

Text: Jonah 3:1-10

Title: Jonah Preaches and Nineveh Repents

Truth: The Ninevites repented of evil; God further delayed judgment.

Date/Location: Sunday July 10, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

In chapter 1-2, we saw the repentance of Jonah. Interestingly, in chapter 3, we will see two more repentances: the repentance of Nineveh, and a third but slightly different kind of “repentance,” that of God.

I. Jonah Has a Second Chance, v. 1-3

A. The Lord basically repeats His call to Jonah in 1:1-2. There Jonah was told to cry out against the city because its inhabitants were very wicked. Here God tells Jonah to preach to them His message. We have no reason to believe that Jonah diverted from this instruction. And rightly so—the God speaking to Him is the sovereign ruler of the universe. It should be so for *every* preacher of God’s word: that we preach the message that He has told us because it is His word, not our word that is important.

We should also note here that God was *not* obligated to give Jonah a second try. It is a mercy that He did so—not an uncharacteristic mercy, but a mercy nonetheless. This cannot be used to teach us that it is OK to be disobedient the first time around, nor to presume upon God’s grace.

B. Note the contrast of Jonah’s responses to God. The first time: “But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish.” This time: “So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.” Much better! Jonah did not waste God’s second-opportunity grace.

C. God may well have used the fish experience to emphasize Jonah’s message. Jonah may have appeared somewhat discolored or disfigured from his ordeal. Even the news of what he survived could have traversed that portion of the ancient world and alerted those who interacted with Jonah that He was a representative of the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

D. Verse 3 ends with a note about the great size of Nineveh. The plainly stated fact of the matter is that Nineveh was exceedingly large. It was a three-day journey. It is not clear if this is three days across or three-days circumference. I take the latter as much more likely, but it matters little to the point of the passage. One historian said that the distance around Nineveh was 60 miles.¹

Illustrate this in your mind with a square centered roughly around Ann Arbor, and surrounding Dexter, Saline, and Ypsilanti. A square 14 miles on a side would cover that territory—the residences of 160,000 souls, and nearly 200 square miles. The “circumference” of that would be 56 miles. To walk this might take 20 hours (what do you think?), which is the better part of a half workweek, or two and a half days. See 4:11 about the population, the numbers of which are not too much different than our own region.

II. Jonah’s Preaching, v. 4

- A. This is not a very encouraging message of the sort that our world wants—“I just want advice, just don’t judge me!”
- B. Jonah entered the city, became a kind of town-crier, and said that in 40 days, Nineveh would be overthrown. Jonah did not specify the method of overthrow nor the reason for it. He did not mention God or the opportunity to repent.
- C. We know from earlier the reason was that the people were wicked. We know that God had (at least provisionally) planned some type of disaster for them (v. 10).
- D. We know from God’s self-disclosure in the Bible and from our experience that God is omniscient, omnipotent, love, holy, infinite, gracious, compassionate, kind, good in every way, and great in every way. Because of this perfect combination of attributes, we can be sure that there is no better thing than the justice that God delivers against evil.

¹ The original NIV said that Nineveh was “a very important city.” This is not the point—God is not concerned for Nineveh because it was more *important* than other cities. The new edition of the NIV corrects this and simply says “a very large city.” There were many souls there to be concerned about.

But we also know from the entire historical account of Jonah that God had some other plans. To implement those, He sent Jonah, had him preach a message of judgment, kindly permitted the Ninevites to turn from their wicked ways, and then withheld the judgment that was promised to them if they did not repent. This is how God's compassion works in judgment.

- E. While we do not read of any other words Jonah used to the effect of "40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed *unless you repent*," we know that is the effective meaning because of what God did in verse 10. No need to get excited about criticizing God's word on this point. Within the space of a single paragraph, *it tells us what God's intention was*.
- F. In fact, God does most often offer people an opportunity to repent. There may not be an opportunity to rid oneself of unpleasant consequences of sin, but God will forgive if one truly repents. I have a little "caveat" in here because there are times when it is simply too late for a person. Take for example Jeremiah 7:16 and 11:14. But this is God's normal stance:

Ezekiel 33:11 "Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'

- G. Notice what the text says. Punishment for sinners —part of which is death—is an unpleasant business, and God feels the same way. It is ugly. But it is a necessity if holiness is to live up to its definition.
- H. The Ninevites were soon to experience the consequences of their wicked ways. But then something happened that was a surprise to Jonah, and if we were reading this with fresh eyes, to us also.

III. Unexpected Repentance, v. 5-9

- A. In an amazing turn of events, the people of that region **believed God**. Can you believe it? I guess we had better believe it because Scripture says so. They believed *God*. The channel through which they believed was God's word—so by believing what the prophet said, they were believing the God who gave Jonah the message.

That's how we believe God as well. Notice that there is not a harsh line of distinction between the word of God and God himself. If you believe God, you will believe His word. If you believe His word truly, you will believe in the one from whence that word came. Yes, we need to believe in the divine *person* and not just the person's message. But one believed genuinely implies the other.

How did the Ninevites know about God? They were polytheistic idolaters. But when the hour of desperation comes, it has an interesting way of clarifying people's thinking to what is *real* instead of what is imagination. The Ninevites, like all humans, have some built-in basic knowledge of God (Romans 1:19-20). That becomes clearer when you are facing destruction.

- B. They manifested belief by *doing something about it*. They used the culturally customary **method of expressing repentance** by fasting and girding themselves with sackcloth. Repentance is a key element of belief.
- C. We might criticize this as a superstitious move on the part of the residents. But even if that were true, it was a good response for the city, its inhabitants, and their upcoming victims.
- D. Even the King of Nineveh was involved in this, according to verses 6-9. Sometimes God induces the heart of a king to move in a good direction (Proverbs 21:1). He too arrayed himself in sackcloth and sat in ashes.²
- E. Furthermore, he went so far as to make a proclamation to the entire city to enter a focused period of repentance. When a king in his position did this, people listened. You can read what he said to do. The main idea is this: if we turn from our evil and violent ways,³ and pray, perhaps God will turn from His fierce anger.
- F. That's a good idea. What other method could work better?

² The King of Nineveh was the King of Assyria as well, but the focus was not on the entire nation or empire. The focus was on the city and its inhabitants.

³ We may also suggest that their violence gave rise to an attitude of superiority, and that this attitude would come into the scope of their repentance as well (see the later events of Isaiah 36:18).

G. There is a question among some interpreters as to how real this repentance was. I take it that it was genuine for the time being, though it did not last for decades after. Were some truly “saved”? I suspect so. Were others merely temporarily repentant? I suspect so also. What I cannot do is *not* take the words at face value. They believed God, they fasted, and they prayed. It seems quite real to me. The reality of it will be shown in the permanency of the fruit, but we are not privy to that information.

IV. God’s Change of Direction, v. 10

A. The other piece of information that indicates to me that the repentance was legitimate was that God thought it was so. He saw, verse 10 says, that they turned from their evil way. The world was a better place for it. Then *He* too “repented” from something—but not from sin! He turned from option 1 (Ninevites do not repent → judgment) to option 2 (they repent → mercy). He moved from a stance of impending judgment to one of mercy. See Exodus 32:14

B. On what grounds did God do this? I believe that the **basis** upon which God shows mercy for any sin at any time in world history is **the work of Jesus Christ**. In times past, God overlooked the sinful ignorance of humanity. That ignorance and sin was worthy of punishment just like any other sin. But God patiently held off dealing with it. This is pure mercy. Think of just how patient God is—for *thousands of years* of history He has allowed people to go their own way. And for the years of your life both before *and* after salvation (if you are a Christian), God has been patient with you. Whether you trust God now or not, the fact is that He has been patient with you. You have exhibited pride, or anger, or lust, or greed, or idolatry, or used God’s name in vain, and other things. Those are universal wrongs. Yet God has not rewarded you according to your evil deeds, has He?

C. Sometimes God changes course in the other direction—from mercy to judgment. When the time is ripe—for example Genesis 6:5-7, or Revelation 14:18. Or in God’s judgment against Babylon (Jer. 50:27, 31). Another example is 1 Samuel 15:29 which records the judgment against Saul. God took the kingdom away from him, and that was it.

D. God always intended to respond this way to Nineveh at this time, because He had a greater purpose in mind.

Conclusion

Therefore “today is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2) because a day is coming for every person when God will declare that enough is enough. Years of opportunity to recognize our need of God’s forgiveness will come to an end.

But be assured that if you repent, you will find as the Ninevites did that God is compassionate and gracious. He is not a mean deity whatsoever.

We are getting closer to the message of Jonah. The book was not written primarily to provide an illustration for Jesus to use about His death and resurrection, although it serves that purpose. It was not written primarily about the Ninevites. It has something to do with Jonah and his understanding of God.

The repentance of Nineveh happened in those individuals alive at the time. It did not transfer to future generations. Each generation must do its own repentance.

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