

We Are Jonah

Jonah 3

**Digging
Deeper**

January 24, 2010

Intro

Jonah 3 recounts the amazing story of the repentance of the people of Nineveh. In order to appreciate what occurs through Jonah's preaching, this week in Digging Deeper we will look at some of the background and history of the city of Nineveh. Also, we will examine why Jonah's message of judgment did not come to pass and how this fits in with Old Testament prophecy.

Background for Jonah 3

The narrator does not give us many clues about how much time passed between chapters 2 and 3. While the juxtaposition of events may give the impression that God spoke again to Jonah immediately after he had been vomited onto land by the fish, there is actually nothing other than silence to prove that a considerable amount of time had not passed. The terse style could hide the fact that perhaps several months had gone by between Jonah's deliverance from drowning and his renewed commission to preach in Nineveh. If Jonah was in Palestine when he heard the word of the Lord a second time, several weeks must have certainly passed between the beginning of verse 3 and the end of verse 3. Or as little as a few days may be involved in all that has taken place in the book up to the first half of verse 3. The narrator doesn't tell us anything about Jonah's circumstances immediately prior to going to Nineveh (Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah*, Thomas Nelson, 481).

God calls Nineveh a "great city" in 3:2. The point is that Nineveh was a city God was concerned for, one that was by no means insignificant to him. Nineveh's physical size may have figured prominently in its importance, as may have its population, but there is no ground in assuming that size is the main issue in calling Nineveh a "great city." Ultimately, the city had people who God cared about and wanted to bring his grace to them (Stuart, 487).

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

Jonah 3:10

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Why does the narrator mention only the first day that Jonah preached and not mention the other days or distances he covered (3:4)? The answer is simple: the people of Nineveh beat him to it. They repented before he could even get into the full task of preaching to them. We are to assume that the “three day visit” in verse three referred to the amount of time that it would take Jonah to preach to all parts of the city. Only after preaching to all parts of the city would his visit be complete. There was no way that Jonah would have been able to talk to the king, the city leaders, and the people in general in just one day. But all this was short-circuited by the eager response of the Ninevites. Jonah was just beginning to warm up, just starting the process, and they were already believing in God. Thus the mention of the first day of the visit and the silence about the other days eloquently makes the narrator's point. It appears that the people repeated Jonah's message and news even reached the king (3:6) (Stuart, 493).

Fasting and uncomfortable dress represented self-denial to the ancient Semites. By overtly giving up normal comforts and making themselves physically miserable they sought to show the genuineness of their prayers for mercy. The decree adds the prescription that the animals must, as well, be involved. In Persian times and later, animals were sometimes made part of the mourning process. This language of mourning is sometimes found in other Assyrian decrees, telling the people to mourn and pray to other gods to avoid destruction. People in the ancient world readily believed that their evil behavior could call down divine wrath, and believed that disasters were generally divine punishment (Stuart, 494).

Nineveh During the Time of Jonah

It may seem hard to believe that a pagan and somewhat corrupt society like Nineveh would simply repent at the preaching of a prophet. However, a closer look at the historical details during this time shows that things were not going well at all for the Ninevites at approximately the time Jonah served as a prophet (the first half of the eighth century). Military and diplomatic losses internationally were coupled with famine and popular uprisings domestically during the time of Ashur-dan III (773-756 B.C.), for example. In addition, both an earthquake and an eclipse, dreaded major omens to the Assyrians, were experienced concurrent to these other problems. A weak, shaky monarchy reeling from domestic and international turmoil could well have welcomed the chance to solidify its acceptance by a suspicious populace, already set on edge by the prevailing problems, through the royal proclamation preserved in 3:7-9.

It is, of course, not possible from the few details given about Nineveh to date the passage- or the story- with certainty beyond the general limits afforded by the knowledge that Jonah prophesied for Jeroboam II (793-753). The Bible does not tell us the name of the king, just that he was the King of Nineveh. However, many factors point to the possibility that Ashur-dan III (773-756 B.C.) or one of the other weak eighth-century predecessors of Tiglath-Pileser III might have been the king who responded so concertedly to Jonah's message to the city. Shocked and threatened by military encroachments, major unfavorable omens, and riots, a king like Ashur-dan would surely have been far more open to the possibility that Jonah's preaching was divinely ordained and authoritative. The populace of Nineveh, spooked by the disasters known to have occurred during this king's reign, could well have responded positively to Jonah's call for repentance, and the king would, in his weakened position, be hard-pressed not to follow the people's lead. Thus, if a speculation as to the date of the (brief) Ninevite repentance be allowed, the year 758 B.C. would not be improbable (Stuart, 440, 486).

It would make sense if Jonah appeared during the reign of Ashur-dan III. During his reign the Assyrian annals in 765 and 759 B.C. record a series of plagues, and a total eclipse in 763 B.C. These may have been regarded as omens of divine wrath that prepared the city for Jonah's message. During this period Assyria was experiencing weakness and degeneration caused by the rising menace of the Urartu peoples, internal dissension within Assyria itself, and a succession of weak rulers. This turn of events for the empire also may have prepared the city of Nineveh to respond to Jonah's call to repentance (J. Carl Laney and Robert Hughes, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, Tyndale, 347)

Jonah contains a few historically unusual phrases that have often confused historians. It appears in Jonah that Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria. However, Nineveh did not become the capital for Assyria for another century. However, the word often translated "capital" can also mean a "great city" as the NIV translates it (3:2). Plus, the ancient countries did not have capital cities in quite the same way that we do. Historical and archaeological evidence also shows that Nineveh was used as a royal residence as early as the time of Jonah. This would explain why the king was in Nineveh for Jonah's preaching.

God's Compassion on Nineveh

The people of Nineveh hope that the Lord is merciful, and their hopes are fulfilled. God "relents," just as after the incident with the golden calf the Lord relents from destroying the people and starting over with Moses (Ex. 32:12). God's forgiveness in this instance is hardly a failure of prophecy. Rather it fulfills the intent of prophecy in the Old Testament. For instance, Hosea 6:1-3 counsels the people to repent and receive the Lord's forgiveness, yet no change occurs. Joel 2:12-14 encourages repentance and hopes for renewal in language very close to that in Jonah 3:9. Amos 4:6-13 mourns continuously the nation's refusal to repent and thereby avoid judgment. Prophecy is not offered to relieve God of the responsibility to warn before punishing. It intends to effect change in its hearers (Paul House, *Old Testament Theology*, IVP, 367).

As a result of the genuine repentance of the people God relented, simply and fully, of his original plan to punish them. The warning that they will be "overthrown" (3:4) had now become null and void by reason of the compassion of Yahweh. The Ninevites would not, of course, know this for sure until the forty days had passed without incident.

What God did was to change his mind in accordance with what he revealed of himself elsewhere in Scripture. Jeremiah 18:7-10 is the major passage of the Old Testament teaching on the contingency of prophetic warning. As verse 8 says, "And if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned." Jonah's words of warning to Nineveh had never been certain predictions of doom. They had contained an implicit contingency on the order of that described in Jer. 18:8. And when Nineveh repented, God relented. Nothing catastrophic happened to the city after all. However widespread was the repentance, however long it lasted it was enough (Stuart, 495).

Final Thoughts

Jonah's message to Nineveh had been that in 40 days God would destroy the city. However, we see that this message was contingent on the response of the people. If the people continued in their evil ways, then God would indeed destroy them. However, if the people turned from their evil practices then God would spare them. The compassion that God showed Nineveh did not mean that he was shocked by the change of heart of the people, or that somehow Jonah's prophecy had

failed. In reality, God was true to what he had said in Jeremiah 18:7-10. If any nation that God warned repented of their evil then God would have mercy on them. We also saw that God not only used the words of Jonah to bring about the people's repentance, but apparently worked through the normal course of history to bring the people of Nineveh to the point where they would accept Jonah's message.

Home Group Questions

1. Why do you think God gave Jonah a second chance to go to Nineveh? How do you think Jonah felt about it the second time?

2. Why did God give Nineveh a chance to repent? Why do you think the Ninevites were so quick to repent and believe God?

3. Describe a time when God gave you a second chance. What did you learn about God?

4. In what situations would you consider fasting and/or giving up physical comfort, like the Ninevites, in order to seek God?

5. Why didn't God just speak directly to the Ninevites instead of sending Jonah? Why does God choose to use *us* to accomplish His will on earth?

6. What can we learn about God from his dealings with Nineveh?

Questions for Personal Application

7. How willing are you to be God's messenger and take the good news to undeserving people? With whom is God asking you to share the good news?