

Jonah 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Jonah chapter 3. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you. So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, By the decree of the king and his nobles, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything.

Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way, and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent, and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

In Jonah chapter 3, we have the second sending of Jonah, and now he goes directly to the city of Nineveh. The call of chapter 3 verse 2 is virtually identical to that of chapter 1 verse 2, only slight variations, from cry out against, to cry out to. Perhaps we should take Jonah's compliance on this occasion as sign of his repentance, although what happens later in chapter 4 maybe suggests that the situation is more complicated. The Lord describes Nineveh as that great city. We have already seen a great wind, a great fear, a great tempest, another great fear, and then a great fish, and later we will see a great evil and a great joy. In verse 3, the description of the city slightly varies from the description of the Lord in verse 2. It is described as a great city to or for God or the gods. The point here may be to emphasise its size. Hans Walter Wolfe suggests a comparison between this description of the city of Nineveh and the description of Nimrod in Genesis chapter 10 verse 9, where Nimrod was described as a mighty hunter before the Lord. Fittingly,

Nimrod is also the person who founded the city of Nineveh. Alternatively, it may emphasise the city's importance to God or the gods. If the latter, then the presence of many shrines and temples within the city might be in view. If the former, then perhaps it is designed to set Nineveh apart from other cities.

[2 : 39] Others have seen here a reference to God's possession of the city, the great city that belongs to God. God has rightful dominion over the city. The description of the city as a journey or visit of three days seems quite hyperbolic. A single day of walking would probably take a person about 20 miles, and if they were walking for three days, 60 miles. It stretches credulity, especially when we have archaeological evidence, to say that the city of Nineveh at that time would be anywhere remotely near 60 miles across. Indeed, from what we know of its historical size, it seems likely you would have been able to walk all the way across it in a single afternoon. Others have suggested that this might refer to a walk around the periphery of the city. While less of an extreme claim, this still seems quite unrealistic. Many scholars see this as a fantastical and hyperbolic detail that is suggestive of a sort of fairy tale account. Other commentators have suggested that what we have here is a metropolitan district, including a number of cities of which Nineveh was the chief. The whole area takes on the name of Nineveh, and takes about three days to traverse. A further possibility is raised by Donald

Wiseman in a Tyndale Biblical Archaeology lecture from 1977. Douglas Stewart summarises this position. It's quite possible that the issue at hand is what Wiseman calls the ancient oriental practice of hospitality, whereby the first day is for arrival, the second for the primary purpose of the visit, and the third for return. Wiseman outlines the relevant Mesopotamian evidence for political as well as prophetic visits of men from one city-state entering another for specialist advice. He concludes, there is therefore no difficulty in a prophet being received by the leaders of the city, though he would probably have had to establish his bona fides first. Accordingly, Nineveh was undoubtedly a place Jonah, like any other emissary, had to enter and leave according to accepted protocol.

The story, of course, does not provide us with the details of how this was done, but we may assume that his first and third days involved meetings and explanations, perhaps even formal hearings. He may even have presented gifts to city officials upon his arrival, as was the custom in the case of official state visits, though his contacts may have been less formal and less high-level. If Stewart and Wiseman are right, then the next verse suggests that he got his mission straight underway in the first day of his visit. One of the important things that the three days journey would do is connect the city of Nineveh with the big fish of the preceding two chapters. Jonah's message is that within 40 days, Nineveh shall be overthrown. It is also possible to read this as it will be transformed. Whichever it is, the status quo in Nineveh cannot continue. The fact that the city receives such an announcement with an attached window of time holds out the real possibility that the city is being given time to repent.

For why would God tell them any of this if there was no way positively for them to respond and to avert at least some of the crisis? In Jeremiah chapter 18 verses 7 to 10, the Lord had said, If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. The words of the Lord are relational. They challenge people to respond. They are not just bare predictions of what will occur. The response of the people of Nineveh is a remarkable one. They call for a fast and put on sackcloth, every single one of them.

When the word reaches the king, he takes things even further. Presumably Jonah had not met the king at this point, perhaps because he was just in the early stages of his visit. The king comes down from his throne, removes his royal robes, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes. And although the people of Nineveh had already independently committed themselves to a fast, he issues a proclamation to back it up and extends it even further. In addition to a fast for all human beings, he includes every single animal. All cattle and all sheep must refrain from eating as well.

[6 : 57] Not just human beings, but animals must be clothed in sackcloth. All of the people of Nineveh are instructed by the king to cry out to the Lord and to repent of their evil and of their violence.

We might think back to the story of the flood here, to the violence and the corruption that was general and that led to the destruction of all human flesh. We might also think to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the violence that went up to the Lord and led to him coming down to destroy the city. The question now is whether judgment will be able to be averted in this particular case.

Verse 9 might be an amalgam of two different verses in the Old Testament. Exodus chapter 32 verse 12. Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Moses' intercession for the people after their sin with the golden calf. And then 2 Samuel chapter 12 verse 22. David's words. He said, While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live. On this occasion, the city is indeed spared. The Lord relents of his anger and does not destroy the city as he said he would do. Some commentators wonder whether part of Jonah's anger is that his prophecy did not come to pass, suggesting that he was a false prophet. This, however, does not seem to be the true reason.

Far more significant, perhaps, is the fact that in sparing Nineveh, the Lord is sparing the ones who will destroy Israel in just a few decades' time. Perhaps Israel was supposed to learn from the example of the Ninevites, who responded so readily to the message of Jonah. Prophets had been speaking to Israel for many years, and yet they had not responded as they ought. We might think here of Jesus' statements in Luke chapter 11 verses 30 to 32. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them. For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.

For they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And behold, something greater than Jonah is here. I've already noticed some of the parallels to the events of the flood, and also of Exodus chapter 32, with Israel's sin concerning the golden calf and Moses' intercession for the people. Those two accounts are already connected. And here we have a text that reflects upon the possibility of repentance in such a general judgment that is coming upon the people. As in those two accounts, there is a significant period of 40 days. The rain would come for 40 days and 40 nights upon the earth. Moses was upon the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. There will be a direct reference to a verse given in the context of the story of the golden calf in Jonah chapter 4. One of the more interesting features of this chapter is the reference to the animals who are brought into the picture in a surprising way. Just as we don't usually have stories of ships at sea, as we do in chapter 1 of Jonah, there aren't many stories in the Old Testament where animals are so directly involved. And their involvement here takes very surprising forms. They also have to refrain from eating. They also have to wear sackcloth and ashes.

[10 : 10] They also have to cry out to God. In the reference to animals alongside human beings in the context of a general judgment, we should naturally think of the story of the flood. In many ways, this is a reversal of the flood narrative. The evil and the violence of the city has gone up to the Lord. The city has been condemned to utter destruction, and yet the Lord relents after the people repent.

A question to consider. What lessons might Israel have learned from the story of the Ninevites?