

Jonah, the Amazing Evangelist



Sabbath Afternoon

JONAH ARRIVES IN THE Assyrian capital city of Nineveh. He proclaims the announcement that God has given him. What happens in the city is remarkable. We find a picture of true repentance from people whom we would not expect to be repentant. In fact, their repentance far exceeds anything seen so far in the prophet Jonah.

What accounted for this remarkable turnaround? The text really doesn't say. When we consider that conversion is personal and often rare, the fact that a whole city of pagans undergoes such an experience is amazing. No doubt here, as in many Bible narratives, a lot of details are missing; thus, we can go only with what we have, which is enough to give us another view of God's love toward sinners.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What was the essence of Jonah's message? What *didn't* Jonah's message say? How long were the people given before judgment would fall? How did the people respond? How did the king respond? In what ways does their action reveal the link between faith and works?

What lessons can we, as a church, learn about faith, repentance, and obedience from the experience of the Ninevites?

MEMORY TEXT: " 'So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it' " (Isaiah 55:11, NASB).

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 22.

Sunday

November 16

PREACHING IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF ASSYRIA.

“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” (Jon. 3:4).

It would be fascinating to have Jonah’s sermon outlines or sermon notes; that is, to know what Jonah preached that had such a powerful impact upon this pagan nation.

All we know is what we have been told here in the text, and notice, according to the text, what his sermon notes probably didn’t contain. He wasn’t preaching monotheism (that there is only one God) or about God’s infinite love or about the hope and promise of eternity. Nor was Jonah commissioned to seek ecumenical unity. Instead, Jonah had one specific message for the Ninevites. Turn from your evil ways or face divine judgment.

What did Jonah specifically warn them about? Jon. 3:4.

Judgment is a key theme in the Bible; it’s as pervasive in Scripture as is the theme of salvation, which makes sense, because both concepts are related. For the wicked, judgment leads to death and destruction; for the righteous, judgment promises vindication, justice, and salvation. Either way, in the end, no one—neither the righteous nor the wicked—escape judgment.

The concept of judgment appears in various ways in Scripture. Look up these texts. Taken together, what do they tell us about judgment? Gen. 15:14; Pss. 1:5; 19:9; Eccles. 3:17; 12:14; Dan. 7:22; Luke 21:36; John 12:47; Acts 17:31; 1 John 4:17; Rev. 20:12.

Theologians say that God’s last word isn’t judgment but salvation. Look at John 12:47: Here is the essence behind all God’s judgments, which is His desire to save. He judged Egypt only after its continued rebellion; He judged the world with the Flood only after people refused to hearken to His words; and even now, with Nineveh, He uses the warning of judgment in order to save them. In other words, He threatens them with destruction as a means of preserving them.

Though we don’t have the details of what Jonah presented to the Ninevites, why did it appear to be a gloom-and-doom message? *Unless you obey, you will be destroyed.* How do we reconcile that idea with the notion of God wanting us to serve Him only out of love, not fear?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Jonah 3:4.

Teachers Aims:

1. To explore the essence of Jonah's message to Nineveh.
2. To examine the Ninevites' response to the message Jonah delivered.
3. To define the lessons that we as a church can learn from the Ninevites.

Lesson Outline:

I. God's Message to Nineveh.

- A. Jonah cries out against Nineveh as soon as he sets foot inside the city.
- B. Jonah—his body in all likelihood visibly altered by his ordeal in the belly of the fish—perhaps appears to the Ninevites as the very wrath of God made flesh.

II. Sackcloth and Ashes.

- A. From the greatest to the least, the Ninevites are impressed by the truth of Jonah's message of doom.
- B. Once again, as on the ship, unbelievers take action to heed God's warning.
- C. The strength of the message and the conviction that it instills in Nineveh are best demonstrated by the king of Nineveh, who leads his city in repentance.

III. Nineveh's Repentance and Seeking of Mercy.

- A. The king of Nineveh is so moved by Jonah's preaching that he personally calls for a reform of the entire nation of Assyria.
- B. Like the sailors on the ship to Tarshish, the king recognizes that forgiveness comes only from God's mercy.
- C. In an ironic twist, God's own people do not repent of their transgressions and later reap the bitter harvest at the hands of their enemies.

Summary: The Ninevites know very little of God, and, yet, they yield swiftly to His commands. Ironically, Israel, rich in a knowledge of the Lord, in their arrogance choose to ignore God's reproofs and later are carried away into captivity. This is a warning to all God's people to spurn neither His mercy nor His invitation to come to Him in repentance.

Commentary.

I. A Great City Before God.

Jonah 3:3 says that Nineveh was a three-day's walk across. Skep-

Monday

November 17

YET FORTY DAYS.

How long does God give the Ninevites before the city will be overturned? In what other instances is that same number used? Gen. 7:17; Exod. 24:18; Num. 14:33, 34; Matt. 4:2; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2; Acts 1:3. Are there any parallels to the uses of that number in these texts and what happens here in the book of Jonah? If so, what are they?

Whatever Jonah said, in detail, to these people, there's no question: It worked. The phrase in Jonah 3:5 "from the greatest of them even to the least of them" (literally, "from their greatest to their least") is a common way to express totality in Hebrew. The entire city of wicked Gentiles accepts what Jonah says about judgment as the truth.

As we saw with the pagan mariners of chapter 1, here again non-Israelites turn to the God of heaven. The notoriously wicked pagan citizenry of Nineveh accept Jonah's judgment message with all seriousness. They believe he is proclaiming the words of God.

When Jonah presents the dire warning to the city of Nineveh, what is the astonishing result? Jon. 3:5.

Notice, the Ninevites didn't just believe Jonah; they *believed God* (Jon. 3:5). In this case, worshipers of other gods are not necessarily unaware of or resistant to the one supreme Deity and Judge, and when confronted with His word, they respond.

In this case, the Ninevites accept that the threatened judgment is deserved. This reminds us of the biblical perspective that there is in each person, whether a pagan or a believer, a conscience that can be touched by the power of God.

Look again at Jonah 3:5. The people "believed God." The Hebrew word there for "believed" comes from the same Hebrew word found in Genesis 15:6, regarding Abraham and his faith. Though the book of Jonah isn't talking about any kind of deep Pauline conception of justification by faith, it still, nevertheless, stressed their belief. Do you think this "belief," as expressed here in Jonah, is the same thing as faith, as commonly understood in Christianity? (See also Heb. 11:6.) Give reasons for your answer.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

tics have argued that the city was not big enough to require three days to cross or even follow its surrounding walls. Others have suggested that Jonah started to preach only after he had gone a day's journey into the city or that he walked through it one day, preached for a day, and left the third day. But such quibbling misses the point. The author means that it is a large and important city—especially in God's eyes. The author also could have had in mind more than the city itself. Nineveh also included a large administrative district attached to it, just as we consider the suburbs around a major city to be part of the city itself.

God wants to save the people of Nineveh from destroying themselves and others. Jonah's mission was to warn them of that destruction. The most important point—indicated by the literal Hebrew—is that the city is “great to/for God.”

II. A Brief Evangelistic Series.

The book of Jonah does not go into detail about what the prophet preached. It says only that he declared “ ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown’ ” (Jon. 3:4, NRSV). While Scripture uses the verb *hapak* (“overturn,” “overthrow”) for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Gen. 19:25, Lam. 4:6, Amos 4:11), it also can mean “to turn around,” “to transform” (see 1 Kings 22:34, Jer. 13:23). Perhaps God inspired Jonah to employ a deliberately unclear word. If Nineveh did not “turn around,” it would have to be “turned over, overturned.”

The brief message might imply that Jonah did not put a lot of planning into it or that its power lay not in Jonah's eloquence but in God's power. Whatever the reason, Jonah's heart was not in it. Although he had at last traveled to Nineveh, he was still a most reluctant prophet, hoping that God really would destroy the brutal city. We must remember that in the ancient world prophets were not missionaries. Jonah went to deliver nothing less than a warning. He did not call for repentance or for the people to reject false gods.

III. An Instant Response.

The text strongly suggests that Jonah did not preach beyond the first day. But the Ninevites responded immediately. “It would not have mattered that Jonah was an outsider representing another country or another deity. The polytheistic beliefs of the ancient world allowed for hundreds of gods, any of whom might be capable of impacting their lives for good or ill. Foreign delegations would at times have included prophetic personnel so that the favor or disfavor of the major deities involved could be expressed concerning any negotiations. . . . The fact that [Jonah] was a foreigner would have served as evidence of the truth of his message, for why would someone have traveled all this distance unless impelled by deity?”—John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP*

Tuesday

November 18

A PAGAN CONVERSION EXPERIENCE (See Jon. 3:5-8).

The Ninevites admit the divine judgment is deserved. And they display their conviction through outward signs of repentance: fasting and wearing sackcloth. This self-humiliation is a means of expressing submission to God. When we think of all the work often needed to bring one soul to genuine repentance, it's amazing here to see a whole city (pagans, no less) doing it, as well.

Who else besides the general population heard the call to judgment? Jon. 3:6.

The kings of these ancient Near Eastern nations weren't known for their humility or attitude of repentance, especially before a "foreign" God. However, something powerful happened to this one here.

The title "king of Nineveh" would more generally be described as the "king of Assyria." But Assyria is never mentioned in the book. Thus, the writer underscores how the book of Jonah is concerned specifically with Nineveh. This also accords with the accepted practice of permitting the name of a chief city to stand for a country in written documents. In the city of Nineveh, we find the king including himself in the earnest supplication of God.

What does the king do in response to Jonah's message?

Notice the movement of the unnamed king. He goes from sitting on a throne and wearing his royal robe to being covered in sackcloth and sitting in ashes. From a throne to ashes, from a royal robe to sackcloth. If this doesn't sound like true repentance, what does?

This heathen ruler does not use modern techniques of denying culpability. He has been wrong, and he is honest enough to admit it. Far from considering himself in a category apart from the morality of the citizenry of Nineveh, the king sets an example to his people by acknowledging his own need to repent. He does not doubt that God is right to be angry with Nineveh. And thus, this pagan king repents before the King of kings.

However dramatic the king's example, what happened to him that needs to happen to all those who would become true followers of the Lord? Why, in a sense, does what happened to the king need to happen to us every day? (See Luke 18:13; 1 Cor. 15:31; Col. 2:6.)

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 779, 780.

The Holy Spirit filled Jonah's few words with a power he probably did not intend, and the people believed the message from the God of Israel. The Hebrew idiom "believe in" expresses the concept of trusting or having confidence in a person (see Gen. 15:6, 1 Sam. 27:12). The Ninevites trusted God's word better than did His own people.

Even though to Nineveh the Lord is a foreign deity, the people acknowledge their sin when, through Jonah, God confronts them with it. The king of Nineveh asks his people to "turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands" (Jon. 3:8, NRSV). They "turn" instead of being "overturned." The Assyrian Empire was known for its violence. Violence in such passages as Genesis 6:11 and Habakkuk 1:3 refers not just to random acts but a whole philosophy of behavior. Assyria had based its policy on premeditated and systematic cruelty and force. Nineveh and its people now vowed to turn away from such a lifestyle. To demonstrate their intention, they prayed and

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Jeremiah 29:13; Jonah 3:4, 6-8.

1. Just as the number three is used repeatedly in the Bible, so is the number 40. (See Gen. 7:17; Num. 14:33, 34; Matt. 4:2; and Mark 1:13.) Based on these verses, why do you think God gave the Ninevites 40 days to repent in Jonah 3:4?
2. From reading Jonah, it appears that the entire population of Nineveh repented. Yet, these were people who had no prior concept of God as a saving God and as a God who wants to know us personally. How would you use Jeremiah 29:13 to explain to a non-Christian how the Ninevites repented?
3. Jonah 3:6-8 tells us that the king led his people in repentance. What was the significance of his laying aside his royal robes for sackcloth? How did this act of humility affect his people?
4. Nineveh was the largest city in the northern kingdom. Yet, every person repented. How is this possible, and what does it tell you about God?
5. Both the ship's captain and the king of Nineveh called on God to have compassion and to save their people. From the lesson this week, we learned that everyone has a conscience that may be touched by the power of God. Why do you think that people who do not have a personal relationship with God often call on Him in times of trouble but then return to their former indifference to Him after He has answered their prayers?

Wednesday

November 19

THE KING CALLS NINEVEH TO REPENTANCE.

What is the remarkable pronouncement the king then issues? Jon. 3:7-9.

A fast is one thing; to not drink is another. And when one usually thinks of a fast, one doesn't usually think of it applying to animals, as well. However, for whatever reasons, even the beasts aren't to eat or to drink. Whether the Lord required that or not is questionable. What isn't questionable is that the Ninevites take Jonah's words very seriously. Also, mention of flocks and herds suggests that the heralds journey beyond the city walls to the rural areas generally surrounding major walled cities then.

What else does the king urge the people to do? Jon. 3:8.

The king urges the Ninevites to "call insistently/mightily to God" in earnest prayer. Both humans and animals are to be clothed in sackcloth, the garb of penitence. Sackcloth expresses witness for grief of sin that makes a person vile. Wearing it gives evidence of the bankrupt state that sin brings. Its coarseness reminds the wearer of the vulgarity of transgression. It prompts remembrance as to how a sinner appears in the presence of a holy God. The ashes speak of the fire that consumes and what the ultimate end of sin will be.

What further action does the king urge upon the people of Nineveh? Jon. 3:8.

Note the striking picture of a pagan king urging pagan people to call upon God earnestly (the pagan sailors had done this already). The king also singles out a particular vice prevalent in Nineveh. Of all the spectrum of evils that could have been cited, the king singles out violence. God had not been mistaken in His call to judgment. Violence was a characteristic of the Assyrians. It still is graphically visible in carefully carved granite panels archaeologists have found, that portray Assyrian violence in military conquests. The king himself readily acknowledges the violent nature of Nineveh's culture.

Why is the call to change their actions so important here? The people believed God (faith), and they covered themselves in sackcloth and fasted (repentance). But what would their repentance have meant if they didn't change their ways, as well?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

fasted. Interestingly, when the king urges the people to “ ‘turn from their evil ways’ ” (NRSV), he is employing the language used by the Hebrew prophets (see Jer. 15:7; 18:11; 23:22; 25:5; 26:3; 35:15; 36:3, 7; Ezek. 3:19; 13:22; 18:23; 20:44; 33:9, 11; Zech. 1:4).

IV. Who Knows?

The phrase “ ‘Who knows?’ ” (Jon. 3:9, NRSV) also appears in the story of the child born from the illicit relationship of David with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:22) and the locust plague in Joel (Joel 2:13, 14). In all three cases, the words are spoken in conjunction with *fast*. (David fasts as an individual and Israel and Nineveh as whole communities.)

God accepts the repentance of the Ninevites and changes His mind about the calamity He said He would bring upon them (Jon. 3:10). The Hebrew verb behind the phrase “change mind” is the *niphal* conjugation of *niham*, meaning “to be sorry, to rue, to repent, to change one’s mind.” The *niphal* form appears a number of times in the Old Testament. Of those, the following—Exodus 13:17, Job 42:6, Jeremiah 31:19—have human subjects. The rest involve God. They fall into three categories:

1. *God repents of past actions*: Genesis 6:6, 7; 1 Samuel 15:11, 35;

WITNESSING

Earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods are just a few of the natural disasters that have caused both the death of millions and a tremendous amount of property damage. Meteorologists use radar to observe and forecast the weather. Storm watches and warnings have helped to save many lives. However, a warning is good only if people heed it. Many have died needlessly because they did not. In Noah’s day, only eight people out of the whole earth’s population heeded God’s warning about the Flood. Lot and his two daughters were the only three survivors when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah by fire.

Although many disasters have occurred as a result of God’s judgment, He is not a God of destruc-

tion. “ ‘ “As I live,” ’ says the Lord God, ‘ “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” ’ ” (Ezek. 33:11, NRSV).

The people of Nineveh heeded God’s warning and repented, so He was able to save them. When Abraham pleaded with the Lord to save Sodom and Gomorrah, God promised to save the two cities, even if there were only ten righteous people (Gen. 18:32). No wonder the Lord was so willing to spare the entire city of Nineveh when it repented.

When witnessing to people, we can show them from the Word of God that they are of great value to the Lord (Luke 12:24) and that He will save to the uttermost those who come to Him (Heb. 7:25).

Thursday

November 20

A PICTURE OF TRUE REPENTANCE.

What urgent motivation does the king now add to his proclamation? Jon. 3:9.

The king realizes that forgiveness for their sin was dependent upon the mercy of the great God of heaven and earth. The king is as perceptive as is the sea captain during the terrifying storm in chapter 1, when he implores Jonah to pray: “*Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish*” (Jon. 1:6, NKJV, emphasis supplied). Notice how this parallels what the king himself is thinking (Jon. 3:9). In both cases, neither the king nor the sea captain are sure what is going to happen; in both cases, they rely totally on the mercy of a God more powerful than they. And in both cases, only by God’s grace do they have any chance at all.

What was it about their actions that causes God to “repent” (actually, the Hebrew word often, and unfortunately, translated “repent” carries with it the idea of “feeling compassion”)? In other words, of all the things the previous texts say the Ninevites did (believed, fasted, put on sackcloth, had their animals fast), what does the text specify that the Lord “saw,” which causes Him not to do what He said He would do? What point should that make for us? (See also James 2:2-26.)

How is the depth of their repentance later recalled? Matt. 12:41.

Their repentance is later mentioned by Jesus. Jonah’s own people, the Israelites, despite their special covenant relationship with God, don’t have this same kind of corporate experience. Ultimately, they fail to repent and, therefore, experience judgment.

We are thus reminded once again that God deals with all humanity on the same basis, without partiality. Ultimately, both Nineveh and Jerusalem are destroyed. God deals evenly with the human race.

It is remarkable and sadly ironic how much more trouble God has had with Jonah, one of His own people, than with the worst of the heathen world! How amazing the willingness of the Ninevites to turn away from and forsake their evil ways. What specific lesson should we, as Seventh-day Adventists, learn from this point? Is not there some Jonah in us, as well?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Jeremiah 20:16; 42:10; Zechariah 8:14.

2. *God speaks of future actions He may change:* Exodus 32:12, 14; 2 Samuel 24:16; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Jeremiah 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; Amos 7:3, 6.

3. *Twice the verb appears in a statement describing God, once by God Himself (Joel 2:13) and the other by Jonah (Jon. 4:2).*

In the great controversy, God's actions can depend upon humanity's response.

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: Bob Hope once said, "Today my heart beat 103,369 times, my blood traveled 168 million miles, I breathed 23,400 times, I inhaled 438 cubic feet of air, I ate 3 pounds of food, drank 2.9 pounds of liquid, I perspired 1.43 pints, I gave off 85.3 degrees of heat, I generated 450 tons of energy, I spoke 4,800 words, I moved 750 major muscles, my nails grew .01714 inches, and I exercised 7 million brain cells. Gee, but I'm tired!" In spite of flaws generated by sin, human beings continue to remain the most amazing creation of all.

Thought Questions:

1. Our high level of intelligence and our immense capacity to reason, when unconsecrated to God, are often Satan's greatest tools. Sometimes, like Jonah, we seek to question God's plans. What must be our response when God calls us to do that which seems nonsensical, odd, or a waste of time?
2. Our power of reasoning makes it easy to justify our actions and to judge the actions of oth-

ers. However, judgment is God's prerogative, not ours. How do we curb the tendency to be as judgmental as Jonah was? How can we demonstrate to others the heart of a God who loves the willfully arrogant and the ignorant just as much as He loves us?

Application Questions:

1. How do human intelligence and technology impede evangelism nowadays? How can we incorporate technology in the advancement of evangelism? Together with the class, think of innovative ways to witness and evangelize using technology.
2. The title of this week's lesson is "Jonah, the Amazing Evangelist." List the characteristics that make Jonah "amazing." How can we emulate these characteristics, both individually and corporately as a church? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us develop these characteristics? How can we help one another become "amazing evangelists"?

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, “The Measure of Forgiveness,” in *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 243–251; “Who Is My Neighbour?” pp. 376–389.

Nineveh, wicked though it had become, was not wholly given over to evil. He who ‘beholdeth all the sons of men’ (Psalm 33:13) . . . perceived in that city many who were reaching out after something better and higher. . . . God revealed Himself to them in an unmistakable manner, to lead them, if possible, to repentance.” —Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 230.

“ ‘And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.’ In the ages of darkness that had preceded the advent of Christ, the divine Ruler had passed lightly over the idolatry of the heathen; but now, through His Son, He had sent men the light of truth; and He expected from all repentance unto salvation, not only from the poor and humble, but from the proud philosopher and the princes of the earth. ‘Because He hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead.’ As Paul spoke of the resurrection from the dead, ‘some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.’ ” —Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 239.

“The pardon granted by this king represents a divine forgiveness of all sin. Christ is represented by the king, who, moved with compassion, forgave the debt of his servant. Man was under the condemnation of the broken law. He could not save himself, and for this reason Christ came to this world.” —Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 244.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. Someone once said, “How can we tell when a sin has been pardoned? By the fact that we no longer commit that sin.” Nice thought, but do you agree? Support your answer.**
- 2. Look again at Jonah 3:10. It says that God decided not to do what He said He would do. What does that mean, and what implications could it have for us, both as individuals or as a church body? How does this quote help us understand this principle? “It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 695.**

SUMMARY: The Ninevites bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. What a lesson for those quick to judge the spiritual state of others.