

Jonah

Hope for Doomed Cities

The crisis of the cities is worldwide. Almost every major country is wondering what to do with its large cities. In April, 1975, the popular American weekly magazine *U.S. News & World Report* featured a cover story which bore the title, "Cities in Peril."¹ One year later the same magazine featured a sixteen-page special section, again with cover headlines, entitled, "Are All Big Cities Doomed?"² From "peril" to "doom" in exactly one year is an indication of the worsening condition of large American cities as seen by news analysts who are in close touch with urban life.

Hardly anywhere can you find much sympathy for big cities, at least not among ordinary people who have to live in them. "Cities" and "problems" seem to be synonymous. The city's bewildering diversity, high crime rate, pollution, congestion, poverty, and squalor have created a kind of antiurban prejudice that makes people view cities with undisguised antagonism, and in some cases, self-righteous contempt. Everyone recognizes that cities are the centers of government, the generators of progress, the progenitors of new lifestyles, and the communication centers of the world. Cities are places where new and exciting things happen every day. Yet city lovers are hard to find, and a worldwide antiurban bias is growing everywhere.

¹ *U.S. News & World Report*, April 7, 1975.

² *Ibid.*, April 5, 1976.

People Problems

The number and complexity of urban problems are directly related to the unrestrained growth of urban populations. Take Mexico City, for example, which was founded in 1325 by the Aztecs. When the Spaniards conquered Mexico in 1512, they kept Mexico City as their capital. After Mexico won its freedom from Spain in 1821, Mexico City became the seat of government for the new republic. Despite this long history, however, Mexico City today is faced with problems that defy solutions.

The scope of these problems is so wide that it touches every aspect of urban life. There is the city's teeming population; inadequate housing; unemployment and underemployment; atmospheric contamination by dust, industrial discharges, and automobile emissions; increasing traffic strangulation; and problems of supplying clean water. When the Spanish discovered Mexico City, it was already one of the world's largest urban settlements, with between three hundred thousand and five hundred thousand inhabitants. But the population of the metropolitan area now numbers over 12 million, and it is predicted that within ten years the population will stand at 18 million people. How can anyone expect urban planners and engineers to supply so many people with adequate housing, safe water, clean air, and decent living?

This same question was asked some time ago by Rubens Vaz da Costa, president of the National Housing Bank of Brazil. He said that today over 60 percent of the Brazilians live in cities and by 1980, two out of every three will be city dwellers. Brazil's cities are growing too fast for the good of the people who live in them. Over 5 million city homes are classified as unfit for human habitation. Five hundred thousand units must be built annually just to keep up with the present demand. In 1970 only about 26 percent of Brazil's 54 million urbanites were served by water mains and only 13 million city dwellers had public sewage disposal. There is no way, said Vaz da Costa, that the 80 million who will live in Brazilian cities in 1980 will be able to have the basic public services of clean water, sewage disposal, and electricity.

The problem of providing the basic public services that urban life demands is proving to be insurmountable for many Western cities. The demand for such services has exposed the economic vulnerability of urban centers. New York City nearly went bank-

rupt in 1975. Throughout the year, arguments raged back and forth between those who insisted that New York bear the responsibility for its own economic situation and not expect the federal government to bail the city out, and those who argued that New York's problems were not exclusively of its own making and the nation as a whole had an obligation to save the country's largest city from financial collapse.

New York's financial crisis became a political issue in the 1976 presidential elections, when all the major candidates were questioned as to their position regarding New York's crisis. The attention was focused on New York because what happened in that city can, and very likely will, happen in other major cities. When millions of people are pressed together—many of them poor, uneducated, and unemployed—the crime rate soars, the quality of education in the schools diminishes, and the demand for public services of all kinds increases. At the same time, when increased tax revenues are needed to meet the demand for public services, taxpayers flee to the suburbs and business organizations relocate. The city is caught in the squeeze. On the one hand taxes rise as more people require welfare assistance, protection, and education; and on the other hand the tax base disappears as people and businesses go elsewhere. Although New York City's problems are larger and more acute than those of most Western cities, they are not unique. The same pressures are felt in every major city of the world, particularly those in which civic administrations try to meet human needs through a variety of social and relief programs.

Many are saying that big cities are doomed, and conditions can only get worse. They point to a host of causes to back up their argument. Cities are becoming dumping grounds for poor people, according to Dr. Pierre de Visé, professor of urban studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The moving van has become the symbol of middle-class people's response to the city's deteriorating condition. The belief that the urban situation is hopeless and cities are beyond renewal dampens the initiative of those who still fight for the cities' improvement.

To see how dire social conditions in a city can become, visit Calcutta, the city which Rudyard Kipling described almost a century ago as the "city of dreadful night." Sprawling vast, gray, and smoky along the banks of the swirling Hooghly River, the

western-most tributary of the sacred Ganges, Calcutta is so lost in everything big, crowded, and old that its misery defies human description. It is one of the puzzles of history that God has allowed Calcutta to exist for so long. It is estimated that 80 percent of Calcutta's families live in single rooms. This leaves two hundred thousand people for whom the pavement is the only home they know. As many as thirty persons share a single water tap and twenty a single latrine. A fourth of Calcutta's food supply is consumed by rats. Some 40 percent of the students at Calcutta University, which has an enrollment of over one hundred thousand, suffer from malnutrition. Major diseases are endemic. Suffering is beyond description. Calcutta's 8 million people are packed eighty thousand to the square mile—hell on earth, vision of the Apocalypse, and the ultimate in urban degradation in contemporary society. If anyone needs to be motivated to work for urban renewal before doomsday comes, let him visit Calcutta.

The social and economic problems of today's great cities are apparent to everyone. But there is another kind of problem, a bankruptcy of a different sort, which is the central concern of Christians. It is the religious need and spiritual condition of city people. It must be admitted, regrettably, that Christianity has not prospered in modern cities, and Protestantism in particular has found the metropolis an unfavorable environment in which to grow. Cities in Western nations are sprinkled with empty church buildings (for sale at giveaway prices) abandoned by Christians who fled to the suburbs "where decent people live." The Christian missionary enterprise, both home and foreign, has not fared well in big cities, and the reluctance of many missionaries to live and work in big cities has contributed to the city's religious bankruptcy. The antiurban bias that for years has characterized Western Protestant churches is reflected in missionary planning and activity. The problems of the city are so numerous and difficult to solve, and even to live with, that churches have directed their attention elsewhere.

It is my intention in this chapter to speak a word of hope for doomed cities. I shall do so in the context of Jonah's mission to the ancient city of Nineveh, which was a doomed city (Nah. 3:5-7) and yet the object of God's gracious dealings. The evidence of God's concern for Nineveh was seen in the mission which he gave to Jonah, who became the first apostle to the city. Jonah

preached to the Ninevites in a bitter and resentful spirit, but despite this God used him. Jonah was a "sign to the men of Nineveh," even as Jesus Christ was a sign to his generation, of God's saving operation (Luke 11:30). The wonder of Nineveh was the manner and extent of the city's repentance, a repentance that prompted Jesus to exclaim:

The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here (Luke 11:32, RSV).

There was hope for Nineveh because of God, because of the prophet, and because of the spirit of repentance that swept through the city.

God's Problem with the City

Had there been urban sociologists in Nineveh's day, they never would have talked about what God saw as the city's fundamental problem. God was grieved by the city's *wickedness*. God made this clear when he commissioned Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh: "Arise," he said, "go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their *wickedness* has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2, RSV, italics mine).

Nineveh was a "great city" in many ways. It was a world metropolis and capital of a powerful empire. The city lasted for fifteen hundred years, making most modern cities look like adolescent upstarts by comparison. Nineveh was famous for its beauty, and many considered it the fairest city built on earth since Cain founded Enoch. Militarily, Nineveh seemed impregnable. Its outer ramparts stretched for sixty miles, its inner walls were a hundred feet high. Horse-drawn chariots, three abreast, could ride its battlements. It took ten thousand slaves twelve years to build the king's house, and the city's parks and public buildings were praised throughout the world.

But Nineveh's wealth and opulence invited divine judgment, for they had been gained by oppression, war, and plunder. The entire political and economic life of the city was based on military aggression, the exploitation of weaker nations, and slave labor. The prophet Nahum spared few superlatives in describing this betrayer of nations and city of harlotries (Nah. 3:4). Nineveh was

the mistress of witchcrafts and a capital of vice. Her artistic achievements were fouled by obscenities, her culture by idols, and her beauty by violence. She was called "city of blood" (Nah. 3:1), for booty and plunder had made her rich.

Nineveh's wickedness provoked God's wrath. God knew precisely what was going on. He said to Jonah that "their wickedness" had come up before him. The sin of the city was personal, for it was committed personally by Nineveh's thousands of inhabitants. It was also collective, for when it was all added up, the sum total of Nineveh's life, culture, and achievements, had *wickedness* written across it. When judgment fell, everyone would be affected. The warp and woof of Ninevite life was depraved, and the city's only hope consisted in a repentance as wide and complete as the sin that stained it.

Jonah's Reluctance to Save the City

Against the urban monster, one man was called to stand. Jonah, a small town prophet from a third-class nation, was chosen by God to bring the great city to its knees. God's strategy was simple: Jehovah to commission Jonah, Jonah to preach to Nineveh, then Nineveh to return to God. The occasion for the mission was Nineveh's great wickedness and impending doom. The human instrument was a Hebrew prophet. Above all else, divine grace was the motivation. Nineveh was to become a model for urban prophets of all times to consider.

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, the notoriously wicked capital of the declining Assyrian Empire, and announce God's impending judgment on the city. How long Jonah struggled over the question of whether or not to obey God's commission, the record does not say. But Jonah decided not to go, and instead of going eastward toward Nineveh, he hurried westward to the Mediterranean Sea. At Joppa he boarded a ship with the intention of sailing to Tarshish, away "from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3).

A storm at sea changed Jonah's plans. The terrified sailors, a mixed crew from many nations, put forth every effort to save themselves and the ship. They rowed hard (Jonah 1:13), and each prayed to his god (Jonah 1:5) while Jonah lay asleep below deck. Roused from sleep by the irate captain and his guilt exposed

through the casting of lots, Jonah told all. He identified himself as a Hebrew, one who feared "the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9). Hearing this, the mariners nearly panicked, for what they knew about the God of the Hebrews indicated that he was someone to be reckoned with. God's runaway prophet on board was dangerous business (Jonah 1:10), so when all other efforts failed, the sailors did what Jonah suggested: they picked him up and threw him overboard. At once the "sea ceased from raging," and the sailors "feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" (Jonah 1:16, RSV).

Now the reluctant prophet was really in trouble. "God has had enough of me," he thought, as down to the bottom he sank. "The waters closed in over me," he said, "weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains" (Jonah 2:5, RSV). Jonah figured he was finished, but the unexpected happened. God "appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (Jonah 1:17, RSV) and after three days and three nights in the belly of the fish Jonah came to his senses. Inside the fish, spiritual revival took place. Jonah later recalled:

"When my soul fainted within me,
I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to thee,
into thy holy temple.
Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to thee;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"
(Jonah 2:7-9, RSV, italics mine.)

When that note of gratitude and submission came from Jonah, God "spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (Jonah 2:10, RSV). Through his own rebellion and God's righteous judgment, Jonah had tasted in a new way God's forbearance and grace. "Salvation, deliverance, is from the Lord," became his personal testimony. Having experienced himself what the city needed to hear, he was prepared for his mission to Nineveh, to be a "sign" to the city of God's mercy as well as his wrath (Luke 11:30).

Commissioned again to go to Nineveh, Jonah turned eastward. Even before he began to preach, he knew in his heart what was likely to happen. As a son of Israel and prophet of God, Jonah knew that God was a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil" (Jonah 4:2, RSV). Had not his own nation, Israel, experienced this over and over again? Had not he himself found it to be true in the belly of the fish? When Nineveh repented and God postponed destruction, it came as no surprise to Jonah. He knew what God was like.

When we speak about Jonah's mission to Nineveh, an important point to be observed is this: *the initiative for the entire undertaking comes from God*. It is all a commentary on the prophet's exclamation from the stomach of the fish: "Salvation is from the Lord!" The Book of Jonah begins with a word from God: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2, RSV). God also has the last word in Jonah: "And should not I pity Nineveh, 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?" (Jonah 4:11, RSV). Between these verses lies a narrative in which the leading human actor is Jonah, but the principal, divine actor is God. It is a story about Jonah, yet the initiative is always God's. God forces the issue at every turn. God threatens judgment on Nineveh; he sends the prophet to preach in Nineveh's streets; he stops Jonah's flight by a storm and saves him by a fish; he spares the repentant city, as an act of his pity and grace: he provides the gourd; he "appoints" the worm; he sends the sultry east wind; and he rebukes the prophet. The Book of Jonah is a stirring account of God in action on behalf of a wicked city. Properly speaking, it is God's mission before it is Jonah's.

The City's Repentance

Nineveh's phenomenal response to Jonah's preaching pleased God and forestalled the city's destruction. The entire population repented. The Bible does not tell us the entire content of Jonah's message, but it does make clear that God told Jonah to preach judgment: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown"

(Jonah 3:4, RSV). Jonah minced no words. No "easy invitation" was given. Judgment and destruction were imminent, and the most gracious act Jonah could do was to tell the Ninevites what to expect. The result was a miracle: "And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5 RSV).

Nineveh's radical response to Jonah's preaching began with the common people and spread to the palace (Jonah 3:6). Upon hearing the news of what was happening in the streets, the king of Nineveh arose from his throne, removed his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes (Jonah 3:6). What an unlikely response from a threatened monarch! No retaliation against the foreign apostle who had aroused the peoples' sense of guilt; no royal order to get back to work and forget this religious nonsense; no repression of the public demonstration of national shame and repentance. Instead, the king made a proclamation and published it throughout the city:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:7-9, RSV).

The king accepted God's judgment as just, and he made no attempt to bargain his way out. He called for a city-wide, unconditional act of repentance. As the political head of the city, and probably its religious head too, he bowed before the judgment of God. He hoped that God might yet show mercy, but the demonstration of repentance which he called was no sham nor an attempt to manipulate God. The prophet had said the city was doomed, and the king believed it. Like Jonah in the fish, the king and his people could only cry to God and hope for mercy.

Just as Nineveh's solidarity in sin precipitated God's judgment, the city's solidarity in repentance was the clue to its pardon. God forgave when king and commoner, rich and poor, and labor and management together joined in public contrition and personal conversion from their evil ways and from the violence which they had perpetrated against their neighbors. As a sign of

the city's solidarity in repentance even the *animals* were made to fast (Jonah 3:7,8). As animals they were incapable of making moral decisions, of "sinning" in the sense of acting responsibly in matters of moral conduct. But animals were vital to the city's life. The city could not work or move without them, and to underscore the city's solidarity in repentance the animals were included in the public fasting. Their thirsty moans blended with the peoples' prayers in repentance toward God. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Nineveh's animals are mentioned again at the close of the book where God speaks of his pity toward the city (Jonah 4:11).

The solidarity of society in sin is not easy for twentieth-century people to recognize, for the concept of social sin sounds foreign to our ears. Schooled as we are in the view that sin is exclusively an individual matter, and similarly that repentance can only happen on a one-by-one basis, the repentance of Nineveh seems almost incomprehensible. At Nineveh, an entire urban populace recognized the fact that wickedness had become a way of life, and God's judgment on their society was justified. They did not argue with the prophet or deny the justice of the doom he foretold. There was no appeal to some "higher court." The repentance of the Ninevites was both personal and corporate. Each living being had to put off evil, fast, pray to God, and wear clothing of repentance. Certain individuals and segments of society were undoubtedly more guilty than others, but that was not the issue. They were all in it together—in sin and in judgment. So also, in repentance. It was their *manner* of repentance, as much as the *fact* that the city repented, that made Nineveh a model for all cities and their inhabitants.

Lessons from Jonah for Modern Urban Mission

Many lessons can be drawn from the Jonah story. The first concerns our understanding of God himself. Holy God is very concerned about unholy people. Nineveh was a wicked city, infamous the world over for its bloody wars of plunder and oppression of helpless people. It was a heathen city in every respect, full of idolatry and vice. Yet the holy God of Israel wanted his servant, Jonah, to get involved with that city. He sent him to its streets to preach a message that would result in repen-

tance and a postponement of divine judgment. The God who loved Israel was also concerned about Nineveh, and he found no pleasure in seeing the Ninevites destroyed.

Religious Israel did not conceive of God in these terms. Consequently, Jonah had a theological problem when God sent him to Nineveh, and the conflict between Jonah's way of thinking about God and the clear implications of his assignment was irreconcilable. For God was revealing himself in terms of universal concern and with a forbearance toward the nations beyond Israel that Jonah and his coreligionists found difficult to accept.

The church, God's new Israel, has a similar problem. It is constantly tempted to be concerned exclusively with itself and ignore the unsaved world outside. Pastors minister faithfully to the flock but find it difficult to break away in search of lost and straying sheep. Theologians develop dogma but neglect missions. Evangelism gets only a small percentage of church budgets. The historic Christian creeds include many great statements about God and his work. But where, except by implication, do they set forth the missionary nature of God and the missionary character of the church? Internal affairs are the principal concerns of Israel, new and old, and insofar as this attitude prevails the Jonah syndrome continues. God sees Nineveh, but his people do not. And because they do not, they really do not understand him.

Second, we can draw a lesson concerning the prophetic vocation. As a man called of God, Jonah represented all who have heard God's call to serve him in faraway places and found it very difficult to carry out their mission. As far as we know, Jonah was faithful to his calling as a prophet as long as he was allowed to stay within the borders of Israel. In Israel he was bold, and he even told the king what God wanted him to do (II Kings 14:25). But when God called him to Nineveh, the great and wicked foreign city, Jonah's courage failed, his calling as God's prophet grew dim, and he fled in the opposite direction. In this sense, Jonah represents all reluctant and runaway prophets who have heard God's call, but "went down to Joppa," and did something else.

Third, Jonah represented Israel, the people of God elected from among the nations to be objects and channels of his grace, his witnesses among the peoples. In the words of Isaiah 43:10-12,

Israel was to be a nation of witnesses to the uniqueness of God and his salvation:

"You are my witnesses," says the Lord,
 "and my servant whom I have chosen,
 that you may know and believe me
 and understand that I am He.
 Before me no god was formed,
 nor shall there be any after me.
 I, I am the Lord,
 and besides me there is no savior.
 I declared and saved and proclaimed,
 when there was no strange god among you;
 and you are my witnesses," says the Lord (RSV).

Israel had forgotten the nation's calling to be witnesses of God's deliverance before the nations. Divine election had come to be viewed as Israel's election to privilege, not to service and witness. Israel's people viewed the nations as means by which God periodically chastened his chosen people, but never as objects of divine grace and concern. The world existed for Israel, not Israel for the world. People like the Ninevites were born to be burned, not to be preached into repentance and saved. Therefore, to the Hebrew mind, God's command to preach to Nineveh was incongruous and incomprehensible. But for a few perceptive souls the message sank in, and they caught the point of God's rebuke. God was concerned about the wicked city. There was saving mercy in God's heart for the nations beyond Israel. And there was a role for Israel to play which God would not let her forget.

Fourth, a lesson can be drawn from the Jonah narrative concerning the strategy of missions. Just as Nineveh, as the capital of ancient Assyria, was the logical place for an effort aimed at influencing the entire nation, so the great cities of our day are the strategic centers that must be won if nations are to be disciplined. Failure in winning the cities means failure in discipling the world. This being the case, we must ask why it is that in today's situation such an overwhelming proportion of missionary resources goes toward evangelizing out-of-the-way places, mountain hamlets, and jungle recesses, while great cities are relatively neglected. Is there a lesson in Jonah which we continue to ignore?

Cities are the places where the destinies of nations are determined. Cities are the centers of communication, commerce, cul-

tural life, and government. As the cities go, so go the nations. If winning the nations to Christ is our assignment, to the cities we must go. Yet, sadly we must confess that many of God's servants are in the same position as Jonah on the hillside, watching the city from a safe distance and caring little whether it lives or dies.

Finally, God speaks through Jonah about the nature of urban mission. So much of what is called "urban mission" never gets to the reason why God sent Jonah to Nineveh in the first place, namely, the *wickedness* of the city. There are two serious weaknesses in most of the so-called urban mission work done in cities. First, there is an almost exclusive preoccupation with the *results* of sin, that is, the human misery that sin produces. And second, there is widespread ignorance of and indifference to the *breadth and depth* of urban sin.

It is tragic that Marxist writers describe more profoundly than most Christian writers the manner in which wickedness operates in the city. The writings of Marxists rather than Christian preaching more clearly describe and condemn the way in which the mishandling of money and power, lust, and racial prejudice are dooming Western societies. Why is this? How is it that middle-class Christianity has allowed itself to settle for a watered-down, comfortable notion of sin, while non-Christian writers are plummeting the depths of society's wickedness? Social wickedness for most middle-class Christians has been reduced to those outward signs of antisocial behavior which shake or threaten middle-class people. But the more subtle types of sin—the deep-seated racism; the corporate violence of a society manipulated by the rich and powerful, enslaving and oppressing whole segments of the human family—are blithely ignored. In view of this, it is no wonder that our "success" in evangelism is only in terms of individual converts, who are often the "marginal" people of society, whereas the great Ninevehs of our day continue in their wickedness, unchallenged by God's prophets.

To all these things, Jonah speaks. With Nineveh, God's struggle to save cities began. Because of Nineveh, there is still hope for cities. Urban mission work began in Nineveh, and in a sense, it must still begin there.