

FPFWC Christian Development



Courageous Prophets of Change

May 2021

Spring Quarter

May 29, 2021

Lesson #4 – Preaching to Enemies

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Jonah 3:1-10

Key Verse - God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.—Jonah 3:10

ICE BREAKERS –

1. Define God's Mercy.
2. What is one way you can extend God's love and mercy toward others, particularly those who don't deserve it?

LESSON BACKGROUND

Though the book of Jonah is only four chapters long, it has much to teach us about the character of God. But the book reveals Jonah's character as well. He reacted to his call like no other prophet in the Old Testament. Those prophets consented to speak for God even when they would rather not (Exodus 4:10–12; Jeremiah 1:6–9; etc.). Jonah chose not only to keep his mouth closed but also to try to run away from God (Jonah 1:1–3).

Jonah appeared to have been willing to live in self-imposed exile rather than deliver a message of repentance to wicked Nineveh, an important city of the aggressive Assyrian Empire. In this way, Jonah held a mirror up to Israel, a nation that would prefer to believe that God's choosing them meant He cared about them *exclusively*. Perhaps Jonah and his fellow Israelites needed to read the "all the nations of the earth" part of Genesis 18:18; 22:18; and 26:4 again!

Even so, Israel had good reason to desire God's sole protection. Assyria was a powerful, expansive nation when Jonah received his call from God in about 780 BC. (See the Lesson Context of lesson 10.) The city of Nineveh, to which Jonah was called, was a royal residence for the king of Assyria. The city was massive (see Jonah 3:3, below) and had a reputation for violence and cruelty (see 3:8, below). Jonah was not someone who had fallen into provincial small-mindedness. His nation—in fact the known world—would be safer if the barbarous Assyrians were destroyed.

Ultimately, Israel's fear of Assyria was justified. Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, plundered it, carried people into captivity, and resettled the territory (2 Kings 17). While history doesn't provide detailed accounts of the Assyrian invasion, we have no reason to believe that the aggressors didn't commit atrocities on the northern kingdom of Israel as done elsewhere.

That was after Jonah's time. Even so, he certainly preferred to avoid his assigned task entirely. In addition to his escape attempt (Jonah 1:3), Jonah later revealed his deep disappointment in God (4:1–3). However, God insisted that

Jonah fulfill his prophetic tasks. Even Jonah didn't dare try to escape God's calling a second time.

LESSON COMMENTARY –

3:1–2. The commission is restated (cf. 1:1) and without a rebuke—showing that God is gracious in offering a second chance. While such grace is to be received with gratitude—as with Peter after his denial (Jn 21:15–17) and John Mark after his desertion (2Tm 4:11)—it is not to be presumed upon. Some disobedience does not result in a second chance (cf. 1Kg 13:26; Nm 20:12; Heb 9:27). God graciously repeated the command to make the over 500-mile trip to Nineveh (v. 2). This great city (cf. 1:2) had over 1,500 towers and an inner and outer wall. The inner wall was over 100 feet tall and wide enough for three chariots to ride abreast. Care was to be given to proclaim God's word precisely. If Satan could not block the message, he would seek to pervert it.

3:3–4. Unlike in his previous response (1:3), Jonah obeyed God's word. Nineveh is described as “an exceedingly great city” which literally reads, “a great city to God.” It was great in God's estimation, which probably underscored His love for the people of this great city (cf. 4:11). The phrase “three days' walk” has been much discussed as to whether it is referring to the city's circumference or diameter. The circumference of the greater metropolitan area, which included the surrounding lands, has been estimated at 55 to 60 miles, while the diameter of Nineveh proper was considerably smaller. However, the three days' walk may be referring to the time necessary for Jonah to accomplish his preaching mission, which would include visits with dignitaries and ministry stops. On the first day of his mission, Jonah proclaimed his prediction of coming judgment: **Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown** (v. 4). This was not all that Jonah proclaimed but rather was a summary of his prophetic message. He probably spoke in Aramaic, the language of the populace. The word **overthrown** was used of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 19:25). While some see this as only a prediction of doom, the sending of a prophet and the delay of 40 days seems to indicate that “unless you repent” is understood as part of this prediction of judgment (cf. Jr 18:7–8). While some have noted that Jonah's credentials of being delivered from the fish gave him an unusual hearing, what brings repentance is God's Word. It is as a prophet that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites.

3:5–9. The response to Jonah's preaching is the greatest miracle in the book. They believed God, “Elohim,” and as outward evidence proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth—a coarse, dark cloth made from goat or camel's hair—as a symbol of sorrow and repentance. Was this the greatest revival in history or only a desire to be spared from judgment? It was clearly a response to God's word and a contrast to the ways Israel had treated the prophets on many occasions and to Jonah's initial response to God's message. God did respond to Nineveh by relenting, and He does not respond to hypocrisy. Jesus did term it “repentance” (Lk 11:32; Mt 12:41), and used it as an example for Israel's leaders.

The **king of Nineveh** refers to the ruling monarch (v. 6). His identity was either Adad-nirari III (810–783 BC) or more probably Ashurdan III (773–756 BC). The latter did reign in a turbulent time that included a solar eclipse and political threats, which may have readied his heart for this prophetic word. The text identifies his fourfold response: he arose from the throne, removed his royal attire, put on sackcloth to identify with the common people, and sat in ashes—a sign of helplessness and despair (cf. Jb 2:8; Mc 1:10). The king’s personal response is followed by his official decree—all Ninevites were to observe a complete fast of food and water (v. 7). Domesticated animals were included in the fast, which appears unusual but was not unknown in the ancient Near East and can be found in Persian records. All creation is affected by man’s sin (cf. Rm 8:20, 22; Jl 1:18–20) and is not outside the sphere of God’s compassion (Jnh 4:11). Their inclusion underscores the utter desperation of the decree. It was mandated that both man and animal were to wear sackcloth (3:5) and **call on God earnestly** (lit., “with strength”), meaning “with sincerity” (v. 8). The last part of the decree was to turn from his **wicked way** and from **violence**. The Hebrew word for wickedness refers to moral depravity while the word for **violence** does not refer to natural catastrophes or justifiable force but rather to morally depraved and oppressive force. Nineveh was known for cruel practices, especially to prisoners of war. As the sailors had hoped to be spared from judgment (1:6), the king of Nineveh expressed his similar hope (v. 9) (cf. Jl 2:12–14). Even a cruel nation that had oppressed God’s people can be spared from deserved judgment if its people repent.

3:10. God’s character is unchanging (Jms 1:17), but He does make changes to His plan of action as He deals with men (cf. Jr 18:7–8). Later, Nineveh did return to its wickedness and destroyed Israel in 722 BC, and was itself destroyed in 612 BC. However, this judgment was delayed 150 years. Later generations are responsible for their own repentance. God’s promise to bless repentance is not to be interpreted as if the accomplishment of God’s sovereign plan is ever in question (Jb 42:2; Eph 1:11).

Some theologians, known as “open theists” have argued that God’s relenting **concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them**, supports the idea that God changes His mind based on the actions of humanity. But the Bible is plain that God knows and declares “the end from the beginning” (Is 46:10). God affirms that He is sovereign over the future, asserting “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.... Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it” (Is 46:10–11). As stated above, God’s warning through Jonah came with an implicit condition: that the judgment would happen *unless they repented*. When Nineveh repented, God did not bring the judgment to pass. Certainly, it appeared obvious, even to Jonah (Jnh 4:2) that “it was God’s intent all along to show mercy to the Ninevites, knowing that the *stated prediction* of judgment would elicit their repentance so that God could then display his *originally intended mercy*” (Bruce Ware, *Their God is Too Small* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003], 40).

LESSON NUGGET – How gracious God is to lost sinners! Why would a holy God give the vicious Ninevites an opportunity to repent? Because He is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9) but “desires all men to be saved”.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary and Wiersbe Expository Outlines on the New Testament*