

# Jonah and the Ninevites

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach condemnation and the Ninevites repent
2. aim – To cause us to see the importance of repentance before God as part of a life of faith
3. passage – Jonah 3:1-10

### b. outline

1. Jonah Recommissioned by the Lord (Jonah 3:1-3)
2. Jonah Preaches Condemnation Over Nineveh (Jonah 3:4-9)
3. God Relents From His Threat of Destruction (Jonah 3:10)

### c. opening

1. the **location** of the pericope
  - a. **again:** the outline based on a *parallelism* twice-over repeated, followed by a *conclusion*
  - b. **previously:** an initial outline to *begin* the book in **1:1-2:10**
    1. **A<sup>1</sup>** – Jonah is commissioned to go to Nineveh, but flees from the Lord aboard a ship
    2. **B<sup>1</sup>** – Jonah is confronted with a storm, the sailors (eventually!) throwing him into the sea
    3. **C<sup>1</sup>** – Jonah prays in gratitude from the belly of the fish and is regurgitated up on dry land (**2:10**)
      - a. **i.e.** Jonah *discovers* that his choices and actions were *sinful*, for no one can thwart the plans and purposes of God – **i.e.** even if it means being swallowed by a fish and taken back
    4. **Part 1:** Jonah’s Commissioning, Jonah and the Sailors, Jonah’s Grateful Prayer
  - c. **now:** a similar outline is repeated *again* in **3:1-4:4**
    1. **A<sup>2</sup>** – Jonah is commissioned (again) to go to Nineveh, and (this time!) goes there (**3:1-3**)
    2. **B<sup>2</sup>** – Jonah preaches a message of *condemnation* over the Ninevites, and they *repent* (**3:4-10**)
    3. **C<sup>2</sup>** – Jonah prays in *anger* over the relenting of God (**4:1-4**)
    4. **Part 2:** Jonah’s Recommissioning, Jonah and the Ninevites, Jonah’s Angry Prayer
      - a. a final section (**D**), designed to give us the *point of the book*, will appear *after* this section
  - d. **today:** we will *combine* **A<sup>2</sup>** and **B<sup>2</sup>** into a single sermon, since the *second* commissioning of Jonah is short and to the point in **3:1-3** (**i.e.** the *next/final* sermon will bring together **C<sup>2</sup>** and **D**)
    1. **IOW:** just **chapter 3** today ...

## I. Jonah Recommissioned by the Lord (Jonah 3:1-3)

### Content

#### a. Jonah recommissioned by the Lord (vv. 1-2)

1. **IMO:** the “*word of the Lord*” comes to Jonah *immediately* upon being “coughed up” by the fish
  - a. it seems to me that Jonah is *probably* put onto land just N of Joppa, where he had departed
    1. no *actual* location is mentioned; it doesn’t need to be – the point is: “welcome back to dry land”
  - b. so, it is unlikely that Jonah had any time to “reconsider” his situation – the Lord immediately speaks to him, sending him on to Nineveh *which was the whole point in bringing him back to land*
2. God speaks to Jonah a *second* time (to recommission him *again*)
  - a. **note:** the second command is *similar*, yet *slightly different* than Jonah’s first commissioning (**1:2**)
    1. **similar:** “*arise, go to Nineveh, that great city*” = leave your country and your *comfort zone*, travel to Nineveh (several hundred miles NE through *hostile* territory), and go into the city
    2. **similar:** “*call out against it*” = when you get there *speak forth as a prophet* – bring *my* message to the city (**i.e.** don’t just go there and *watch* for destruction to come; **e.g.** **4:5**)
    3. **different:** “the message that I tell you” vs. “for their evil has come up before me”
      - a. **before:** I am sending you to condemn the Assyrians for their wanton destruction of human life through their warring ways (built on a foundation of paganism)
      - b. **now:** I will tell you what to say when you get there
  - b. **question:** are the two commissioning’s different by virtue of “different” language?” **answer: no**
    1. in the end, the message Jonah brings to the city (**3:4**) aligns *completely* with the *original* command (**i.e.** call out judgment on the evil of the Assyrians)
    2. **IMO:** the two commands are *fundamentally similar*, such that Jonah would have *completely understood* what God was instructing him to say to the Ninevites (**see more below**)

## b. Jonah goes to Nineveh per the Lord (v. 3)

1. **ITC:** Jonah *doesn't* flee in the opposite direction, but goes where God has instructed him
  - a. **note:** the journey from N of Joppa to Nineveh probably took some time, perhaps several weeks – Jonah had *plenty of time* to (re)consider the situation on that journey (**see below**)
2. **remember:** it is *highly likely* that the “*exceedingly great city*” is actually a *region* around Nineveh
  - a. Jonah’s journey probably included going through the cities of Rehoboth, Calah, and Resen (**i.e.** its exurbs, **Genesis 10:11-12**)
  - b. **IOW:** the “*three days’ journey in breadth*” was probably measuring a *zigzag path* through these outer cities, with Jonah (eventually!) ending up in the heart of great city itself (**see 3:6**)
3. so ... Jonah arrives in the *heart of Assyrian power* – an *unknown* Israelite prophet travels from Samaria into the heart of its *primary enemy*, to deliver a message of judgment from the Lord himself
  - a. **in a sense:** a picture of the Son of God taking a *great* journey from his place of glory down into the very *heart* of rebellion (in his Incarnation) – an “unknown” prophet traveling from the presence of God **into the very city of his enemies**, planet Earth and all its pagan, rebellious inhabitants
    1. to deliver a message of judgment – “*repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (**Matt. 4:17**)
    2. to deliver a message of salvation – “*that the world might be saved through him*” (**John 3:17**)
  - b. **in a sense:** Jonah, *like all the prophets of old*, acted as a *foreshadowing* of the Great Prophet who would come *as the Lord himself* – going to his enemies to warn them of their destruction
4. **concluding:** *Jonah’s Recommissioning (A<sup>2</sup>)* – now on to *Jonah and the Ninevites (B<sup>2</sup>)*

## II. Jonah Preaches Condemnation Over Nineveh (Jonah 3:4-9)

### Content

#### a. Jonah preaches a message of condemnation (v. 4)

1. “*yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown*” – a message of **impending disaster**
  - a. **observation #1:** this *specificity* (forty days, overthrown) may be what God was alluding to in **v. 2** (**i.e.** “*the message I tell you*”) = Jonah was to announce an *impending* overthrow of the city
  - b. **observation #2:** although there is *no direct* indication in the text, it seems *likely* that Jonah was *also* telling them that this disaster *was coming from his God* (**i.e.** Yahweh, the God of the Israelites)
    1. this is bolstered by the fact that the people “*believed God*” (**v. 5**)
  - c. **observation #3:** it is *probable* that the Ninevites believed this to be a message of some sort of *natural catastrophe* that would fall upon them (**i.e.** one falling “from above”)
    1. **note:** “*overthrown*” is the same verb describing the destruction of Sodom (**Genesis 19:25**)
    2. **question:** what other nation (including Israel!) had the *military might* to capture and destroy the heart of the *greatest power in the region*? **answer:** none (at this time!) – **i.e.** the Assyrians may have been *arrogant* in their military strength (and abuse of it), but *they were correct*
  - d. **observation #4:** “some” have suggested that there were two (2) other realities that bolstered Jonah’s message before the Ninevites (neither have Scriptural support, but are *interesting*)
    1. **#1:** Jonah being in a great fish has led some to speculate that he had been “bleached” by stomach acid, and came into Nineveh “white as a ghost”, making his message more *ominous*
    2. **#2:** others assert that Assyrian religious practices were *particularly* interested in the worship of *sea creatures*, leading to Jonah’s message *after surviving in a fish* as a “wake up call”
    3. **IMO:** these *aren't* based in fact – God does not *need* to give “signs” for his message to be worthy of consideration (**e.g.** Jesus *refusing* to give the Jewish leadership “signs” other than “*the sign of Jonah*”; **Matthew 12:39**)
  - e. **observation #5:** although Jonah does *not* call for the Ninevites to repent, it is *clearly implied* in his message – otherwise, *why bother* to “announce” destruction is coming?
    1. **principle: God is patient with rebellious humanity** – *all* his *interactions* with humanity *post-Fall* strongly suggest that at the *heart* of his sovereign decree is his *intention* to wait patiently *through evil* for his elect to be brought forth (**i.e.** allowing evil to flourish *in order that* his grace might be demonstrated *through time*; **Romans 9:22-24a**)  
“What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured *with much patience* vessels of *wrath* prepared for destruction, in order to make known the *riches of his glory* for vessels of *mercy*, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called ...”
    2. **note:** this is *not* to say that God will wait *forever* to bring judgment (patience implies an end)
      - a. **e.g. (Bryan)** hell is a place where God’s *grace* and *restraint* is removed and the reprobate *continue in hatred of God* forever (**i.e.** continuing in sin)
      - b. **nor** is it to say that God will *only* deal with rebellious humanity *through judgment* (for *another* route is for God to bring *his power over evil* in the hearts of men ... **see below**)

## b. the Ninevites respond to Jonah's message (vv. 5-9)

1. the response of the *common people* (v. 5)
  - a. they "believed God" = they believed the message of Jonah that *his God* was about to bring destruction upon them – i.e. *personal* responses by *individuals* to the warning
    1. **signs of remorse or grief** (i.e. fasting, sackcloth, etc.)
  - b. **note:** it is *impossible* to discern here how much understanding of Yahweh was present in the hearts of the Ninevites – i.e. did they understand him as the Creator God, or something else?
    1. **or:** was this just a *pagan* response to a "bit" of light that God shined over them, or did he reveal *more* of himself than is noted in the narrative?
    2. **IMO:** the fact that Nineveh slipped back into her "old" ways very soon afterwards (and became God's instrument of the exile of the N kingdom) suggests that this was only a *pagan* response
    3. **i.e.** a "deity" has come forth to announce destruction – better to be "safe" than "sorry"
  - c. **note:** the response of the people is not *lessened* by this "lack of knowledge" – the fact that they *did* respond is the key to the story (which we will see in **chap. 4**)
2. the response of the *political leadership* (vv. 6-9)
  - a. the "word reached the king" (v. 6) = it becomes a *national crisis* when the *political class* recognizes *why* destruction is about to come upon them – i.e. a *public* response by *the state* to the warning
    1. **note:** the proclamation of v. 7 was from *both* the king "and his nobles" (i.e. the *ruling class*)
    2. the king makes **several public gestures** to send a message: he arises from his throne, removes his royal robes, covers himself in sackcloth, and sits in ashes
    3. **as above:** all of these are signs of remorse or grief – the king *acting* in a way that symbolized remorse before his people *in a very public way* (i.e. for others to join him)
    4. **observation #6:** given Jonah's *original commission* (1:2), it is *highly likely* that he has told *the king why* the city is about to be destroyed: their *evil actions* towards the nations around them
      - a. thus the **civil response** from the king – what was *required here* was *far more than individual repentance* – what was needed was **an entire nation turning from its corporate path**
  - b. the king "issues a proclamation and published through Nineveh" (vv. 7-8) = a *national "decree"* designed to *change* the overall "culture" of the people (i.e. recognizing its *global impact*)
    1. **it called for:** a nationwide *fast*, a nationwide day of mourning and prayer, a nationwide command for everyone to "turn from his evil way ... and violence"
      - a. **i.e.** recognize the danger, seek the face of God, put away all that displeases him
    2. **the three (3) elements of true repentance:** recognizing that an action is sinful and against God's law, seeking forgiveness, committing to shun the evil with the help of the Spirit
  - c. the king admits "who knows? God may turn and relent ..." (v. 9) = *maybe* if we demonstrate a sense of repentance before the God of Jonah he will *not* bring destruction upon us
    1. **note:** the *attitude* of this verse can be read as either (a) a flippant sense of "let's try this", or (b) a genuine remorse (and commitment to turn from evil) mixed with hope
    2. **remember:** no repentance of sinful human beings is ever *perfect* – God *knows*, even if our attitude *seems* genuine, there is *always* the possibility of failure again
    3. **IOW:** this repentance was *genuine enough* to warrant God relenting (**see next**)
3. **aside:** is it possible for God to bring such a national repentance **to America?**

## III. God Relents From His Threat of Destruction (Jonah 3:10)

### Content

#### a. God sees them turn from their evil way

1. **question:** **how was it possible** for the pagan people of Nineveh to repent enough to see God relent of his threat to destroy them? how could a **rebellious nation** turn from evil *to please God*?
2. **answer:** only by his *grace*, in giving them the *ability* to respond to his call (even if only *temporarily*)
  - a. **principle #1:** **we much preach repentance as a part of our gospel call (Acts 17:30)**
  - b. **principle #2:** **but only God can bring true repentance as a gift of mercy (Acts 11:18)**
    1. **our job** is to tell the truth – our **prayer** is that God would grant repentance