

(1) There was the general consideration that all threatenings are warnings; that they are uttered in order, if possible, that they may not be executed. Had it been the purpose of God, finally and irrevocably fixed, to overwhelm the city with destruction, it would have been unnecessary and superfluous to give them intimation. The announcement was given, clearly, if possible, that the evil might be averted. Manifestly, in the very sending of a herald to give them warning, there was mercy towards them.

Through the streets of Sodom and Gomorrah no awakening ambassador wended his mournful way foretelling the doom that was decreed. To Lot's sons-in-law tidings were carried by Lot himself, the angels of the Lord commanding him to do so. And to them the commission bore evidence that they were not so consigned to judgment, but that their faith and flight would assuredly have saved them. But on the other dwellers in the doomed cities of the plain, destruction fell without a warning; for God had determined it without any door of hope. The very mission, however, of Jonah to Nineveh carried in it some intimation on God's part of a lingering mercy towards them, a mercy that would warn them how soon justice must take its course. The Ninevites themselves seem to have judged thus. Reason taught them that if God abstained from suddenly and instantaneously pouring out His wrath upon them and gave them forty days' notice, it must be because there was some space given for repentance, some room for hope. Thus, under a dispensation of forbearance, threatenings are employed not to shut the door of hope, but to awaken the insensible and compel them towards the gates of repentance.

(2) But secondly, the hope of the Ninevites may have arisen from another cause, or been prompted by another consideration. Our Lord in the days of His flesh was solicited by the unbelieving Jews to show them a sign, and He answered, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*" [Matt. 12:39,40 NKJV]. And again: "*For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation*" [Luke 11:30 NKJV].

Now it seems very clear from these sayings of our Lord that the respect in which Jonah was a sign was in his being three days and three nights in the whale's belly; that in this respect he was a sign to the Ninevites, and therefore that the Ninevites must have been made aware of his history--the history of his original commission, his disobedience, his flight, his pursuit, his punishment, and forgiveness. Without their knowledge of his history, he could not have been to them in respect of that history, a sign. But the very story of what had befallen the very messenger whom God had sent them could not fail to impress them, not only with a deep sense of the terrors of God's wrath but with a lively perception also of His mercy. The fact also that the Lord interposed to deliver His servant from the dreadful misery in which he was shut up, could hardly have been imparted to them without some intimation of the place which the prophet's lowly prayers held in the matter. And they could, therefore, scarcely avoid seeing that there is some influence which prayer and penitence exert in averting the threatened wrath of the Almighty; and hence, perhaps, their wise and humble question, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?"

Such then was the origin of the Ninevites' repentance. It originated in faith, as indeed every good thing does. And their faith wrought by fear and hope combined. Their fear predominated, but hope was not altogether wanting [lacking]. The evil dreaded was sufficient to break and humble all their pride, to prepare them to abase themselves to anything that might afford any prospect of escape. And the hope they entertained was sufficient to prevent them from being paralyzed out of the efforts to which their fear might reasonably prompt them.

The combination of appeals to these two principles of fear and hope, which Scripture makes in addressing us on the part of God when it calls us to repentance, is most complete. The evil, by the terror whereof it seeks to arouse us, is terrible beyond conception and irrevocably certain and sealed on impenitence. On the other hand, the glorious inheritance, by the hope of which it labors to allure us, is equally great beyond conception and assured even by the oath of God to all who repent and turn unto the Lord. By the terrors of the Lord, therefore, we ought to be persuaded, and by the mercies of the Lord we may well be overcome. If these terrors and mercies both be believed in and dealt with as realities, they will indeed compel and constrain us to turn from all our evil ways, to turn unto the Lord that we may live.

II. But let us consider the NATURE as well as the origin of their repentance: "*They cried mightily to God, and turned every one from his evil way, and from the violence that was in their hands.*" The city underwent a sudden and striking reformation. "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way." Their haughtiness and pride were abased; their contempt of God was abandoned; their luxury, cruelty, violence, and unrighteousness were given up. And God looked on with approbation.

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? [Isaiah 58:6,7 NKJV]

Such is the fast that the Lord calls for--not a formal, ceremonious, outward solemnity, but a spiritual and moral reformation, outwardly evidenced and certified by new obedience.

The principle is this: true repentance is a change of mind, of heart, of disposition. It is the making of a new heart and of a right spirit. It originates in regeneration, in our being born again, in our obtaining a new nature and becoming new creatures in Christ by the Spirit. And it flows forth in unmistakable manifestations--in a new course of conduct, in a reformed life, a life aiming at new ends conducted under a new rule and aspiring to attain to a new standard. Repentance, springing from a true fear of God and a true sight of sin, manifests itself in a dutiful obedience to God's law and a jealous abstinence from sin. True and saving repentance is not a mere shaking off the evil fruit from the tree and tying on fruit of a better appearance. It is the changing of the tree's very nature; and good fruit is then naturally brought forth, and not artificially appended. The penitent exclaims, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Thus much for the healing of the tree. He obeys the command, "Cease to do evil, learn to do well." Thus much for the new, good fruit. "Make the tree good, and his fruit good" (Matt. 12:33).

Shall we say that the repentance of Nineveh was thoroughly spiritual and saving in the light of eternity? Alas! there is no evidence to show that thorough conversion to God was effected, at least in the city generally. True, spiritual, living religion does not seem even to have taken hold in Nineveh. Idolatry continued to be practiced. And the ultimate fate of the city may be read in the prophecies of Nahum, prophecies that have minutely been fulfilled, and their detailed accuracy verified before the whole world in the disinterment within these days of the buried capital, and the bringing to the light of day, after more than two millenniums, of its ancient sculptors and records.

It may be inquired, then, why God should have set the seal of His approbation on their repentance, as we shall afterwards find He did, if it fell so far short of thorough regeneration and conversion? And the answer is that God's procedure in sparing them is not to be taken as the pronouncing of His opinion upon the goodness, thoroughness, or spiritual nature of their repentance. God is carrying on towards individuals and communities a dispensation of forbearance, subordinately to a dispensation of saving mercy, and with a view ultimately to a final dispensation of judgment.

The exigencies of such a procedure imply a large amount of Divine patience. Occasionally--as in the instance of the flood, the cities of the plain, and of Nineveh (had repentance not intervened)--God puts a limit to His long-suffering, and being provoked by flagrant wickedness sweeps the evil suddenly from the earth which it pollutes. His not interfering to do so with a community does not by any means imply the presence and the power among them, to any great extent, of His true and holy fear. They may be far enough as a whole from that, and yet not be given over to the flagrant iniquity which usually provokes the special judgment of Heaven. And we can easily conceive of a community on the very verge of the limit of God's patience; but under salutary and, so far, religious alarm, turning and retreating to safer ground, repenting in a sense and turning from their evil ways without going over to the ground of true, spiritual, vital godliness, or being savingly and for eternity converted. They may take up ground comparatively safe from special and dreadful judgments without becoming truly living Christians. For were God immediately to smite with His wrath for the usual ungodliness of unconverted men, He would be continually doing so; and works of judgment would be the ordinary features of His administration.

On the contrary, judgment is His strange work, and forbearance is the great leading feature of His present dispensation. And hence we might warrantably enough expect that a repentance exhibiting a great reformation of manners, without going so far as vital conversion, would secure

the favorable interposition of God, and the removal of His threatened exterminating indignation. The Ninevites, though few of them probably were savingly converted, were sincerely alarmed. They were convinced of their wickedness, and they turned from the evil of their doings. Their daring neglect and contempt of God were abandoned, and they cried mightily to Him. Their unrighteous and unjust actions towards man also were abandoned, and they began to deal in rectitude among themselves. They laid aside, in short, the eminence and distinction in wickedness to which they had attained. And the features of their case that had provoked the Divine indignation being gone, the Divine pity, as we shall see, returned, and a forbearing Providence flowed towards them again in its wonted channels.

But what an evidence does this afford of the unspeakable goodness of God! If even their very imperfect repentance (their turning from their evil ways though, alas, it fell short of turning truly to the Lord) was nevertheless regarded by the Lord, how open must His ear ever be to the poor afflicted soul that turns truly to Himself!

We have an instance of God's extreme readiness to be reconciled to us on our repentance in the merciful manner in which He dealt with Ahab. We are told concerning that wicked monarch that "there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord." Yet when Elijah was sent to denounce the most dreadful judgments on his house, the wretched king, stung with alarm and remorse, "rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly." There is not the slightest evidence, but the contrary, that this was a vital change of heart. But there was in it true regret; a sincere owning of God's power, and hand, and righteousness; a justification insofar of the justice of God's threatening; and a public testimony to the supremacy and government of God. And though not accompanied by a renewal of nature and a repentance unto life, it was pleasing in the sight of God insofar as it went. "And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, See thou how Ahab humbles himself before Me? Because he humbles himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (1 Kings 21:25-29). He procured a delay of the threatened temporal judgment all the days of his own life. So decided was the regard which the Lord had to Ahab's meek and humble reception of His awful word.

And how very great is the encouragement which this holds out to sinners to repent and return unto the Lord with all their heart and with all their soul! A repentance arising only from a regret however valuable, but without a change of heart, will assuredly avail but little. God may not count it utterly of no value in the light or on the platform of time. But in the light of eternity and of the spiritual world it can profit you nothing. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. And anticipating that most awful event, it is ours to rend our hearts and not our garments; to seek grace that the tree may be made good; that we may be actually renewed in the spirit of our minds, transformed in the renewing of our minds, renouncing ourselves, and putting on Christ Jesus, and living in the Spirit.

But how great is the encouragement to turn to God and seek the grace which a risen Saviour is exalted to bestow, and which He proves His readiness to give by the record of His merciful and pitiful procedure even to those who fell far short of sorrowing after a godly sort! Be persuaded, then, to lay deeply to heart, on the one hand, the terrible wrath of Almighty God against the unconverted, and the terrible ruin of an unsaved soul. And lay equally to heart, on the other, the great and sure mercy and acceptance in Christ open to all who turn from their evil ways and come unto God by Him. And seeing that God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke of old by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, let us bear in mind that if

we are not found among God's penitent, believing, renewed, and redeemed children, the men of Nineveh will rise against us in the judgment--"*For they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here.*"

Note: The text has not been changed, but some editing has been inserted in brackets to assist the reader. Also, long paragraphs have been divided, KJV-era verbs updated, and punctuation has been modernized.