

Nineveh Repents at the Preaching of Jonah

Jonah 3:5-10

Jonah 3:5-10 - *“So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?*

¹⁰ Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.”

Background Notes

“And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’” (v4). The essence of Jonah’s message to Nineveh was short and to the point: “Turn or Burn!”

And guess what? The people turned! The people believed the message, turned to God, and repented of their wickedness. *“So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.”* And as a result, Nineveh did not burn. God withheld His judgment.

This was probably the greatest spiritual awakening in history. The entire city of Nineveh - from the king on down! - repented at the preaching of Jonah. No wonder the Lord Jesus referred to the preaching of Jonah as one of the great events in all of Old Testament history (Matthew 12 and Luke 11).

How did God prepare the hearts of the people of Nineveh to receive Jonah’s message? Many times God will use events and circumstances to pave the way for His messengers and their message. There are several factors that God may have used to “soften up” the hearts of the people of Nineveh, so they would be ready to listen to Jonah.

- a. Historical records indicate that the Assyrian Empire was in a temporary period of decline at that time, primarily because of internal dissension. In fact, that is why King Jeroboam II was able to regain some of the territory that Israel had lost to the Assyrians. When the economy is down, and things are not going so well, people are a little more open to hearing what God has to say. God allows hard times, then and today, to soften hard-hearted people.
- b. Two plagues had swept through Nineveh at this time in history: one in 765 BC and one in 759 BC. Devastating plagues will certainly open people up to listen to a message from God.

c. Ancient inscriptions chronicle a solar eclipse in that area in 763 BC. Ancient peoples viewed an eclipse as an event of divine intervention – and divine wrath in particular.

4. Finally, there was the appearance of Jonah himself. The story of Jonah’s miraculous experience may have preceded Jonah to Nineveh. And it’s been pointed out that the gastric chemicals and digestive fluids of the fish may have affected Jonah’s skin. This may have given Jonah’s skin a mottled appearance - evidence of his miraculous preservation inside the fish. This would have given Jonah a ready audience!

In any case, God may have used several factors to pave the way for Jonah’s message of judgment and grace, and the great spiritual awakening of Nineveh.

Doctrinal Points

1. When people believe God, they turn from their wicked ways.

“So the people of Nineveh believed God” (v5), and, “Let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands”(v8).

Did you notice I’ve been referring to the great repentance of the people of Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah as an **awakening**, not a **revival**? Do you know the difference between a *revival* and a *spiritual awakening*?

Technically speaking, a **revival** is a change of heart and life for people who are already believers. They already have spiritual life, but they have backslidden, or they’re apathetic and lukewarm, and they need to be revitalized or revived.

A spiritual **awakening** refers to unbelievers who come to faith and are converted. These people were spiritually dead - but they’ve been awakened from the dead through the preaching of the Word of God. They have come to spiritual life and been saved. That’s why we refer to the work of God in this country at the time of Jonathan Edwards as “The Great Awakening” (not a Great Revival) because many people were saved at that time. (However, don’t feel bad if you’ve called an “awakening” a “revival,” or vice versa!)

The spiritual awakening of Nineveh in Jonah’s day was unprecedented in history. In fact, it was greater than the conversions on the Day of Pentecost, at least as far as numbers go. As many as 600,000 pagan people (and maybe more) were converted!

Was this true conversion, or was it only a temporary turning away from evil? It’s clear that the entire Assyrian Empire didn’t turn to the one true God at this time. The Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel about a generation later. The prophet Nahum predicted the downfall of Nineveh, and it fell about 150 years after the preaching of

Jonah. So if these people were true converts, they didn't do a very good job of communicating their faith in the one true God to the next generation.

However, I think there was true conversion. Verse 5 says that this generation of people of Nineveh did believe in the one true God, that they did truly repent, and they did turn from their wicked ways. Furthermore, in Matthew 12:41 the Lord Jesus said: *"The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it [the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day] because they repented at the preaching of Jonah."* It sure sounds like the Lord Jesus believed there was true repentance and true conversion at Nineveh!

A sign that belief in God is more than just head knowledge is **repentance**. And a sign of true repentance is a change in a person's way of life - a turning away from sin. When people believe God, they turn from their wicked ways.

2. When people turn from their wicked ways, God withholds His judgment.

"Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" (v10).

The *"works"* or *"deeds"* of repentance that are mentioned in verse 10 did not save the people of Nineveh. No! Romans 10:17 says, *"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* When the people heard the word of God through Jonah's preaching, they responded to the grace of God that was inherent in the message. So doing these *"works"* did not save the people of Nineveh – their belief and faith in the word of God is what saved them. However, the *"works"* were evidence of a true change of heart.

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" When the people heard this message, they realized that God, in His grace, was giving them a chance to repent of their violence and wickedness. Listen to what the people said: *"Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish" (v9).* They cried out mightily to God and turned from their wickedness (v8). They fasted, and put on sackcloth and ashes - outward symbols of inner repentance. In fact, as a symbol of national penitence, they even put sackcloth on their animals and forced their animals to fast.

God saw this evidence of their repentance and their faith and belief in Him and His Word, *"and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it."*

What does it mean that God *"relented"* or *"changed His mind"*? Isn't God omniscient - He knows everything? Isn't God immutable - He doesn't change? Yes, God is immutable, and He is omniscient. He knows everything - past, present, and future. So then how can He *"relent"* about something, or change His mind?

The answer is that this verse was written from the human perspective. From the human perspective, it appears that God relented or changed His mind. However, God knew all along that Nineveh would repent.

This perspective is relevant to the way God answers prayer. From our earthly perspective, it looks like God's decisions are based on our prayers, and how fervently we pray. James 5:16 says, *"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."* From God's perspective, however, He knows the end from the beginning. He knows whether we'll pray and how we'll pray. So it's two sides of the same coin.

Perspective is important. The Bible certainly teaches that God is omniscient and immutable - but the Bible also teaches that when wicked people repent and change, God relents and withholds His planned judgment. ***This divine principle is intrinsic to God's immutability. It's part of the way God works.***

In Jeremiah 18:7-8 God said, *"The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it."* When people turn from their wicked ways, God withholds His judgment.

Practical Application

You'd be surprised who might listen to you!

When Jonah finally showed up to preach in Nineveh, he probably thought no one would listen to his message. After all, these were pagan Assyrians, well known in the ancient world for their cruel and wicked ways. Jonah probably thought that he would preach his message, and then he would go outside the city and wait for the judgment to come. (In fact, we'll see that Jonah hoped exactly that when we get to chapter 4.)

Well, was he in for a surprise! In his wildest dreams, Jonah never imagined that the whole population of the nation of Nineveh would believe his message - and repent!

How true this is today as well. We tend to just write off some people because they don't seem to have any interest in the gospel - but you might be surprised who might listen to you. For example, when I was in high school, one of the football coaches was the kind of man you'd never expect to become a Christian. He was just too hard and too worldly. But one of the players was a Christian - and he witnessed to the coach - and the coach became a Christian! Unbelievable! What a radical change!

Do you have a boss - or a neighbor - or a fellow student - whom you have written off because you think they'd never be interested in becoming a Christian? Give it a try. You'd be surprised who might listen to you!