

Jonah 3-4: Jonah Preaches to Nineveh

Introduction

In our previous lesson we discussed Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh and his adventurous ride at sea. After Jonah returns to dry land, some wonder if he goes back to his hometown of Gath-hepher where God comes to him a second time calling him to go to Nineveh. Wherever he went after the sea creature episode, God found Jonah and expected him to fulfill his mission. And so, he goes. We are told that Nineveh was an extremely large city. Most historians suggest that during Jonah's time the circumference of Nineveh would have been around eight miles. When factoring in the suburbs and surrounding areas, Nineveh would increase to a sixty-mile circumference. The term three days walk in verse three probably means that it took Jonah three days to deliver the message to the city. Imagine him going to street corners, public gathering places, temples, etc. issuing the warning, *Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown*. "Overthrown" as used here would have been understood by the people as complete destruction.

Why forty days some have asked? This would have been a period where God waited to see how the people responded to Jonah's message. If by the end of the forty days they failed to respond, God would destroy the city. This is not the first conditional time where God held out for the repentance of man. Before the flood, God gave mankind one hundred and twenty years to repent, Genesis 6:3. God gave Israel innumerable opportunities to repent, and when they failed to do so, they suffered punishment from God. In Scripture the term forty has a special significance as it is "considered the number of probations, testing, punishment, chastisement and humiliation."⁵ Consider:

- Genesis 7:12 – God sent forty days of rain to flood the earth.
- Exodus 16:35 – Israel spent forty years in the wilderness after the majority rejected God.
- Exodus 24:18 – Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai receiving the law.
- Matthew 4:2 – Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan.
- A period of around forty years elapsed between the establishment of the church and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Nineveh's response

The simple message Jonah delivered had an extreme impact, reaching as far as the king. His words penetrated the entire city, from the greatest to the least of people. Luke 11:30 says, *...Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites*. Perhaps the story of the storm at sea, Jonah's predicament inside the great fish, and his deliverance preceded him to Nineveh? Could his physical appearance have changed because of spending three days and nights being churned inside a fish? Whatever the case, Jonah's message worked on the hearts of his listeners. When word reached the king, he proclaimed a fast, ordering that neither man nor

⁵ Coffman's Bible Commentary, Copyright © 1971-1993 by ACU Press, Abilene Christian University.

beast eat anything. How long this fast lasted we are not told. You may remember from a previous lesson that fasting during Old Testament times was a sign of grief and anguish. It was an effort to move God so that He would relent of His impending punishment. The King urged everyone to cease from their wicked ways and *the violence, which is in his hands*, 3:8. Here is a pagan king who recognized the evil in his own city and set the example by humbling himself to God in order to stave off destruction. Verse nine is important in that it shows how the king recognized the sovereignty of God. *Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger...* He recognized that God did not have to issue repentance, but if He did, it would solely be by His grace and mercy.

Verse ten states the fact of Nineveh's repentance and that it led to a reversal by God concerning the destruction of the city. Their repentance was genuine. They did deeds of repentance and *turned from their wicked way*. With God's relenting of punishment, it shows us His deep care and concern for all men. He wishes to dispense His grace and mercy on all men, including the most wicked and cruel. What a lesson for each one of us to learn! How long did Nineveh's repentance and good deeds last? We are not told. Secular history tells us that during and after the reign of Adad-nirari III (810-783 B.C.) Assyria made a move toward monotheism. Some attribute this to the preaching of Jonah, but that is nothing more than speculation. We do know that in the generations after Jonah that Assyria returned to its wicked ways, becoming even more wicked and violent than before. They would conquer the northern ten tribes of Israel after a three-year siege in 722 B.C. Eventually this powerful nation would fade into history, being absorbed by the great Babylonian Empire in 612 B.C.

Jonah's reaction to the events in Nineveh

Jonah becomes extremely displeased at the repentance of a people he loved to hate. He felt the Ninevites deserved punishment and was sad to see God relent from the calamity He was going to bring upon them. Verse two gives us the real reason why Jonah attempted to flee to Tarshish in chapter one. He feared God would spare them. This is in great contrast to his thanksgiving for God's grace and mercy in delivering him from the *depth* of Sheol in chapter two. Jonah knew well the character of God, and while he wanted those blessings for himself, he absolutely did not want those blessings extended on a people whom he felt unworthy. He was so disgusted with the repentance of the Ninevites that he wished he could die, 4:3. There has been much speculation on the reasons why Jonah could have been angry with the result of what most prophets and preachers would call successful preaching. Some of the theories include:

- Damage to his reputation as a prophet. He prophesied doom on the people, but they repented, and God relented from punishment. It would appear to others that something he prophesied did not occur.
- If Nineveh repented, this heightened the possibility of their remaining in power long enough to encroach upon and eventually take over the Israelite nation.
- Simple prejudice against the Assyrians.
- Assuming the best, Jonah might have possessed a desire to use Nineveh as an example of God's punishment of sin to persuade Israel to return from its own sinful conduct.

Whatever the basis for his anger, he was not justified to act in the way he did.

God's response

Some suggest that once again God demonstrates extreme grace and mercy for the way He responds to Jonah's "temper-tantrum." After Jonah wishes for death, God asks, *Do you have good reason to be angry?* As a father would to his child, God seeks to make Jonah stop and think about his anger. God wanted Jonah to think for himself and adjust his attitude. God's reaction here is another demonstration of his patience and longsuffering. This is the second time that God has had to teach the prophet a lesson. Verse four does not tell how Jonah responded to God's question. From here Jonah moves eastward into the desert and sits down to see what will become of Nineveh. We might speculate that this was still during the forty-day grace period he spoke of in chapter three. It has been suggested that he figured and/or hoped Nineveh's repentance would not last forty days. In the desert Jonah prepared himself a shelter to shade himself from the extreme heat and sat down to wait. As Jonah is holding out in the desert, God caused a plant to grow up over Jonah to give him shade from the intense heat of the desert. He was comforted from the heat and very thankful for the plant. Overnight, God prepared a worm to come eat the plant. It died. On the next day God sent a brutal east wind, which together with the burning hot sun, made Jonah so miserable he wished he would die.

God comes to Jonah again in verse nine and asks, *Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?* Jonah's response suggests total exasperation. He says, *I have good reason to be angry, even to death.* To this God responds, *You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.* Here is Jonah, so upset over the destruction of a plant yet so indifferent, unconcerned, and even hopeful for hundreds of thousands of deaths in Nineveh. On this Hailey has written, "Man can become greatly concerned and disturbed when that which directly affects him is touched by the finger of providence; but he can be utterly indifferent, even hard, to that which may be of infinitely greater value when this does not affect him."⁶ Jonah's concern for the plant was only for his own self-interests, not for love. He did not have a connection to the gourd (he didn't plant it), and yet he was sorry for its demise. Contrast that to God's love, care, and concern for His creation. Even though the Ninevites were a very wicked people, God still cared for them. Verse eleven tells us that God held out for Nineveh's repentance because of over one hundred and twenty thousand persons who could not distinguish between their right and left hand. Most take this to mean that these were children. God felt it necessary to give them a chance to grow up and make the choice to serve Him. Not only were the people precious in the sight of God, but livestock and animals were also something important to Him. Indeed, God loves all His creation.

What became of Jonah after this little book abruptly ends? No one knows. Did he repent? Did he continue sulking? Smith speculates that "Jonah could have intended this account, which puts himself in

⁶ Hailey, Homer E. *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 80.

such a bad light, to be a confession. If that is true, then Jonah straightened out his thinking.”⁷ Whatever happened to Jonah, this little book is one that today’s reader can profit greatly from.

Lessons for Today

God lives for second chances.

Chapter three opens with the following line: *the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time...* Did not God have the right to be finished with Jonah after his outright rebellion in boarding the ship to Tarshish? Yet God sought to use the experience as a lesson to help Jonah come to a better realization of God’s salvation and grace. How many would argue that God would have the right to be finished with Jonah after his temper tantrum in chapter four? But if he repented, God would have welcomed Jonah back into His grace. How wonderful it is to serve the God we do! Indeed, *God is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.* Are the characteristics of God not testimony to his holding out for our repentance? See 2 Peter 3:9-11.

God holds out for the repentance of all people—no matter how evil they are

It has been well documented as to the brutality and cruelty of the Assyrians. Even the king recognized the great wickedness and violence of his people. If they would repent, God would cease his plans of bringing destruction to Nineveh. This is a lesson we need to learn. We can be more susceptible to our own prejudices and biases than we care to admit. One of Jonah’s greatest problems seems to be that he felt the Ninevites were not worthy of God’s salvation. His reason for going to the desert east of the city was that he was hoping to see them destroyed. He would have relished in their destruction. Scripture is full of exhortations for us to watch out for a superior disposition that looks down on others. An entire chapter in Luke is devoted to Jesus’ teaching on this matter. Luke fifteen and part of sixteen give us rich teaching on everyone’s need for forgiveness, and these chapters challenge us to be forgiving and accepting of those whom God has forgiven.

God uses extreme patience and longsuffering in dealing with our attitudes

Place yourself in God’s shoes in Jonah 4:4. Would you have answered the testy and arrogant prophet in this way? God is holding out that his question will prompt Jonah to think about his attitude and conduct. We can easily see Jonah’s shortcomings, but it can be very hard to see our own attitude problems. We need to praise God that He has been so patient and longsuffering with us when our behavior and conduct might have paralleled Jonah’s.

God has power over all aspects of His creation.

In chapter one we learn that God has power over the forces of weather. Not only did He create the wind that began the storm, but He had the power to calm the storm once Jonah was cast overboard. In chapter two we learn that God has control over the sea creatures as He prepared the fish that swallowed Jonah. After Jonah repents, God directs the fish to vomit Jonah out on dry land. In chapter four God reveals His

⁷ Smith, James E., *The Minor Prophets*, p. 122.

power over the plants and small animals of the earth. All His creation is under His control and can be used to further His purposes and will.

It is ironic that a heathen and extremely wicked people repented at their first opportunity, yet Israel failed to repent after relentless pleading by God through the prophets.

Israel had all the blessings of being with God. They witnessed God's signs, miracles, and wonders. They had been a constant recipient of God's marvelous blessings. All of this seemed to make them feel secure, smug, and self-important. When they fell into sin, Israel often had to fall to the lowest depths to realize their dependence upon God. Yet when a prophet of the Lord came to Nineveh, the people were humble enough to recognize the power of God and the sureness of the calamity which would fall upon them for any lack of repentance. Nineveh's zealousness to repent, from the top to bottom of society, was a sure "slap-in-the-face" to the Israelites who had every opportunity to obey.

For discussion

1. How large was Nineveh during the lifetime of Jonah?
2. Explain the symbolism behind the period of forty days in scripture.
3. What kind of reaction did Nineveh have to Jonah's preaching?
4. Describe the attitude of the king of Nineveh when he heard of the need to repent. Are there any lessons we can take from this? If so, what?
5. What in verse ten signals true repentance from the Ninevites?
6. What was Jonah's real reason for going to Tarshish in chapter one? See 4:2.

7. Do you think Jonah was praising the attributes of God in 4:2?

8. What are some speculations on the reasons for Jonah's anger?

9. Read 4:4. Would you have been as patient with Jonah as God was? What does this teach us about God?

10. What was the intent of God's lesson to Jonah in 4:6-11?

11. What are some important lessons we can learn from this section of Jonah?

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