

What about hell?

On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. . . . When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.

--Jonah 3:4-5, 10

Think back to when you first trusted Jesus Christ. What was your reason?

I remember mine. I first trusted Jesus because I was scared of going to hell. That being the case, I tend to encourage people not to shy away from talking about hell when they evangelize.

Jonah's message focused on the destruction that would soon come to Nineveh if they didn't repent. Now, in Jonah's case this was because he had no love for Nineveh. In fact he was GLAD that God was about to destroy these terrible enemies of Israel.

But even though Jonah's motives may have been less than pure, he was still God's chosen vessel for preaching to Nineveh. And the Sovereign Lord knew that Jonah's bold willingness to confront Nineveh about the impending wrath was the "just right" message to reach this particular audience before it was too late. And it did. All of Nineveh repented and were saved.

Millions of people are living their lives completely unaware of that fact that if they don't trust Jesus, they'll face an unspeakably terrible punishment forever. America has forgotten about hell. Of those who believe it even exists, most apparently think only someone who is terribly evil will go there. Perhaps that's just human nature to deny that we deserve the wrath of a God so holy He cannot even look upon sin.

But perhaps it's also partly our fault as Christians for giving people the impression they will be all right. "But we can't focus on hell," we tell ourselves, "because then people won't like us. They won't listen to us. They'll think we're fanatics or we're crazy." So we never bring up the subject. We figure we can be just as effective in evangelism if we don't warn people about eternity.

Evangelist Ray Comfort has a problem with that mentality. He illustrates it this way: Imagine you're on a plane, and you are the only

passenger who knows it is going to crash. You need to persuade the rest of the passengers to put on a parachute, so that when the time comes, they'll be able to safely jump out of the plane. You go to one side of the plane and tell them, "You've got to put on this parachute because if you don't, you will die. The plane is going to crash." But you tell the other half of the plane's passengers, "Since I put on this parachute, I've come to enjoy the flight more fully than I ever thought possible. It is just wonderful for me to feel so secure. I want to invite you to try a parachute, too."

Which side of the plane would have the most survivors?

Granted, when we preach the gospel, we have to use tact. We must balance Jonah's "hellfire and brimstone" with a message of how God so loves the world. We have to let our speech be full of grace, and seasoned with salt. We have to show compassion and love through our choice of words, our vocal inflection, our demeanor, and our whole being.

But if we only tell people about how good it is to be a Christian, and fail to also warn them that hell awaits those who do not trust Jesus Christ alone for salvation, we will have done them a great disservice.

There might be Ninevites in your sphere of influence, who would repent and believe if they only knew what was coming to them. Don't be silent. Pray for God's wisdom and boldness. Then commit to speaking the truth, and speaking it in love.

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