

Series: *A Moody Missionary Meets the Merciful Master*

Lesson: *A Nation's Finest Hour*

Text: *Jonah 3:4-10 (L6)*

Date: *Sunday, October 7, 2011*

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

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Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

INTRODUCTION¹

In Jonah 3:3, we are introduced to a “great city” (cf. 1:2; 3:2). This Biblical history records: “Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey.” A couple of those phrases have been variously interpreted, but recent explanations help us understand the picture of Nineveh being here presented.²

Modern archaeology reveals an impressive city proper (see pictures on next page). Established on the Tigris River and boasting a walled inner city of roughly 7 miles around, Nineveh had dozens of watch towers and beautiful buildings. It would become the capital city of one of the world’s greatest nations, and it was a city of great wealth and influence.

To bring it home by way of comparison to our city and our nation, consider this. “Of three days’ journey” in 3:3 suggests that the author has “greater Nineveh” in mind with its suburbs and outlying communities. This total area was roughly 60 miles in circumference, containing some 120,000 to 600,000 people, depending on how you take the statement in 4:11. Our own city of Indianapolis has an I-465 circumference of 53 miles in which roughly 800,000 people live. In fact, it is the 12th largest city in America. Our own city, then, is roughly the same size as Nineveh, but with many more condemned souls.

That condemnation is obvious when we compare the Assyrian nation to our own nation. Archaeology has substantiated the accusations of debauchery, lewdness, idolatry, and brutality that Nahum proclaimed against Assyria 100 years later. This was not only a city “great” in size, but also a nation “great” in sin. And that sin warranted the swift judgment of God, for “the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17).

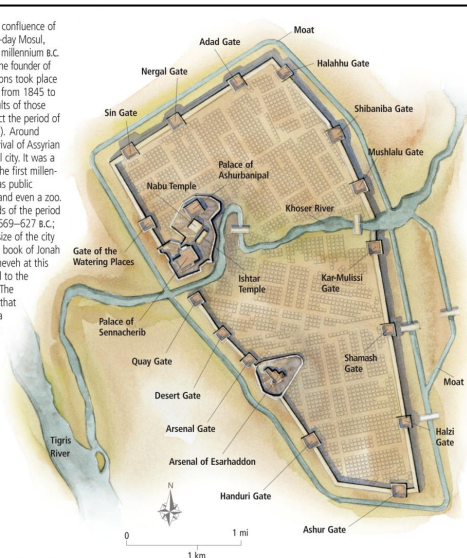
¹ This lesson could be enlarged by changing the points from “America” to “Every Nation.” In truth, the World is facing the judgment of God—the Tribulation is coming. We can nationalize (or individualize) the message of Jonah 3 because the message is universal (Luke 18:8).

² “Wiseman has shown that this phrase can relate not only to Nineveh proper but to the entire administrative district of Nineveh. This metropolitan district included also the cities of Assur, Calah (Nimrud), and even Dur-Sharruken (Khorsabad). This interpretation is supported by Gen 10:11-12, where ‘that is the great city’ seems to refer to the whole district covered by Nineveh, Rehoboth, Ir, Calah, and Resen. [Furthermore,] regardless of the extent of Nineveh, perhaps the best way of understanding this phrase is as a description of the type of visit Jonah made to the city of Nineveh. As the NIV has translated, Jonah’s visit to Nineveh was a three-day event. Nineveh was a major diplomatic center of the ancient world, and the message God wanted the city to hear could not be shared hastily. For Jonah to have accomplished his mission, he would have had to travel to various sections, speaking to as many groups as possible. Such a visit could have taken three days.” (Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, vol. 19B, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001. P. 257.).



The City of Nineveh

Nineveh, which was situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Khoser rivers (modern-day Mosul, Iraq), was first settled in the seventh millennium B.C. According to the Bible, Nimrod was the founder of the city (Gen. 10:11). Major excavations took place under the direction of Henry Layard from 1845 to 1854. The diagram pictures the results of those excavations, especially as they reflect the period of the Assyrian Empire (1420–609 B.C.). Around 1000 B.C. there occurred a great revival of Assyrian power, and Nineveh became a royal city. It was a thriving city during the first half of the first millennium, and contained such luxuries as public squares, parks, botanical gardens, and even a zoo. One of the great archaeological finds of the period is the library of King Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.), called *Osaggar* in *Ezra 4:10*. The size of the city was approximately 1,850 acres. The book of *Jonah* reflects the flourishing nature of Nineveh at this time (3:1–5). Nineveh eventually fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C. The invading armies dammed the rivers that supplied water to the city, causing a flood that broke through one of the perimeter walls, giving the foreign armies access to the city.



Likewise, America is a nation filled with corruption. While we like to consider America a superpower, it is also the world’s greatest debtor nation; we view ourselves a peacemaker, but we are a leader in the murder of babies; we sing that we are “the land of the free,” but we are in fact a nation of addicts; and we label ourselves the “land of liberty,” even though we are full of the chains of immorality, violence, pornography, and scandal. Indeed like Nineveh, Indianapolis is a “great city”; and like Assyria, America is a wicked nation.

A sobering omission is noted outside of the modern city of Mosul, Iraq today: there is no longer a city of Nineveh; nor is there a nation called Assyria. Two mounds mark the place where that immense city once stood. That great city and nation faced the judgment of God upon their wickedness and have been destroyed—they no longer exist. What a solemn warning for our city and nation today! Thomas Jefferson once shuddered, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just and that His justice cannot sleep forever.”

However, the story is not all bad. As one commentator notes, “Sandwiched between the beginning and the end of Nineveh’s eventful life is what should be seen as her finest hour.”³ In *Jonah 3*, when it looks like Nineveh is moments away from destruction (3:4), we discover them repudiating their sin and crying out for the salvation of God. In turn, we read in verse 10, “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not.”

This third chapter of *Jonah* stands as a message of encouragement to the current generation of our great nation. There is still hope for America! While the United States continues to “store up wrath against the day of wrath” (*Romans 2:5*), she can experience the mercy of God in a revival like Nineveh. Indeed, she must if she is to survive! In *Jonah 3*, we find three crucial responses if America would avoid God’s wrath and once again experience His blessing.

AMERICA MUST HEAR THE WORD OF GOD (v. 4).

Today, information is expanding and knowledge is exploding at the speed of light. In a world of technology and media, there are many voices to listen to and many writings to be considered. However, if one hopes to escape the inevitable judgment of God, there is only one message that needs to be heard and heeded—that’s the message of God’s Word!

1. America must hear God’s Word, because it speaks of judgment.

The Word of God to Nineveh was that it would “be overthrown.” The consistent message of Scripture to all other nations is, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (*Luke 13:3, 5*). The word

³ Mackrell, Paul. *Opening Up Jonah*. Leominster: Day One Publications, 2007. Pp. 11-12.

“overthrow” is consistently used throughout Scripture to summarize the judgment of God in a nation’s demise (cf. Genesis 19:21, 25, 29; Deuteronomy 29:22; II Samuel 10:3; II Kings 21:13; Jeremiah 20:16; Lamentations 4:6; Amos 4:11).

Proverbs 14:34 states, “Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” This Assyrian nation—great in influence, size, and iniquity—is about to experience the reproach of God in a complete judgment.

God knows the character of a nation, as certainly as He knows the heart of a man (cf. John 2:25). In Genesis 6, we read of the first great judgment upon the peoples of the earth in the form of a worldwide flood. It was predicated by God’s knowledge of their sin: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (v. 5). Likewise, God knew that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was “very grievous” (Genesis 18:20), and He determined to “overthrow” those cities in judgment (Genesis 18; cf. Amos 4:11).

No nation is too great, too significant, too large, too important, too powerful to avoid the reproach of its sin and the judgment of God. Philistia, Midian, Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Rome, and Greece are all testaments of the judgment of God toward those who are great in status, but filled with sin. Therefore, while God loves to show mercy and grace, He warns, “At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it—if it do evil in My sight, that it obey not My voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them” (Jeremiah 18:9-10).

Application: According to God’s Word, then, America is facing the judgment of God just like Nineveh. It well may be that God has already issued the deadline, and we are hurtling through the final days of mercy. While history records that God did “speak concerning [our] nation...to build and to plant it,” America has done “evil in [God’s] sight” and has refused to “obey...[His] voice.” Therefore, God will change His posture toward us from one of mercy to one of condemnation. This is the message of God for America! May the joy and pride and emotion of our July 4 or 9/11 services never blind us to the miserable state of our country. We are a nation under the judgment of God! Our only hope is to hear the Word of God.

2. **America must hear God’s Word, because it speaks of mercy.**

While Jonah certainly didn’t expound on the mercy of God (perhaps because he didn’t want the Ninevites to understand and ask for it, cf. 4:2), it’s evident in the short phrase, “Yet forty days.” God was

delaying His judgment so that He might have opportunity to show mercy. Someone has noted, “[Nineveh’s] greatness in wickedness drew the wrath of God, but its size, importance and unknowing helplessness also drew His compassion (4:11).”⁴ While God promises to withhold blessing from a nation that turns against Him, He also pledged to extend mercy to a wicked nation that turns toward Him: “At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it—if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them” (Jeremiah 18:7-8). God can do this and still be just, because in Christ, His wrath toward the wickedness of repentant nations has already been spent (cf. Isaiah 53). Christ died so that Ninevites didn’t need to!

This should cause the vile nations of the world that stand condemned under the knowing gaze of God—including our own “great” America—to “glorify God for His mercy” (Romans 15:9). While the absolute judgment of God should lead to trembling and terror (II Corinthians 5:11), the mercy of God should cause “the children of men [to] put their trust under the shadow of [God’s] wings” (Psalm 36:7).

Application: Oh, that America today would hear the Word of God, because it speaks to us of tremendous hope in God’s mercy. The Old Testament offers this provision of blessing to any nation—including our own—that will turn to the Lord: “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD...The LORD looketh from heaven; He beholdeth all the sons of men. From the place of His habitation He looketh upon all the inhabitants of the earth....There is no king saved by the multitude of an host; a mighty man is not delivered by much strength; an horse is a vain thing for safety; neither shall [a king] deliver any by his great strength. Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear Him, upon them that hope in His mercy” (Psalm 33:12-18). If America wants to escape the judgment of God, she must hope *only* in the mercy of God!

Application: It has been over 2500 years since Jonah preached God’s Word of judgment and mercy to the great city of Nineveh. Today’s American landscape closely parallels the situation of Nineveh, with one major exception—there’s no Jonah. While Jonah admittedly preached against his will, this Israelite Jonah had a responsibility to be a light to the perishing nations around him. God had commissioned Israel, “I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be My salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6; cf. I Kings 8:57-61). So, where is Jonah today, the one who will share this glorious message of salvation to America?

⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

Well, God has transferred His missionary responsibility from one nation to another. I Peter 2:9 reminds the individual believers within the church of Christ today: “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people—that ye should shew forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.” We are the Jonahs to our “great” nation of America! We are the ambassadors of mercy to a city of judgment (cf. II Corinthians 5:18-21)! While we may not know the specifics of our nation’s deadline until destruction, we do know (1) that judgment upon sin is inescapable apart from Christ, (2) that lavish mercy is offered to the nation that will hear and heed God’s Word, and (3) that “now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (II Corinthians 6:2). We must be the Jonahs to our modern-day Nineveh!

Our nation must hear God’s Word, and we must proclaim it! While the Lord may not raise a Jonah today to preach His message to congregations of thousands of godless Americans, He has chosen you to share His message of judgment and mercy to your neighbor, your coworker, your relative, etc. America can be saved, and while that may not happen through a massive revival of thousands at a time (as was the case with Nineveh), it may occur via the one-by-one harvest of souls through the personal sharing of the Gospel.

Transition: If America hopes to escape her impending destruction because her “great” sins, then she must hear the Word of God and its double-edged message of judgment and mercy. And that two-pronged message demands a two-fold response. If God’s message is one of judgment, then America must believe the judgment of God. Secondly, then, in order to experience the life-giving revival of Nineveh, America must not only hear the Word of God, she must also...

AMERICA MUST BELIEVE THE JUDGMENT OF GOD (vv. 5-8).

After the Word of God was heard, the Ninevites immediately responded: “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” (v. 5). The key idea here is that Nineveh *believed* God. That word “believe” means “to be convinced,” “to regard something as trustworthy,” or “to trust.”⁵ The Ninevites regarded the message of Jonah as being reliable and accurate, and they trusted in the ability of God to judge and/or show mercy. They were convinced about the reality of God and the authenticity of His Word through Jonah.

Nineveh’s responses in vv. 5-8 demonstrate that this kind of belief (i.e., “saving faith”) is more than just intellectual; it’s more than just learning from history

⁵ Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, M.E.J Richardson and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1999. P. 64.

and concluding, “Yes, I can believe that there are dark days ahead for our nation.” Nineveh had recently experienced some disturbing phenomena, and it would be easy to agree with an experienced prophet concerning coming calamity. This the Ninevites certainly did, but their *belief* compelled them to do more than that. They listened to the Word of God and then allowed that message to determine their subsequent responses and actions. The message completely changed the nation. This was an active faith, a working belief. Nineveh models for America what national, saving *belief* looks like. If America believes the judgment of God, she will...

1. *America must own her sins.*

The picture in vv. 5-8 is of a nation that completely changes its mind concerning its sin. This was the proud and fearless nation of immorality, idolatry, and brutality; but in vv. 5-8, they are humble and harmless. They’ve acknowledged their sin to be what it is—cruel, wicked, abominable, and wrath-deserving (v. 9).

Application: Likewise, America must take ownership of her sins. We must remove the palatable jargon, no longer considering sin to be “an alternative lifestyle,” “a disease,” “a disorder,” or “a syndrome.” These labels simply deceive us into a sense of God’s blessing, when we are “forty days” away from God’s judgment. We must call sin what God calls it and view it as God views it. A nation that believes God does not minimize its rebellion against God. However, such saving belief is more than simply recognizing the depraved state of our nation; it’s more than simply wishing we could return to the innocent “good ole days.” Nineveh shows us that a believing nation not only takes responsibility for her sins, she also...

2. *America must spurn her sins.*

Nineveh not only changed her mind concerning her national vileness, she also changed her evaluation of it. In vv. 5-8, the entire city (“from the greatest...to the least,” v. 5; “man and beast,” v. 8; “every one,” v. 8) exchanges their robes of pride and pomp for the rags of fasting and sackcloth. The king himself led the national display of humility (v. 6), and he commanded the entire city to follow suit (vv. 7-8). Their sin, which had recently seemed so justified and fulfilling, now reeked to them of judgment, and they spurned their evil deeds.

Application: Oh, that America would humble itself before the shame of its vileness is revealed for the world to see! Oh, that America would spurn its sin as that which like a hearse is carrying us to a certain and terrible grave! And, oh, that we would turn from our sin in the understanding that it is disqualifying us from the mercy with which

God longs to bless our nation (cf. 2:8-9)! This is the example of Nineveh, for having owned and spurned their sin, they lastly...

3. *America must turn from her sins.*

Verse 10 records that the Ninevites “turned from their evil way” in accordance with the example of their king (v. 8). This was a complete rejection of violence, immorality, and idolatry as a way of living⁶ to humility, tenderness, and obedience as a way of life.

Application: We say we live in “the greatest nation on earth,” and we gloat a bit, perhaps, in the dislike that many nations of the world express towards us. Their animosity, however, pales in comparison to the wrath of God directed toward our “great” and sinful nation. We must believe the message of God’s judgment. God is “of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on iniquity” (Habakkuk 1:13); so, He will put up with national treason for only so long. America must change her policy on sin. She must change her mind and recognize that she is “full of corruption”; she must change her evaluation, and learn to hate her iniquity; and she must change her direction, turning from sin, as one would turn from poison unto health.

Christian, I Peter 4:17 reminds us that “judgment must begin at the house of God” (cf. II Chronicles 7:14). It’s easy for us to spurn the great sins of society (e.g., homosexuality, pornography, abortion, euthanasia, adultery, murder, divorce, embezzlement, political scandals, etc.), while overlooking our own frustration, anger, criticism, bitterness, anxiety, lust, irritability, moodiness, pride, discontentment, judgmentalism, jealousy, gossip, and worldliness. Those are the very sins that nailed Christ to that cross—they grieve the heart of God (Ephesians 4:30) and are as condemning as any “great” sin (James 2:9-11). When we ignore our own “refined sins,” we are contributing to the judgment of God upon our land. God will never bless America, when His own people fail to deal with their sin. Believer, we, too, must take ownership of our “respectable sins,” spurn them as rebellion against God and grievous to Him, and turn from them as that which dulls our joy, diminishes our real satisfaction in Christ, and warrants the chastening of God.

Transition: On the national holidays of this country, we swell with pride when we consider our history, our freedoms, and our achievements as a nation. Many of us are also burdened, when we consider the daily increasing wickedness and oppression within our nation. We loudly sing, “God bless America!” but few of us pause to consider what it will take for God’s blessing to be known here again. If America hopes to experience a Ninevite revival and merit the forbearance and

⁶ For other examples of “way” as “way of living,” see Judges 2:17; Psalm 107:17–22; Proverbs 4:25–27; 5:21.

forgiveness of God, she must hear God’s Word, believe its message of judgment, and respond to its message of mercy. We consider finally, then, that...

AMERICA MUST PLEAD FOR THE MERCY OF GOD (vv. 8-9).

What a scene has been described here in chapter 3! The city of Nineveh—great in size, influence, and power and great in wickedness—is barely recognizable. Arrogance has been replaced with angst; indifference has melted into lament; self-indulgence has turned into self-affliction; and the violence that had once terrorized the nations round about, now causes fear only in the hearts of these Ninevites. This once proud and seemingly unshakable nation fully recognizes their precarious position before God, and they bow low before Him in grief, contrition, repentance, and petition. While the headlines of that generation may have mocked them for being so soft and frightened, too easily pushed and cornered, unconventional and a bit archaic in their response to a questionable message of judgment—this was actually Nineveh’s finest hour. When they were low, God would exalt them (cf. James 4:10), because they had pleaded for the mercy of God. The character of their humble plea is instructive for us.

1. *We must plead humbly, because God doesn’t owe us anything.*

Nineveh never presumed upon the grace of God. They certainly hoped for His mercy, but they knew that God didn’t owe it to them. Instead, in humility they “cried mightily unto God” (v. 8), acknowledging, “Who knows? Perhaps God might be willing to change His mind and relent and turn from His fierce anger so that we might not die” (v. 9). They knew that they deserved “anger,” but they humbly asked for mercy. One author explains the Ninevites humility here:

The king expresses his uncertainty whether Jonah’s message constituted a conditional announcement or an unconditional decree. Jeremiah 18 emphasizes that God sometimes gives people an opportunity to repent when they hear an announcement of judgment. However, as Amos and Isaiah learned, if a people refused to repent over a period of time, the patience of God could be exhausted. The offer of repentance in a conditional announcement of judgment can be withdrawn and in its place an unconditional decree of judgment issued. In many cases it is difficult to determine on the front end whether or not a prophetic message of coming judgment is conditional or unconditional, thus explaining the king’s uncertainty.⁷

⁷ NET Bible notes on Jonah 3:9.

2. *We must plead earnestly, because this may be our last chance.*

Nineveh's cry in verse 8 was "mighty." This word is used elsewhere to describe the taking of something "by force" (I Samuel 2:16; Ezekiel 34:4. Nineveh's petition, then, was vigorous and earnest, wholehearted and desperate. They recognized that they stood on the knife-edge between death and life, and this was their last chance to escape a certain destruction.

Application: Oh, America, "Seek ye the LORD *while He may be found*, call ye upon Him *while He is near*" (Isaiah 55:6). Don't presume upon His kindness and love. Don't assume that our Christian heritage, our super-nation status, our technological superiority, etc. will stop the judgment of God. No, God has "appointed a day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). And our nation seems to be standing first in line for the judgment of God! But He may be merciful yet. Indeed, since His Word is not preached in vain (Isaiah 55:10-11), and since He commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30), our study this morning is another "yet forty days" patient delay in God's wrath. America, plead for the mercy of God! "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

CONCLUSION

In speaking to a nation that had rejected Him, Jesus declared, "The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this generation and shall condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a Greater than Jonah is here" (Luke 11:32). So far, the same could be declared against our own nation, for we have thrown our Word-centered heritage behind our backs and rushed headlong into the destructive pleasures of sin. Perhaps like Nineveh, though, our "finest hour" is yet ahead, when we hear the God's Word and its message of judgment and mercy and respond to it by believing in the wrath of God toward our sin and pleading for the mercy of God instead. Our God still loves to save—indeed He's the God of salvation (cf. 2:9; 4:2; Psalm 68:20)! Friend, if you've never individually spurned your sin and turned from it to Christ—the "Greater than Jonah"—who took God's wrath in your place and offers you the righteousness of God and the gift of everlasting life, then you stand with your nation under the condemnation of God. Will you not "seek the LORD" and His mercy?

Believer, Jonah 3 gives a responsibility to us, as well. The chapter forces us to ask ourselves, "Am I contributing to America's continuation in sin and judgment either (1) because I refuse to play the part of Jonah and issue a bold and confrontational, but merciful message of wrath and salvation, or (2) because I resist dealing with my own sin and pursuing the righteousness of Christ?" We say we love America, and we sing, "God Bless America!"—but are we really burdened with the "yet forty days" impending judgment upon America? Perhaps our

problem will be revealed with Jonah's in chapter 4—we just don't really care enough; we just don't really love enough. We love living in America; but we don't love Americans that much. We enjoy the comforts of this nation; but we don't care too much for the citizens. May the fear and forgiveness of God in this chapter loosen us from that calloused spirit and send us forth to preach.

What a triumphant chapter in this little book! Will this page ever be written of America? It won't be, unless it's written first of your neighbor, your sister, your co-worker, your spouse, your classmate, etc. By the grace of God, there is still hope for America! Like Jonah, you and I must proclaim and practice that message. Perhaps we'll reap the harvest of modern-day Nineveh, and experience the joy spoken of by Jonah in this concluding poem:

*And when the days were at
An end, I heard a mighty shout
From in the city gates, and out
They came, ten thousand with the blast
Of trumpets, dancing like a vast
And rolling sea, with branches in
Their hands, and singing how they'd been
Delivered from the wrath to come.
They sang with harp and lyre and drum:
"In darkness for a thousand years,
And slaves to violence and fears—
No hope beyond this world of tears;
And then a man of hope appears,
A prophet with a scar-drawn face
A sign of life, and proof of grace."
They put me on a pallet high
And made procession with a cry:
"The God of Jonah is our God;
The God of Jonah spared the rod;
The God of Jonah rules the sky;
The God of Jonah heard our cry."⁸*

Indeed, let us work and pray that America's "finest hour" may still be realized!

⁸ *Jonah*, Part 3. By John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org