

PREACHING TO ENEMIES

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jonah 2
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jonah 3
TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Jonah 3

I. The Word of the Lord Jonah 3:1-4

1 And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying,

2 Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.

3 So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.

4 And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

1. *Jonah* was the chosen messenger of, for, and by *the Lord*. Jonah's prior disobedience had not disqualified or exempted him from being God's chosen vessel (Jonah 1:3).

2. This command repeats what God originally told Jonah. Noticeably missing is the previous emphasis on the city's evil, seen in the phrase "their wickedness is come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). The prophet was already aware of that fact, but didn't see the remedy as God saw it. Jonah's desired remedy was fiery judgment; God's remedy was repentance. *Preach unto it the preaching* is a command for Jonah to speak only what God would tell him.

We wonder why would God send an Israelite prophet to a nation that threatened

His chosen people. The answer is found in the last verse in the book:

Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left? (Jonah 4:11)

God's love is not determined or constrained by national boundaries. We live in a world in which nationalism is on the rise. Exceptionalism is the belief that a certain society is superior to all others. Ancient Israel had nationalistic and exceptionalistic pride due to the fact that they were chosen by God uniquely.

3. His time inside the great fish had taught Jonah the price of disobedience. Here we see the evidence of having learned that lesson. The *three days' journey* ironically matches Jonah's three days in the fish (Jonah 1:17).

Archaeology has determined the size of Nineveh to have encompassed some 1,730 acres. Combining this with the population figure we see in Jonah 4:11 gives us a hint of the strength of the Assyrian Empire.

4. *Jonah* walked one-third of the way into the city before delivering God's message. The prophet likely was giving God bare minimum obedience. We do much the same when we obey the letter of God's law but do not allow our hearts to be changed by His commands.

The recorded sermon is simple but powerful. Lacking from the recorded text here is a call to repentance. This seems to be in keeping with Jonah's mind-set to this point: he seems not to have wanted to mention the possibility that God would forgive.

The number *forty* has symbolic meaning in the Bible. Rain fell for that number of days in judgment on wicked humanity. Forty was the number of years the Israelites wandered in the desert because of their faithlessness. It was the number of days Jesus fasted before facing the tempter. In each case, God considered the completion of this number of days or years to be sufficient to excise evil or prove its absence. Nineveh's having that amount of time before being *overthrown* was nothing more than fair in God's reckoning.

II. The People of Nineveh

Jonah 3:5-10

5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

6 For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:

8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

9 Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

10 And 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.

5a. Several startling events are recorded in the book of Jonah, but one of the greatest is the tremendous response to Jonah's pointed message. The faith of the *people* depended not on Jonah's rhetoric or enthusiasm for the subject (Jonah 3:4). Instead their reaction speaks to the work of the Spirit of God in their midst, although not specifically stated as such.

The Ninevites had their own gods. *Nineveh* was home to the temple of Ishtar, goddess of love and war. Ashur was both a city and a god. Other gods of Assyrian or Babylonian invention were also worshipped in Nineveh. But at this point the people *believed God*, the underlying Hebrew of that designation being *Elohim*, not *Yahweh*. When the word *Elohim* is used without the word *Yahweh* being adjacent, the implication is that of the Creator of the universe (Genesis 1).

Of course, the Lord is both Creator of everything in the earth and Ruler over Israel specifically. Old Testament texts often use the names interchangeably. But the Ninevites' belief seems to have been tied only to God as He makes himself known through creation (Romans 1:18-20), rather than to God as He reveals himself more fully in the Law of Moses.

5b. Fasting from food or drink was a common religious practice in many nations. It could be practiced privately or corporately. The practice indicated self-denial, repentance, and/or humility. *Sackcloth* was a rough material that was generally made from goat hair; wearing sackcloth signified submission or intense distress. Fasting combined with wearing sackcloth added intensity to the picture. A spiritual change was happening throughout that city!

6. The phrase *for word came* is similar to

that used to describe God's revelation to Jonah (Jonah 1:1; 3:1). This implies that a true word from God made it to the *king of Nineveh*. But unlike Jonah, the king didn't attempt to flee from God. Instead, he humbled himself and exchanged his royal robes for the coarse clothing of the penitent masses. His sitting *in ashes* may have been a sign that the king took additional responsibility for the cities he had destroyed by fire.

Nineveh was a major city in the nation, and kings did reside there occasionally. The hectic conditions in Assyria at the time may have caused some provincial leaders to assume titles of royalty.

Here we see a pagan monarch responding to God in a more obedient fashion than God's own prophet! This upended expectations about who responds to God appropriately. The Assyrians in Nineveh responded in submissive humility while the prophet from Israel had done the opposite.

7-8a. *The king* showed his support for the fasting initiative not only by participating in it, but by intensifying its terms. The fast was originally limited to the citizens of *Nineveh*, but livestock were also to be denied food and *water*. To cover these animals in *sackcloth* was a symbol of the city's repentance. Though we often think of the consequences of sin being confined to humans, this verse underscores that the natural world also suffers because of sin (Romans 8:19-22). God's last recorded response to Jonah reinforced the fact that God cares for *all* of His creation (Jonah 4:10-11).

For the king to risk the health of the city's livestock by causing them to fast indicates that he believed that destruction was imminent. If *God* didn't see genuine repentance, the well-being of the livestock wouldn't matter anyway.

8b. The king seems to have recognized that empty ritual would yield no benefit. Repentance begins with the heart and through

righteous behavior. The king commanded his people to reject their *evil* lifestyle. The word *way* refers to well-established patterns of sin, which must be forsaken.

The violence of Assyria is seen in archaeological finds. These depict scenes of gruesome torture. Those not tortured to death were deported to Assyrian cities to work as slaves on building projects. The Assyrians indulged in these tactics to strike fear in the hearts of any nation who dared to oppose them. The city of Nineveh was called on to repent of a way of life built on violence.

9. When the king says that *if God will turn*, the idea is of God's changing His mind about something. A change of God's mind would result in a change of His action. The king's hope in this regard was not unfounded, but it also wasn't assured. The people had been told they would *perish*. For God to follow through on His word to them would be just.

10. As the king and the people hoped, *God saw* their repentance. As in the previous verse, we see language of God's repentance, and the explanation is the same. God does indeed visit judgment, sometimes in the form of destruction, on people in keeping with His just nature. But this time we see an exception.

This verse captures God's forgiving nature. The apostle Peter wrote that God was "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). For God has *always* so loved the world (John 3:16).

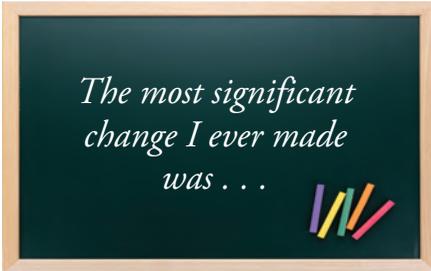
Nineveh's repentance didn't last. The prophet Nahum catalogued specific sins of which Nineveh was guilty (Nahum 3).

Nineveh suffered destruction in 612 BC. Before that, God used the Assyrian Empire as an instrument of His wrath against His rebellious and idolatrous covenant people. But Assyria went too far and ended up on the receiving end of what they had inflicted on others (Isaiah 10:5-19).

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

PREACHING TO ENEMIES

Into the Lesson



1. Why were you willing to change?

2. Why is change difficult?

3. What's a change you've resisted?

4. What does that experience tell you about leading others to change?

Into the Word

Summarize the actions of Jonah, the Ninevites/King of Nineveh, and God found in Jonah 3. Justify your responses in light of Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17.

1. What Jonah Did

2. What the Ninevites Did

3. What the King of Nineveh Did

4. What God Did

5. How Jonah Changed

6. How the Ninevites Changed

7. How God Changed

Which change in this story surprises you most, and why?

1. Jonah's change of heart and willingness to preach?

2. The Ninevites' repentance and turn to God?

3. God's change of decision on destroying the Ninevites?

Into Life

How would you complete the following statement?

The world situation I most wish would change is . . .

What will be required for the desired changes to happen?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER
No human boundaries limit God's grace.