

JONAH 3:1 – 4:11

By Ashby L. Camp

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II. Jonah Resents God's Grace (3:1 - 4:11)

A. Jonah's Obedience (3:1-4)

1. God in his mercy commands Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh to proclaim the message that he gives him. There's no place for Jonah's personal views in the matter; he is to deliver God's message. This time Jonah promptly gets up and goes to Nineveh in compliance with the word of the Lord.

2. Nothing is said about the journey to Nineveh. Depending on where Jonah was when commanded to go, the trip would have been roughly 500 miles. Going by camel or donkey caravan, it would have taken about a month. Going by foot would have taken even longer.

3. Nineveh is described as a "very great city" (lit. a "great-to-God city"). Though Nineveh undoubtedly was large for an ancient city – its population of 120,000 (4:11) being four times the estimated population of the ancient Israelite city of Samaria (Ellison, 380) – the emphasis here probably is on its importance or status rather than its size. Neither of the two Israelite cities designated in Scripture as "great" – Jerusalem (Jer. 22:8) and Gibeon (Josh. 10:2) – was large in size compared to other ancient Canaanite/Israelite cities.

4. Nineveh further is described as a "three-day-visit" city.

a. If this means it took three days to walk across or around Nineveh and is not hyperbole, then "Nineveh" in this instance must refer to the triangular administrative district that included Nineveh proper along with other cities. The same Hebrew word is used for the two similar Assyrian words. It couldn't refer solely to the city of Nineveh, because Sennacherib (704 - 681 B.C.) bragged about enlarging the circumference of Nineveh from about 3 to 7+ miles, which description squares with archaeological excavations of the ancient city.

b. Rather than referring to the time it took to walk across or around Nineveh, it seems more likely that the reference to Nineveh as a "three-day-visit city" means that it was a major diplomatic center in which certain visiting protocols would need to be followed. Perhaps the phrase originated from a stereotypical visit involving a day of meetings with the city leaders, a day of business, and a day of farewell hospitality. Douglas Stuart comments: "[T]he narrator's point is that Nineveh was a 'three-day visit city,' a major diplomatic center of the ancient world, a city where a formal protocol was observed by official visitors, whose business could not be accomplished hastily, as if it were a small town."

c. It's also possible that the phrase means that the city was so large and spread out (by ancient standards) that it took at least three days of preaching to disseminate the message to the bulk of the populace (rather than three days to traverse).

5. Jonah ventures into the city and at the first opportunity announces its impending destruction, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

a. Skeptics claim that Jonah wouldn't have been understood by the Ninevites, but that's incorrect. As Smith and Page point out: "[I]f an Assyrian official could speak to the populace of Jerusalem in Hebrew in 701 B.C. (2 Kgs 18:26-28), there is no reason to doubt that a Hebrew prophet could speak to the populace of Nineveh in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the day, fifty years earlier."

b. Even if one assumes that Jonah spoke only Hebrew and that no Ninevites spoke Hebrew, Jonah could have used an interpreter not mentioned by the author.

B. Nineveh's Repentance (3:5-9)

1. The people of Nineveh believed the message Jonah brought from God; they believed that the God for whom Jonah spoke was soon going to destroy their city. They showed their fear and humility before the Lord by fasting and wearing sackcloth.

a. The psychology of fasting is to say to the Lord, "I am already humble; you need not afflict me further."

b. Sackcloth was the coarsest of cloth, often made from goat's hair. It was symbolically worn as a sign of grief and mourning. They are mourning the fate announced to them by Jonah.

2. When the word reaches the "king of Nineveh," he leaves his throne, takes off his royal robe, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes (another sign of grief and mourning; see, Isa. 58:5). Some have objected that the king of Assyria would not be referred to as the "king of Nineveh," but Ahab and Ahaziah, kings of Israel, are referred to in Scripture as "king of Samaria" (1 Ki. 21:1; 2 Ki. 1:3).

3. The king is so fearful, so convinced of Jonah's word, that he decrees that his people must even enforce the fast and wearing of sackcloth on their herds and flocks! (The ancient Persians had their animals participate in mourning rituals by shaving their manes, though this may be hyperbole on the king's part to stress how complete the repentance should be.)

4. The king goes beyond a ritual show of repentance and commands the people to cry out to God and to turn from their evil ways and their violence. He is hoping that somehow God may relent and spare his city.

5. This repentance is not as unbelievable as some people claim.

a. Historical circumstances may have inclined Nineveh to take Jonah seriously. Recall that, during the time of Jonah, Assyria was weakened by internal dissensions and menaced by the powerful kingdom of Urartu to the north, to the point that it seemed threatened with disintegration. There was a famine either lasting from 765 to 759 B.C. or recurring during that period. In 763 B.C. there occurred that "sign of the ill omen," an eclipse of the sun.

b. We know that the kings of Assyria took such omens seriously. They corresponded with their prophets about them and in some cases even abandoned the throne to a substitute king until the danger would pass (Stuart, 492). Various omen texts from Nineveh give predictions of what sorts of events may be expected to follow a solar eclipse, including: "the King will be deposed and killed and a worthless fellow seize the throne"; "the King will die, rain from heaven will flood the land. There will be famine"; "a deity will strike the King and fire will consume the land"; "the city walls will be destroyed."

c. Interestingly, the solar-eclipse omen texts mention not only the king but animals and the land as a whole in their specifications of those on whom the divine wrath indicated by the eclipse might fall.

d. According to the omen texts, famine also could indicate divine displeasure. In addition, earthquakes were also understood by the Assyrians as evidence of divine wrath, and there is a report in the Assyrian records of an earthquake in the reign of Ashur-dan. It cannot be determined whether the record refers to Ashur-dan III (773 - 754 B.C.), but if it does, his repentance would be even more understandable. Stuart comments:

There is, of course, no way to identify with confidence the king mentioned in Jonah 3:6. On the other hand, a king such as Ashur-dan III, during whose reign an agonizing confluence of omens and disasters (eclipse, earthquake (?), famine, rioting) had occurred, whose capital (or at least common residence) may have been Nineveh, though this cannot be proved, and who was beset by international problems including continuing military failures against Urartu, was certainly the sort of king (among others) who might well have been predisposed to receive Jonah's message sincerely as a chance for respite from his troubles.

e. In addition, their repentance was not a conversion to Judaism. They did not become Jewish proselytes with all that would entail. They simply believed that the all-powerful One, whatever his name, was about to bring destruction on them, and they responded in fear and humility in hope of averting the disaster (Ellison, 382).

C. God's Mercy (3:10)

1. God sees their repentance and in compassion decides to spare the city.

2. God's word of judgment is actually a blessing. It is not to be avoided but embraced. If taken to heart, it provides one an opportunity to repent and so be saved.

3. We need to remember this when our culture tells us that we should avoid telling the truth about God's judgment, the truth about the reality of hell, because "negative preaching" turns people off. I don't doubt that people don't *like* hearing about judgment, but they *need* to hear about it. People don't *like* hearing about cancer, but does that mean the doctors shouldn't tell them they have it? That would be medical malpractice, and I think it's spiritual malpractice to fail to tell people their spiritual condition apart from Christ.

4. Here is an example of a conditional prophecy. See, Jer. 18:7-10. When he promises destruction, he is not bound to carry that out if a nation repents. Likewise, when he promises blessing, he is not obligated to carry that out if a nation turns to evil.

D. Jonah's anger (4:1-3)

1. Jonah is angry that God spared Nineveh. In fact, that's why he ran away in the first place; he knew God's word of judgment was really a tool of grace. He did not want the Ninevites to be spared.

2. Jonah may have feared the sparing of Nineveh because he feared Assyria. After all, they had been quite menacing under Shalmaneser III and Adad-nirari III. Or he may, because of some personal feelings, simply have thought they were unworthy of being spared. Maybe he wanted Nineveh destroyed so he could use that example in his effort to bring Israel to repentance. We're just not told.

3. Whatever his reason, here is a rebel, who himself has been saved by marvelous grace, objecting to grace being given to others. It is similar to Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (Mat. 18:23-35). Those who receive mercy should not object to it being given to others.

4. How easy it is to lose the sense that our life is not our own. Jonah rejoiced in God's salvation and was a ready instrument of his will, but he drew the line at sparing Nineveh. He was not willing to accept God's will in that particular situation.

E. God's rebuke of Jonah (4:4-11)

1. God gently challenges the propriety Jonah's anger, and then Jonah prepares a booth outside the city to see what would ultimately happen.

a. This "booth" would have been a crude shelter constructed primarily of interlaced tree branches. When they were fresh, they'd provide adequate shade, but the leaves on the branches would quickly wither and fall off, leaving many holes for the scorching Assyrian sun.

b. Jonah may have been thinking (or hoping) that the Ninevites repentance was not real or that they'd revert to their old ways and that God would destroy them in the end. Maybe he thought he may have convinced God that he should carry out his original intent. Rather than examining himself as the Lord had wished, he examined the city to see if they were the ones who would change.

2. God provides a plant for Jonah's comfort and the plant brings Jonah joy. God then promptly uses a worm to destroy it. With the plant gone, God turns up the heat, and Jonah sorely misses the shade-giving plant.

3. God uses Jonah's anger over the fact the plant, which Jonah had nothing to do with providing, was not spared to teach him how much more God is justified in caring about sparing Nineveh, tens of thousands of people whom he had created. As G. V. Smith has said:

God will (and does) act in justice against sin, but His great love for every person in the world causes Him to wait patiently, to give graciously, to forgive mercifully, and to accept compassionately even the most unworthy people in the world. To experience the grace of God and not be willing to tell others of His compassion is a tragedy all must avoid. Messengers of God neither limit the grace of God nor control its distribution, but they can prevent God's grace from having an effect on their own lives.

4. The description of the people as not able to distinguish between the left and the right may refer to their lack of religious discernment, their lack of moral and ethical maturity, or simply their pitiful condition.