

Reviving a City and Nation

Breakthrough Praying:

Jonah 3:3-10

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It was June 12th, 1873. A dark cloud blackened the southwestern Minnesota sky. Laura Ingalls Wilder described it:

A cloud was over the sun. It was not like a cloud they had ever seen before. It was a cloud of something like snowflakes, but they were larger than snowflakes, and thin and glittering. Light shone through each flickering particle... The cloud was hailing grasshoppers. The cloud was grasshoppers. Their bodies hid the sun and make darkness. Their thin, large wings gleamed and glittered. The rasping whirring of their wings filled the whole air and they hit the ground and the house with the noise of a hailstorm.

Rocky Mountain Locusts moved into Minnesota. They ate everything in sight, including the blankets farmers used to cover their crops. The plague did not end with the ravaging of the crops. They left billions of eggs behind in the fields to later hatch and continue the plague in 1874, 1875, 1876 and 1877. Desperate letters poured into Governor Pillsbury's office. Finally, he declared a statewide day of fasting and prayer on Thursday, April 26th, 1877. Over the next few days hot air baked Minnesota with near record temperatures. Billions of larvae hatched. Suddenly, arctic air swept out of Canada with a killing frost. Was it a temporary reprieve? No, by middle of August all the locusts had left the state. One Minnesota farmer observed:

A person could see little dark whirlwinds here and there, which after a while turned into dark clouds, and lo and behold, it was the grasshoppers leaving in the same manner as they had come years before.

One historian noted about the locusts that summer, “*They took wing without landing to lay eggs.*” Consequently, in 1877 Minnesota had its largest wheat harvest of its young history.

A public television correspondent from the Twin Cities concluded:

While some people insist that it was the governor’s day of prayer and fasting that succeeded in banishing the grasshopper, some say they just went looking for a new supply of food.

What do you say? Do you think that the weather patterns, the exit of the locusts and their failure to lay more eggs are coincidental? We are not talking about Israelite history. We are not talking about ancient times. We are talking about the history of our people and our land in Minnesota.

Up until now, we have talked about breakthrough praying as it relates to individuals. We considered Jesus’ emphasis on prayer and fasting in healing people. We pondered the truth that, although Jesus was anointed with the Spirit at his baptism, he walked in the power of the Spirit after fasting and prayer. We examined how fasting brought revelation to Daniel and brought victory in a spiritual struggle. Finally, we discussed the purposes and promises of fasting. Today we look at the practice of fasting with others.

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, it is clear that he expects us to pray and he expects us to fast. He gives instructions on how to enter into private prayer and fasting. However, Jesus and his followers also took part in corporate praying and fasting. Israelites were commanded to observe corporate fasting. From the time of Moses, Israelites entered into a corporate fast on the Day of Atonement. They would close their mouth to food as they sought forgiveness for their nation. God showed the Israelites that they not only needed individual forgiveness. They belonged to a people who corporately were guilty. In Deuteronomy 21, when a murder went

unresolved, the leaders of the nearest village were to seek God's forgiveness for their community and sacrifice a young cow to clear the community of judgment. The community, not just the individual, needed forgiveness. The community, not just the individual, needed to repent.

In Matthew 11, Jesus condemned the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum for failing to sit in deep repentance when God visited them with signs and wonders. In Matthew 12 Jesus said that on Judgment Day the people of Nineveh will rise up and condemn the present generation because of their failure to repent. Jesus then describes what happens when he evicts an evil spirit from a person who does not repent and turn to God. Seven spirits, all worse than the original, will return with the evicted spirit to haunt and torment the individual's life. Jesus said that would be the experience of his society. As a people they would be tormented, haunted and afflicted to greater degrees because they failed to repent as a people. Satan would dominate and direct more of their social and civic life.

Can you see that happening with our society? Consider the dissolution of marriages. I examined the annual divorce rate in America for six-decades. Except when the GIs returned from World War II, the divorce rate held fairly constant until the sexual rebellion in the 1960s. Then, in a period of three years, divorce launched into the stratosphere. Despite all the sophisticated psychology and sociology, it appears that the only thing restraining the divorce rate from climbing to new highs is the practice of cohabitation. Some 2.7 million couples are living together without getting married and many are having children. When they break up, it isn't counted as divorce.

What will bring the breakthrough for our marriages? More psychology? Better education? Different laws? Shall our state and society redefine marriage to include homosexual, bisexual, polygamous and interspecies attractions and affections?

Do we understand our dependence upon the favor of God and the desolation when we stray from God? Ezekiel prophesied about a wall protecting the people of Israel. He said that God saw their sins and that God had a wall of love and grace protecting this people from judgment. However, their sins had broken the wall so there was a gap. He was looking for someone to stand in the gap and rebuild that wall so he would not have to judge them. However, God could find none, so destruction followed (Ezekiel 22:26-31).

It appears that a wall protecting American families came down in the late 1960s. Evil forces poured in. Whether you are Christian or not, you face an onslaught of temptation and pressures to disintegrate. Since families shape people, eventually these forces will dominate every aspect of our civic life and determine our destiny.

The Bible reveals that all cities and all nations are blessed by God. They also all suffer from his judgment. During the time of Joshua, the Promised Land was given to Israel and taken from Canaan in judgment for 400 years of sin. Much earlier the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed in judgment. Later Tyre and Sidon was destroyed as Jesus mentioned in Matthew 11. None of this was God's desire. That is not only apparent from God's statements, but it is clear from his activity. God sent the Israelite prophet Jonah to the pagan city of Nineveh. These were Israel's enemies. Jonah didn't want to go. God sent him anyway because, even if Jonah didn't love them, God loved them as God loves all people.

When Jonah proclaimed God's judgment, people felt convinced of their evil ways. They began to pray, fast and mourn over their sins. The king became so troubled that he exchanged his royal robes for sackcloth and ashes and he commanded no one in the city, not even the animals, to drink or eat. All were to pray for mercy. All were to stop their evil ways.

Consequently, through their acts of repentance, the wall of God's grace and love was rebuilt; and God did not have to destroy the people.

How can the wall for our families be rebuilt? How can the walls for our community and nation be erected so that we live in the favor and blessing of God? Fasting spared the nation of Israel in the times of Moses, King Jehoshaphat and Queen Esther. God called people to fast, weep, and assemble together through the prophet Joel. Nehemiah fasted and prayed with others for the restoration of Israel (Nehemiah 1:11). There are times when a personal problem may require personal prayer and fasting, but congregational concerns require congregational prayer and fasting; and the plight of a city and nation need citywide and nationwide fasting.

Just before midnight April 14th, 1912, the *Titanic* on its maiden voyage struck an iceberg. Hailed as unsinkable with 16 watertight compartments in its steel hull, the technological wonder listed, broke apart and went down within three hours. Over 1500 people died. What did it in? A three hundred foot gash caused by a giant iceberg as some theorized? No. Recently it was discovered that the damage was no more than 1 square meter or 12 square feet. How could such a relatively small gash do in an unsinkable ship and take so many lives? The location of the gash, misjudgment in manufacturing the steel and the unusual coldness of the water caused the steel to be brittle and separate along a line of rivets. Not one big thing, but multiple, unnoticed small things led to the Titanic's demise. The self-assurance of humanity resulted in too few lifeboats, so when a sleepy radio operator in a nearby ship put down his earphones minutes before the distress call, the fate of many was sealed.

Does not that event describe the blindness of human pride and misplaced confidence? Has the wall shielding our city and nation from judgment been brought down by our sins? Who will stand in the gap and rebuild the wall? Who will cry out in repentance for our people?