



Lesson 13 May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Jonah: Fiery Harbinger of Doom

Middle/High School

Study Scripture – Jonah 3

Background Scripture – Jonah 1-2

### Key Verse:

*When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their evil way, then God relented of the disaster which He had declared He would bring on them. So He did not do it.*

**Jonah 3:10**

### INTRODUCTION

The Lesson today focuses on the Mercy of God. It teaches us about the extent of God's Love, and this points us to the statement of John 3:16:

***"FOR God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life".***

It forces us to compare human love as shown in Jonah who is willing to die for an inanimate gourd as opposed to the Son of God willing to die for 120,000 living, breathing, animate people. As we look at the actions of God that arise from His character, we have to ask ourselves how we would respond to the approach of an ultra-compassionate but unknowable God who does not have much of a regard for our exercise of our gift of righteous indignation.

So we ask ourselves when and how God dispenses with Justice and Mercy trumps what we think is the best of His characteristics for God to display.

The book of Jonah which we will be looking at is in reality a story of what happens when God's Mercy is too much for some while at the same time this Mercy is just enough for others. We are also confronted with a situation where even though we are professing believers and followers of God sometimes we find that our heart doesn't really match up with our words. We love to sing hymns of praise, but our behavior is not really in sync with the truth. We might even be speaking with a friend or someone else about the reality of the world that God has revealed in the Scriptures, but our heart is not really in the advice you're giving. Even when we pray for others, we might be expressing words which are really reflecting a certain amount of Hypocrisy.

Sometimes sadly and quite unnecessarily we feel inside us that we're not really living up to what we are saying about faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners and the Lord of our lives. Of course this becomes plain when we take note of Jonah's strong condemnation of idolatry and his extremely strong commitment to worship, praise and his obedient to God. He says in Chapter 2: 8 to 9 as he criticizes:

***"Those who pay regard to vain idols***

*forsake their true loyalty,  
But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to thee;  
what I have vowed I will pay,  
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"*

But we know that there is a certain amount of cognitive dissonance going on in Jonah. The Dictionary defines this as

**"The state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude changes".**

**This means a person is holding two or more views that in some way contradict each other.**

We can compare this to the definition of hypocrisy. The Dictionary states:

**"Hypocrisy is claiming to believe one thing but actually and/or doing something contradictory-usually consistently rather than just once".**

Is the same thing happening with us?

Are you harming yourself by behaving in embarrassing, anxiety-producing, and mentally exhausting ways?

What about our basic prejudices?

Are we out of sync with God?

Are we not starting with our calling because we think that we have a much too difficult message and mission?

Are we more comfortable with an authoritative declaration (an oracle) of judgment than an oracle of hope for the people around us?

Are we happy when we speak of divine judgment and joyous over it without quite understanding that the message of divine judgment is a terrible message which must be tempered with the hope proclaimed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

We should also remember that Jonah is the only minor prophet mentioned by the Lord Jesus Christ for He tells us His life is in some ways similar to some of the experiences of Jonah. As the only prophet in the Old Testament directly sent to the Gentiles, we should realize immediately that we are dealing with an extremely important situation for when Jonah gives us statements about his experience, he is trying to keep us from falling into the same kind of trap into which he fell.

Note carefully that Jonah's message is not a wishy-washy kind of message about divine love for he really speaks about divine judgment. He speaks about fear. We hope that we understand that divine love is really behind all of this dramatic and blunt approach to reality which faces Nineveh.

For us though it is important we take a look at how we throughout our life have been given a message from God for the world. Maybe it is not as fiery a message of doom as Jonah was given, but there really is not much difference between the message we have to give to the world than what Jonah had for Nineveh. One writer warns us of the trap we can get into with a warning from the Christian classic Bunyan Pilgrim's Progress which young and old Christians rarely read in our present day. This lack makes us ignorant of much of the reality in our /Christian walk:



**“When Bunyan’s Pilgrim had abandoned The King’s Highway for Bypath Meadow, and he is about to fall into the hands of Giant Despair, the great giant who owned Doubting Castle, when he looked back and realized how difficult it was to get back into the King’s Highway after he had left it, he said, “Then I thought that it is easier going out of the way, when we are in, than going back in when we are out”.**

**And what a tremendous amount of Christian sentiment is found in that statement... And I'm sure that if you have lived any of the Christian life that has become yours since you have believed in Jesus Christ, you have discovered how easy it is to get out of the way once you have come to be in the way, than it is to get back in the way when you have come to be out of the way...**

**Jonah the prophet would agree, for he had a similar experience. He got out of the King’s Highway. He was led astray. Whether he went into Bypath Meadow or not is beside the point, but he discovered he was out of the will of God. And oh how great it was, how difficult it was for him to get back into the way once he had gotten out”.**

The prophet of doom about which we are studying is Jonah the son of Amittai who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom representing God among the idolatrous and disobedient tribes of Israel.

We are told that he prophesied successfully as a servant of God in the reign of Jeroboam 11, a successful military ruler of the eighth century B.C., who forged a significant expansion to the northern borders of Israel. The King at the time was idolatrous and immoral and brought nothing but evil into the land. The nation was in gross disobedience to God but nevertheless God had Jonah prophesied that their territories that had been captured by Syria several generations before would be recovered.

2 Kings suggest that Jonah's ministry played a great part in encouraging the expansion of Israel despite the growing menace of Assyrian power. This military expansion would have required a great deal of nerve and Jonah's role in motivating the rulers of Israel and the Army would be crucial for their success.

Note carefully that these prophecies of Jonah which supported the military actions of Israel were made by God’s permission to Jonah despite the evil nature of the rulers and people. God was showing great mercies to them, but this demonstration of God's mercy did not change their attitude toward God. The nation persisted in their rebellious behavior. We would have expected that the Northern Kingdom and its rulers would have repented in response to God's merciful blessings and with the return of the economic and military glory days would have rewarded Jonah’s ministry.

Clearly the rulers and people would have respected and feared Jonah and welcomed his presence. In addition Jonah clearly loved his people and wanted the best for them. But the people certainly would not like the idea of Jonah going to the enemy to save them from God's wrath and destruction, and Jonah seemed to prefer to keep their respect and accolades rather than to obey God.

God therefore first instructed His prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh, one of the capital cities of the Assyrian empire with a stern message. The city had a very long history and according to Genesis 10: 8-12 this city was built by Nimrod. He built this city in Mesopotamia along with Babel and other cities.



The people of Nineveh were for all intents and purposes the most vile and wicked people living. They were renowned for their extreme cruelty and practiced all forms of evil (see *Nahum 3:1-4*).

It is a wonder that God loved them. One writer describes them as follows:

**“God loved these wicked Assyrians even though they are hung up on old kinds of astrology and pagan worship. They had water gods and land gods. But they were forever in fear, because the gods they created in their minds were like people: they were greedy and demanding; they loved sacrifices; they had husbands and wives and children. Their gods controlled their destiny, so the Ninevites were forever trying to appease them. So in a true sense they were religious people; they were very conscious of the other world; they were very aware of powers and beings and destiny; they were very aware of the stars and how they moved in the heavens”.**

But God had an Agenda. He wanted His prophet to go to Nineveh and tell its inhabitants that God was aware and was no longer prepared to tolerate their wickedness.

Jonah was to *“cry against it”*. We are not told that God specifically said what the sins of Nineveh were but certainly it appears that though they were pagans, they would understand the nature of their unacceptable behavior.

So what exactly were the Assyrians and the people of Nineveh accustomed to do. One writer gives us this awful description:

**“The Assyrians, when they conquered a city, as a general rule did not leave garrisons behind to control the people that they conquered. They did not have the manpower to do that. And consequently, since they could not afford large amounts of occupation forces, they usually engaged in just a little bit more brutality that was, in order to give the people what they had just conquered a definite message. And that message came home very clearly, I'm sure. One of the first things that they did was to select some of the outstanding citizens and slaughter them. Now that was the beginning. We read in the Bible some of the instances of this as, for example, as when Sennacherib was at Lachish. But then a second thing that they did was to take some of those that had been conquered and then after bringing them out before the people and gloating over them considerably with fiendish delight-- they would take their hands and reach down into the mouths of their victims and wrenched the whole tongue out-- that can create a message, too.**

**But that was not all that they did. They would frequently take a man, lay him out, or make him lie down on the ground, fasten his arms and feet to stakes. And when they had stretched him to the place where the skin was almost ready to tear, they would take a knife and cut it at the appropriate place and begin to tear off the skin. And they would flay the person alive. And they would take that skin and hang it on the city walls in order that as you came to this city, you would get the idea. And many got the message of course.**

**And then another thing that they did was to take individuals, stretch them out upon the ground, tie them, take a long pole with a sharp end, take the sharp end and plunge it right down in their stomach, just below the ribs. And when they had finished with that, they would take the body and take the body up in the air, take the body over to a hole they had dug, stick the body down in the hole so that the body of the writhing victim was there for everyone to see, and they would sit around and watch him die”.**



It should be clear to you therefore that when God told Jonah to cry against the city of Nineveh because their wickedness had come up before God there was much justification for that. The Ninevites were showing what their heart was like. But we see that God was not only concerned with their love for physical atrocities, but He was concerned with their inner man.

God certainly will move in mysterious ways. He is willing to do something about any event and though He tarries, there is the principle of long-suffering. God will wait sometimes for quite a while until the propitious time and when that time comes, He will act. So never forget that God is doing something, and He will do something for He cares. And when He does display His wrath, it is never going to be pleasant. Note that Nineveh was great in the eyes of God and had been the object of a Great Divine Commission.

Nineveh at that time was really the capital of the Gentile world. Gentiles did not know God, and this great Gentile city lived without any real knowledge of God. Their wickedness therefore was accordingly great, and a report of this great corruption and wickedness had come up before God.

Israel itself had indulged in grave wickedness, despite their knowledge of Jehovah, and we can imagine how easy it was for the people of Nineveh, infatuated with their power and might, to slide into gross cruelty and violence. This evil was not only directed toward nations they conquered but was directed also against their own people.

We have seen the justice of God in His dealings with Sodom and Gomorrah, making them an example for those who live ungodly lives (*2 Peter 2:6; Jude 5-7*). This would also be the inevitable outcome for that great city called Nineveh.

Because of their wickedness Nineveh was on the path to destruction, a just recompense for their evil deeds. But this was not to be in the book of Jonah, for God had decided to make Nineveh the object of His mercy. In continuance with His sovereignty, God exercises His right to have mercy on whoever He chooses.

Note carefully that God had for some time been threatening punishment and destruction against Israel. Jeroboam, the first King of the Northern Kingdom had showed a terribly high-level of disobedience and unconcern for the commandments of God. So did every King after him.

God apparently was now about to provide a dark background for His message to Israel, so that by the way He showed this unheard of grace to the heathens, it would highlight very vividly God's forgiving mercies.

It would be clear to sinning Israel that God's grace was a strong and marvelous attribute of God. This would emphasize His grace very forcefully to the hearts of the sinners.

Since God was so ready to show compassion to a wicked but repentant people, and to withhold the destruction He threatened, Israel would have no excuse but would recognize that her coming judgment from the hand of God was not to occur because of God's unwillingness to forgive, but because of Israel's impenitence.

Ironically, the book of Jonah shows just that. Though Nineveh plays a major role, the book really is about God's dealings with His renegade prophet and His renegade people. Jonah, however, finds himself taking 'Course 101' in the mercy of God, and it was to be hoped that Israel would find in this event 'a Course' or Lesson.

Throughout the greater portion of the Book we find that Jonah's agenda runs counter to the will of God, and the ensuing disobedience led to the hardening of his heart, which God had to



soften. The mercy of God was at work in the life of Jonah long before he reached Nineveh. In Jonah's case this would prove to be very unpleasant experience and a difficult lesson to learn, but it was absolutely necessary. Note that Jonah's effort in Nineveh was really a good but minimal effort. Nevertheless the people repented, and the reluctant prophet had great success.

Of course we see the same thing in our lives. Our efforts at evangelism or taking the message of the Gospel to people, who are lost, are often quite minimal. Many times we are not very consistent, determined, steady, and unrelenting in carrying the message of the Gospel to the lost. But God still sends His people to the Church, and these people repent despite our feeble efforts.

But as in the case of Jonah, to whom God repeated His call, God still calls us to work.

God uses our hands, even though there is some question as to whether He really needs us.

Notice that Jonah was initially free to resist the divine will, but in due course he goes along with God after God's discipline.

Yet he shows a lack of grace despite his experiencing divine love and salvation.

We should realize that when we do not carry the message of God's love to the lost, or carry this message reluctantly or halfheartedly, we are being similarly as graceless as Jonah, and without mercy in our hearts also. Despite our shortcomings God works to bring repentance and a turning away from evil. The lost often behave in ways that surprise us. One writer therefore warns us:

**“Let us therefore make sure that it is divine providence that guides our steps. There is also a satanic providence that would seek to capture us and guided our steps”.**

## THE TEXT

**Verse 1.** Jonah's action had been one of rank defiance. With deep thought, introspection, premeditation, and determination; Jonah refused to submit his will to the will of God. Jonah was fully cognizant of the fact that he could not flee the presence of God. See Psalms 139:7. His action therefore was one that indicated his abdication of responsibility and resignation as a prophet of God. Without saying a word, Jonah was telling God to find someone else for the job. God would not accept the prophet's resignation as it were but would extend mercy to him. The prophet's epic ordeal was God's mercy at work. Brought to his knees in the belly of the 'great fish', surrounded by rotting corpses and decomposing weeds wrapped about his head as if to strangle the remaining life out of him, and engulfed by darkness, every last breath filled his nostrils with the stench of his own disobedience.

In desperation Jonah cries to God, and despite Jonah's insubordination and irrational behavior to this moment, God hears and delivers Him (*Jonah 2:2-9*). God went to this extreme to humble His servant and bring him to the point where he could be used. Still a work in progress, Jonah is eminently more qualified now that he is a living example of God's mercy.

Thus **“...the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time...”** We see that God continues to allow Jonah to operate in the office of prophet. And indeed it was vital that the Word of the Lord be reiterated; it would have been a grave mistake to undertake such a work in one's own strength. God's word confirms that God's anointing is on one to accomplish the assigned task.



The anointing must not be confused with some modern-day interpretation or usage of the word. Whereby it merely implies an outward show of one's righteousness; signs such as speaking in tongues, prophesying and even healing are not the anointing; although these signs may be evident in those who have the anointing, it must be made clear that the primary purpose of the anointing is to move one into complete obedience to God's law. Thus it is the power to obey God and is the work of the Holy Spirit.

When told to possess the land of Canaan, Israel listened to the negative report of the spies and did not go when God told them. After considering their sin they decided to go, but this time without the word of the Lord and against the advice of Moses. Many perished in this attempt (*Numbers 14:1,3,40-45*). It is of the utmost importance to move when God says move, because the anointing always flows with God's timing. Never go before or behind it, you must go in it.

**Verse 2. "Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city"**. From chapter 1 we get a sense that the greatness of the city was truly intimidating. The fear of the people of this wicked city and more significantly, the fear of his own people's retribution should the Ninevites repent at his message ruled Jonah's mind.

Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians empire, had been built by Nimrod, and by Ninos, the mythical founder of the Assyrians empire. See Genesis 10: 11. Classical writers state that it was the largest city in the world at that time. It was said to be much larger than Babylon. Over time and under successive rulers it was a complex of four large ancient cities. It is interesting to note that Nineveh will eventually become the capital of the Assyrian empire but not until about 17 years after the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell.

After his amazing ordeal, Jonah readily received the word the second time, as a prophet should, and it seemed that nothing could faze him, as he moved in the way that his anointing as a prophet had required.

**"...and preach onto it the preaching that I bid thee..."** The message had not changed. Jonah was to deliver the same message without alteration, exposing their wickedness and telling the people of Nineveh that their sins had come up before the Lord and that the destruction of their great city was imminent, Jonah 1:2.

God's command to preach means to deliver the message exactly as it is given to you. God empowers and protects all those who he sends with His message. (*Jeremiah 1:17; 15:19-21; Ezekiel 2:7; 3:17*)

Obviously now Jonah was given the opportunity to make up for his previous mistake and was now willing to do that since his life was hanging in the balance.

This of course demonstrates that God is the God of the Second Chance. Jonah realized this and in his hymn of thanksgiving in chapter 2 we see this.

It is quite ironic that Jonah was given a second chance, but he does not want God to give the Ninevites a second chance. His heart is not really in it for second chances are for him or for Israelites and not for Ninevites or Assyrians. It is as if he is under duress and God is forcing him, so that he cannot resist God at this time. The only thing he can do is to be petulant when against his wishes he succeeds in his mission.

**Verse 3. "So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord..."**

Immediately after being vomited on to the shore we see a more humble Jonah, now willing and empowered to obey the word of the Lord. All fear of the inhabitants of this great city is gone, he now proclaims with boldness the word of the Lord.



The greatness of the city before God, was not its wealth, size, or large population. A city surrounded by fortified walls and fifteen hundred towers each standing two hundred feet high. The city truly was vast, larger than Babylon in her heyday and larger still than most of our modern cities. Yet none of this would impress God. The only thing that God would notice was the enormity of their wickedness. People deserving of death, would receive God's mercy. One spiritual says"

**"My God is so high that you can't get over him. So wide that you can't get around him. So low you can't get under him".**

Jonah has learned that lesson. But one writer warns us:

**"A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart, whispering his insidious message of smug prejudice, empty traditionalism and exclusive solidarity".**

Another writer reminds us:

**"Perhaps we can appreciate how Jonah felt about his commission if we compare a similar case. Suppose God called some Jew living during the Hitler regime to go to Berlin and prophesy publicly that God was going to destroy Nazi Germany unless the Germans repented. The possibility of the Germans repenting and God withholding judgment on them would have been totally repugnant to such a Jew. His racial patriotism would have contradicted with his fidelity to God just as Jonah's did".**

We could just as easily place this idea in the context of an oppressed people like South Africa during the apartheid South Africa regime, or in some other terrible situation of oppression. There is no shortage of evil places and events into which we can fit human behavior or try to explain Jonah's reluctance and unwillingness to obey God.

**Verse 4.** Jonah more focused than ever, entered the city, traveling about a day's journey, he begins to proclaim the word. Of course we know that Nineveh was an important but a relatively modest city with 120,000 male inhabitants plus women and children. It was of course expanded considerably by the subsequent strongmen rulers of the Assyrian empire

He did not stop to admire the city with its huge walls and towers; sight-seeing evidently was not on his agenda. He had a message to deliver and was eager to do so. His motivation however was not the same as God's. We are told that it was a three day walk across the city from one side to another. We are told that Nineveh was simply the center of several small towns that belonged to the city proper and so we would consider the area as a metropolis. We are not told if Jonah preached along the way or waited to the end of the day but being so serious, he probably would preach along the way.

To this point in time, Jonah's eagerness to deliver the message ran parallel to his desire to see the destruction of Nineveh. It is probably difficult to think that Jonah preached his very short sermon with great conviction or force attempting to persuade the people. But maybe he did even though he did not like. But we know that Jonah's sermon was very short, and it consisted of Only five words in the original Hebrew. Whether he put more into the sermon we do not know. But we know in his short sermon there was no explicit call to repentance and there was no offer of any ray of hope. In our days and given our style with sermons we would hardly think that such a shot pithy sermon was intended to be persuasive.

Given that this sermon talked about forty days to doomsday there was a hint that God was not really determined to overthrow the city right away. Forty days was to be regarded as the grace period, an opportunity to repent and for the people to change their way of behavior and save



themselves. So forty days might be regarded not as an exact measure of the time that they had to change.

We do know that the term 40 was an important time period. Forty days and 40 nights was the time the Great Flood lasted. Israel was in the wilderness for 40 years. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days to receive the Law. But in any case, we are probably wise to take the time period of forty days literally instead of speculating.

The Text suggests that Jonah went immediately into the city. It is speculated that he did not stop to freshen up, and therefore he most certainly would demand the attention of the people merely by his appearance. Recently vomited out of the fish's belly, he must have looked awful and smelt atrocious. The digestive fluids of the fish probably caused his hair to fall out and turned his skin an unnatural shade. It is very likely that the fishermen in the area would have seen the event and what had happened to him when the fish vomited him out.

**Verse 5.** Then Jonah begins to preach a message more terrifying than his appearance ***"...yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown;"*** and ***"So the people of Nineveh believed God..."***

Note that the word 'destroyed' or 'overturned' is the Old Testament word meaning destroyed from the very foundation, and is the word applied to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The city was granted a reprieve fixed at forty days, a period which, as early as the Flood, was taken as the measure for determining the delaying of visitation from God.

It is quite evident that the power of God is at work as Jonah's few words brought about mass repentance. (*Exodus 9:18-21; Matthew 12:41*) It is quite possible that as he proclaimed the word of the Lord that he related to them the sequence of events that brought him to this point. This would most certainly lend credence to his message.

Some theologians speculate that the sailors from the ship on which Jonah had been traveling, were also in Nineveh relating their encounter with the one true God. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that the Spirit of God was there to bring about such a quick and complete work of repentance

All the people, small and great, reacted to the message.

It is very important to note however that the people believed God. It did not say that the people believed Jonah. They obviously accepted that God had given Jonah the message and that Jonah was simply a messenger. They clearly believe that Jonah was telling the truth and that God indeed would overthrow and destroy everything in forty days which would be a terrible thing.

This was a dream sermon that we all pray that we would get a chance to preach. This short sermon would lead the entire city to repent. Only the work of the Holy Spirit showing evidence of the grace of God could achieve such a thing.

This was the greatest evangelistic message ever preached. And surprisingly it was preached to Gentiles. In contrast, the many sermons preached to the people of Israel had little or no effect. Referring to This amazing event Jesus would contrast the unbelieving and stubborn people of His day with these Ninevites. Jesus said:

***"The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclaiming of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!"***

Clearly Jesus was saying that the preaching of Jonah could not be compared to His teachings and the miracles that He performed. But nevertheless the people of Nineveh without hesitation



responded and accepted Jonah's preaching. In comparison the scribes and Pharisees rejected His greater ministry.

In this vast city the people believed Jonah's message. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth the ways of demonstrating penitence. Fasting of course means abstaining from food and sometimes water for a period of time. Sackcloth was a rough material made from the hair of camels or goats and it was used for making heavy-duty bags or for making tents. This was very tough and heavy material, and it was not comfortable when worn for it rubbed against the skin. So it was therefore only used when one is mourning as a sign of grief, as a sign of repentance or a desire for atonement.

Verses 6-8. The King, the name given to the ruler of the city heard what was going on and he set aside his robes, sat in ashes and added a significant influence to the call for repentance. It is not easy to persuade high-ranking people to repent for they given their position and power are always arrogant and proud and would be reluctant to make the people see that they are weaker than they claim. So public displays of repentance would be something that they would avoid.

But this king was different, and he issued a royal decree requiring everyone, people and even animals to fast and to cry mightily to God. He proclaimed a fast of the most solemn type. By royal decree, every man, woman, child, and beast should not eat or drink for three days, in the hope that God may turn from His fierce anger. So solemn was their grief that they also put on sackcloth and ashes.

Man and beast were to taste nothing, animals were not to be put out to pasture and were not to receive water. Both man and animals were to be covered with mourning clothes, and in addition were to cry out strongly to God.

Ezekiel in Ezekiel 26: 16 depicts the mourning of the Tyrian princes over the ruin of their capital in just the same way in which the city of Nineveh is described.

The historian Herodotus has written about this Asiatic custom, which is peculiar to the mourning of Nineveh, that is, that the cattle also take part in mourning. Plutarch also relates the same thing. This custom apparently originated in the idea that there is a biotic rapport between men and the larger domestic animals which are his living property. The animals, which live with man, are therefore drawn into fellowship with his sin, so that their suffering might also help to appease the wrath of God. This practice is only common in extraordinary cases of mourning, such as that in the time of Esther and Mordecai and the fate of their people *Esther 4:1,15*.

The king himself put on sackcloth and ashes. ***"Pride goes before destruction..."***

(Prov. 16:18) From the greatest to the least all put on sackcloth. Whether prince or pauper, all were in the same condition before God.

Notice that the king was uncertain if God would relent and save them, but since Jonah did not rule out God's mercy, he expressed the hope that God would indeed be merciful.

The king conquered his enemies by his ferocity and military might but now he was conquered by humility, seen in his mourning, his prayers and his genuine conversion.

So God saw that the people turned from their wicked ways and God did not destroy the city. Destruction was postponed for about 100 years when obviously new generations and new strongman consumed by their lust for power and fame arose.



But no Assyrian records refer to any incident of dramatic conversion to monotheism as in the Jonah account. Some scholars have noted some religious reforms begun about 800 B.C. by Adad-Nirari 111, who reigned from 805-782 B.C. These reforms had a monotheistic (one God) emphasis, even though the records show the cult worship of the God Nebo was encouraged. The reforms may have been somehow connected with Jonah's mission but even if it was, the Assyrians would not admit publicly that they had changed to worship a foreign God. It is also said that since the Ninevites worshiped Dagan, the fish god, Jonah's appearance from the 'great fish' would have had a striking effect. His skin and hair color changed due to the fishes' digestive enzymes would have added to the force of his dramatic message. The King likely knew that Jonah was the prophet who had previously prophesied the successful military advancement of Israel against the mighty Assyrians. Nineveh being the capital of Assyria would most likely have been encouraged to a swift response.

It would have also been painfully evident that the impending destruction was to be from the hand of God, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah or maybe by an earthquake. If it were that an army was to besiege this great city, they most certainly would already have been located in the surrounding valleys, where they would be clearly visible from those two-hundred-foot towers that surrounded the city. This thought alone would have generated some godly fear.

**Verse 10. "And God saw their words, that they turned from their evil way..."** God who sees all things with eyes of omniscience, saw that their repentance was genuine, and not merely an outward show of putting on sackcloth and ashes and fasting. Indeed it is **"godly sorrow that leads to repentance..."** (2 Cor. 7:10) and it was this type that the people of Nineveh displayed. They turned from their evil ways as they turned to God, bearing fruit and works meet for repentance, the sort of which was commended by Jesus.

Of course, there is question about whether or not the conversion of the Ninevites was genuine, or whether their religious response was superficial as in the case of Ahab recorded in 1 Kings 21: 27-29.

It is difficult to explain why the Assyrians continued their path of violence, but we note that it was approximately thirty-seven years later that they destroyed the Northern Kingdom. Perhaps it was the next generation that reverted to the typical violence of the Assyrians. But we are told:

**"And God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them, and he did it not;"** God always meets true repentance with mercy.

It is very interesting to note however that the Assyrians whose empire had been destroyed by the Babylonians, are nowadays Christians practicing Eastern Christian rites. I have personally met several of them in Canada and they are quite proud of their Christian beliefs. So what is the mind of God and what does God intend for a nation or survivors of that nation?

Hence the question arises:

**Does God change his mind? God by his nature and essence is unchangeable. (James 1:17) Neither does he change his decrees or purpose, even in the case of Nineveh; (see Nahum 2 & 3)**

**In complete harmony with his immutable character, God's response to repentance has always been mercy; this will never change. (Jeremiah 18:8; Joel 2:13; Amos 7:3,6) It is God's will that none perish, but that all should come to repentance. Thus the impending doom that hung**



**over the people of Nineveh at that time, is the same that looms over every unrepentant sinner today.**

Maybe we should consider that even if the Ninevites were not thoroughly converted to God, they were waking up out of their careless life of sin and had turned from their evil ways.

God apparently not only forgives the converted man who turns away from his sin, but he seeks to also have mercy on those who are penitent and who willingly promise to amend their ways. This is true compassion.

When the Ninevites who had sunken deeply in idolatry and vice responded to the word on God, it showed that they were not yet ready for the judgment of extermination. Their punishment was therefore put off by a long-suffering God, until they had gotten to the stage where they had developed into a totally anti- God imperial power, determined to subjugate and force everybody to be as sinful as they were.

## **CONCLUSION**

The prophet was not overjoyed to see this wicked and perverse people turn to the true and living God. But we know, the very host of heaven rejoices when a sinner is saved.

Not so with Jonah. Despite the chastening hand of God and subsequent mercy shown him, Jonah still wanted to see the destruction of the city. In pursuit of his own agenda and unfounded notions that he would be branded a false prophet – Jonah expressed dismay and disgust that God would extend mercy to such a people.

The message was right to the point; destruction would come within or at the end of forty days. Jonah felt betrayed by God for his success in preaching his fiery message of doom.

The call to repentance was not explicit but implied, in that God gave them time to respond to His message. Thus the judgment pronounced was contingent on their response. If this was not so, God could have destroyed the city as He did with Sodom – without warning. After all, the sins of the people had come up before the Lord, as did the sins of the people of Sodom.

But note that they too in Sodom had heard the messages of God from Abraham and from Lot who had lived among them. They in Sodom must have known about Melchizedek, the Priest of the Most High God to whom Abraham paid tithes after the battle where he wrested their citizens. But they didn't care. They do not repent. And so they were doomed to destruction. Jonah was actually acting like an unbeliever, who ignored the teachings of the Law of God and thought gentiles unworthy of salvation despite the promises to Abraham. See Romans 10:19,20; 1 Thess. 2:16.

The repentance of Nineveh also pierced his nationalistic pride as he saw a heathen nation more responsive to the word of God than his own people. His own people having seen the goodness of God and to whom the oracles and law of God were entrusted – continued to play the harlot.

Note that Jonah's vexation was not caused by offended dignity, by anxiety or fear that men would regard him as a liar. He was not angry because he was unwilling that the name of God would be exposed to the blasphemies or mocking of the heathen if God did not destroy Nineveh and changed His purpose. His problem was simply that he was hostile to the city of Nineveh and did not want these pagans to be saved even if they repented.



Jonah's attitude toward God's dealings seemed to be very fickle and disjointed. He started out being disobedient, then when punished he offered thanksgiving, then was obedient, and then he showed great displeasure at his great success carrying out his mission.

It was not that this prophet thought he knew how to handle the situation better than God. He knew that God was willing to forgive. But he did not want his enemies to know that doom could be avoided if they turned to His forgiving God. He clearly knew God's character, for he quoted Exodus 34:6. He knew God was gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, full of love, and did not like to bring calamity on anyone. Jonah feared that God would extend His graciousness toward the cruel Assyrians. Jonah did not disagree that God's grace was important, but he certainly felt that he did not want to associate himself with God indiscriminately exercising His grace.

Jonah himself had prophesied that these people would one day rise up against Israel. The answer to his personal turmoil was, let God destroy them.

Did he really expect the will of God to be brought into subjection to his own will? Do we? God shows His love for people by extending mercy. And Jonah accepts the fact that "God's grace is greater than all our sin."

God's people, those who are called by His name, must strive to yield their will to God, adopting God's desires as their own. As God's children, disobedience will bring you down to a horrible pit. Jonah's was the belly of a fish, where God will have to bring you before you humble yourself.

God will exercise His sovereign right to have mercy on whomever He chooses; it is for His glory not our gloating.

God will also turn away His wrath from those who repent, responding with mercy to all those who show a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Psalms 51:10,17). Contrition is the only type of repentance acceptable to God. It is a complete change of mind, a turning from one's sin and a turning toward God.

We must also be mindful of the manner in which God treated His prophet, instructing him in the way of righteousness. We too must treat each other with much mercy, desiring to correct an erring brother. And we must replace our own agenda with God's agenda.

Mercy triumphs over Justice, it is an attribute of God and should be for every Christian.

It is interesting to note that the book of Jonah leaves us with a question, and the curtain drops abruptly. We hear no response from Jonah. How then must we understand the Book? Did Jonah write it to tell us of His error after he had learned the point that God wanted him to understand?

Jonah was left angry, depressed, hot, faint, to think about God's words about his lack of compassion, and God's depth of compassion.

We too must be very careful in how we treat sinners. We must live our lives in such a way that like Paul, we can state confidently that we are innocent of the blood of all men.

