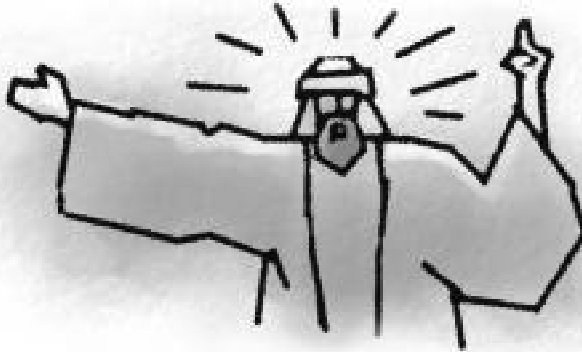


Jonah, the Wonderful Evangelist¹



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PM**

JONAH HAS ARRIVED IN NINEVEH, THE CAPITAL OF ASSYRIA. With courage, he preaches the message God has given him. What happens in the city of Nineveh is quite a surprise. We find a picture of true repentance² from people whom we would not expect to repent.³ Their repentance is the biggest surprise so far in the book of Jonah.

What was responsible for their repentance? The Bible really does not say. When a person accepts the gospel, it is wonderful. But for a whole city of nonbelievers⁴ to accept the gospel is almost unbelievable!⁵ In the story of Jonah and many other Bible stories, a lot of details are missing. So we have to go only with what we have. But what we have is enough to give us another view of God's great love and mercy⁶ toward sinners.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What was the main part of Jonah's message? What did Jonah's message not say? How long were the people given before judgment⁷ would fall? How did the people answer? How did the king answer? In what ways does their action show the connection between faith and works? What lesson can we, as a church, learn about faith, repentance, and obedience from the experience of the people of Nineveh?

MEMORY VERSE: "So also will be the word that I [God] speak—it will not fail to do what I plan for it [the word]; it will do everything I send it to do" (Isaiah 55:11, TEV).

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

¹evangelist—a preacher who travels to share the good news of salvation.

²repentance—being sorry for your sins, wanting to stop sinning, and turning away from sins.

³repent—to say you are sorry for your sins and then to turn away from your sins.

⁴nonbelievers—people who do not believe.

⁵unbelievable—hard to believe.

⁶mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

⁷judgment—to declare guilty or not guilty of sin.

SUN PREACHING IN NINEVEH.

“Jonah started through the city, and after walking a whole day, he proclaimed [preached], ‘In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!’ ” (Jonah 3:4, TEV).

It would be interesting to have Jonah’s sermon outlines or sermon notes. We would like to know what Jonah preached that had such a powerful influence upon Nineveh.

All we know is what Jonah 1:1 tells us. Jonah was not preaching about monotheism,⁸ God’s limitless⁹ love, or about the hope and promise of eternity.¹⁰ God did not send Jonah to bring different religions together. He had one special message for the Ninevites.¹¹ Turn from your evil ways, or face God’s judgment.

What did Jonah warn the people of Nineveh about? Jonah 3:4.

Judgment is a key theme in the Bible. The judgment theme fills the whole Bible just as the theme of salvation does. This makes sense, because judgment and salvation are closely related. For wicked people, judgment leads to death and destruction. For righteous (holy) people, judgment promises forgiveness, justice (fairness), and salvation. In the end, both

righteous people and wicked people cannot escape judgment.

The idea of judgment appears in different ways in the Bible. What do the following verses tell us about judgment? Genesis 15:14; Psalm 1:5; Psalm 19:9, 10; Ecclesiastes 3:17; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Daniel 7:22; Luke 21:36; John 12:47; Acts 17:31; 1 John 4:17; Revelation 20:12.



God’s judgments are sweeter than purest honey.

Theologians¹² say that God’s last word is not judgment but salvation. John 12:47 tells us that the important message of all God’s judgment is His desire to save. He judged Egypt only after its stubborn rebellion. He judged the world

⁸monotheism—the belief that there is only one God.

⁹limitless—having no limit.

¹⁰eternity—life without end; forever.

¹¹Ninevites—the people of the city of Nineveh, Assyria.

¹²theologians—people who study the Bible for a living.

with the Flood only after the people refused to accept Him. Even with Nineveh, He used the warning of judgment to save them.

We do not have the details of how Jonah preached to the Ninevites. But why did it appear to be an “end-of-the-world” message? Jonah was saying, “You *must* obey, or you will be destroyed.” How do we connect this idea with the idea of God wanting us to serve Him out of love, not because we are afraid of Him?

MON FORTY DAYS.

How long does God give the people of Nineveh before the city will be destroyed? Jonah 3:4. What other examples show the same use of this number? Genesis 7:17; Exodus 24:18; Numbers 14:33, 34; Matthew 4:2; Acts 1:1-3. What comparisons¹³ can you find between the use of that number in these verses and Jonah 3:4?

We do not know what Jonah said to the people of Nineveh. But whatever he said, it worked! The wording in Jonah 3:5, “from the greatest of them [the people of Nineveh] to the least of them” (KJV), really means “from their greatest to their least.” This is a common way in the Hebrew language to show all people. The

entire city of wicked Gentiles¹⁴ accepted what Jonah said about judgment as truth.

As we saw with the unbelieving sailors in Jonah 1, non-Israelites¹⁵ turn to the God of heaven. The very wicked citizens of Nineveh accepted Jonah’s judgment message. They believed he was preaching the words of God.

When Jonah presents the warning to Nineveh, what is the surprising result? Jonah 3:5.

The people of Nineveh did not just believe Jonah. They believed God (Jonah 3:5). The worshipers of other gods may be familiar with and not rebellious to the true God and Judge. And when they are challenged with His word, they accept.

The people of Nineveh accept that they deserve God’s judgment. This reminds us of the Bible truth that each person, whether a believer or nonbeliever has a conscience¹⁶ that can be touched by the power of God.

Look again at Jonah 3:5. The people of Nineveh “believed God.” The Hebrew word for “believed” comes from the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 15:6 to describe Abraham and his faith. Do you think the Ninevites’ “belief” is the same as we understand faith? (Also read Hebrews 11:6.) Give reasons for your answers.

¹³comparisons—how things are the same.

¹⁴Gentiles—people who are not Jews.

¹⁵non-Israelites—people who are not from Israel.

¹⁶conscience—a knowledge or sense of right or wrong with an urge to do right.

TUE A CONVERSION EXPERIENCE.

Read Jonah 3:5-8. The people of Nineveh admit that they deserve God's judgment. And they show their acceptance through repentance such as fasting¹⁷ and wearing sackcloth.¹⁸ They humble themselves by surrendering to God. Think of all the work needed to bring one soul to true repentance.¹⁹ Then imagine a whole city repenting!

Who else heard the call to judgment? Jonah 3:6.

The kings of these ancient²⁰ Near Eastern nations were well-known for their pride and stubbornness, especially against a "foreign" God. However, something powerful happened to the king of Nineveh.

The title "king of Nineveh" means the "king of Assyria." But Assyria is never named in the book of Jonah. By not mentioning Assyria, the writer shows how the book of Jonah is especially about Nineveh. Not mentioning Assyria also follows the accepted practice in written records of using the name of a chief city to mean a country. In Nineveh, we find the king humbling himself before God.

What does the king do in answer to Jonah's message? Jonah 3:6-9.



Wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes showed sorrow for sin.

Notice how the king acts. From sitting on a throne and wearing his royal robe, he covers himself in sackcloth and sits in ashes. From a throne to ashes, from a royal robe to sackcloth. This sounds like true repentance.

This unbelieving²¹ ruler does not use modern methods of trying to cover up his sins. He has been wrong. And he is honest enough to admit he has been wrong. The king does not think himself above being responsible for his people's moral actions. Instead, he sets an example to his people by admitting his own need to repent. He does not doubt that God is right to be angry with Nineveh. So he repents before the King of kings (Jesus).

¹⁷fasting—not eating so you can focus on God.

¹⁸sackcloth—course cloth such as burlap that Bible people wore to pray seriously and humbly for forgiveness of sins.

¹⁹repentance—being sorry for your sins, wanting to stop sinning, and turning away from your sins.

²⁰ancient—very old.

²¹unbelieving—not believing.

The king's example was wonderful. But what happened to him that needs to happen to all people who would become true followers of God? Why does what happened to the king need to happen to us every day? Luke 18:13, 14; 1 Corinthians 15:31; Colossians 2:6.



Everyday, we need to pray to God to have mercy on us.

WED THE KING CALLS NINEVEH TO REPENTANCE.

What wonderful announcement did the king make? Jonah 3:7-9.

A fast (not eat) is one thing. To not drink is another thing. We can live longer without food than we can without water. And when we think of a fast, we do not usually think of making animals fast. But for reasons we do not know, even the animals were not to eat and drink. We question if God required even the animals to fast. But this shows that the people of Nineveh were taking Jonah's words seriously. Mention of flocks and herds shows that the messengers went with the king's instructions to the farming areas outside the walls of Nineveh.

What else did the king encourage the people to do? Jonah 3:8.

The king encouraged the Ninevites to pray to God in serious prayer. Both humans and animals were to be clothed in sackcloth, the robe of repentance.

Sackcloth showed sorrow for sin. Wearing the sackcloth showed that the sinner had come to the "bottom" of sin. The rough feel of the sackcloth reminded the wearer of how terrible sin is. It reminded the sinner of how terrible sin makes him or her look to a holy God.

The ashes spoke of the fire that will destroy sin and what the final end of sin will be.

What further action did the king encourage upon the people of Nineveh? Jonah 3:8.

Note the powerful picture of a pagan²² king encouraging pagan people to call seriously upon God. (The pagan sailors already had called upon God.) The king also names one special sin in Nineveh. Of all the sins that could have been named, the king names violence.²³ God had not been mistaken in calling Nineveh to judgment. The Assyrians were well-known for violence. Proof of violence is still pictured in the stone carvings that archaeologists²⁴ have found. These carvings show the Assyrians' violence in war. The king himself quickly admitted the violent nature of Nineveh.

The people believed God (faith). They covered themselves in sackcloth and did not eat (repentance). But what would this faith and repentance have meant if they did not change their behavior?

THU A PICTURE OF TRUE REPENTANCE.

What important reason does the king give for not eating, praying, and wearing sackcloth? Jonah 3:9.

The king understood that forgiveness for their sins was dependent upon God's mercy. The king was as wise as the sea

captain was during the terrible storm in Jonah 1, when he begged Jonah to pray: "Get up and pray to your God for help. *Maybe he will feel sorry for us and spare [save] our lives'*" (Jonah 1:6, TEV; italics given). Notice how this compares²⁵ with what the king was thinking (Jonah 3:9). Both the sea captain and the king were not sure what was going to happen. They both had to depend fully on the mercy of a God who had more power than they had. They both had a chance only because of God's grace.

How did the people's actions cause God to "repent"?²⁶ (The Hebrew word here translated "repent" carries with it the idea of "feeling compassion [mercy].") Jonah 1:10. Also read James 2:2-26. What does this teach us about the relationship between faith and works?



Faith without works is dead.

²²pagan—not believing in God.

²³violence—cruel attacks against people that cause a lot of blood shedding and suffering.

²⁴archaeologists—people who dig to find things from the past that have been buried.

²⁵compares—shows how things are the same.

²⁶repent—when the Lord repents, it means that instead of giving sinners the punishment they deserve, He forgives them out of His grace and mercy.

Who later remembered the Ninevites' repentance? Matthew 12:39-41.

Jonah's own people, the Israelites, had a special covenant²⁷ relationship with God. But they did not repent as a group the way the Ninevites did. The Israelites failed to repent, and finally experienced judgment.

God saved the Ninevites from judgment. He did not save Israel from judgment. This reminds us once again that God deals with all people equally. Finally, both Nineveh and Jerusalem were destroyed.

God had more trouble with Jonah than he did with the Ninevites! How wonderful it was for the people of Nineveh to turn from their evil ways. What special lesson should we, as Seventh-day Adventists, learn from the behavior of Jonah and the people of Nineveh? Is there a "Jonah" in all of us?

FRI **ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Ellen G. White, *Christ's (Jesus') Object Lessons*, "The Measure of Forgiveness," pp. 243–251; "Who Is My Neighbor," pp. 376–389.

"Nineveh had become very wicked. But it could still repent. He who 'sees all mankind' (Psalm 33:13, TEV). . . knew

that the city had many people who were reaching out for something better and higher. . . . God showed Himself to them so clearly that He could lead them to repentance."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 230.

" 'In the past, God overlooked such ignorance [idol worship], but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,' (Acts 17:30, TEV). Through the long history of darkness before Jesus' first coming, God had not punished nonbelievers for idol worship. But now, through His Son, God has sent people the light of truth. And He expects from all people repentance unto salvation. 'For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice [fairness] by the man [Jesus] he has appointed [chosen]. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him [Jesus] from the dead' (Acts 17:31, NIV). As Paul spoke of the raising from the dead, 'some of them [Paul's listeners] made fun of him, but others said, "We want to hear you speak about this again (Acts 17:32, NIV)." ' ' "—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*,²⁸ p. 239.

"The pardon²⁹ given to the king of Nineveh shows God's forgiveness of all sin. Jesus is represented by the merciful³⁰ king, who forgave the debt of his servant (Matthew 18:21-35). People were under the curse of the broken law. They could not save themselves. So Jesus came to this world. He hid

²⁷covenant—an agreement between God and His people.

²⁸apostles—the disciples of Jesus whom He chose to preach the gospel after He returned to heaven.

²⁹pardon—to free a person from punishment.

³⁰merciful—full of kindness we do not deserve.

His godly nature by putting on human form. And He gave His life for sinners. To every soul He freely offers the blood-bought pardon. 'His love is constant [continuous] and he is always willing to save' Psalm 130:7, TEV."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 244.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Someone once said, "We can tell when a sin has been pardoned by the fact that we no longer do that sin." Do you agree or not agree? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Jonah 3:10 says that God decided

not to do what He planned to do. What does that mean? How would such a decision on God's part influence us as individuals and as a church? How does the following quote help us understand these questions? "We should remember that the promises and the warnings of God depend on conditions."³¹—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*,³² p. 695.

SUMMARY: The people of Nineveh bring forth the fruits of true repentance. What a lesson for those of us who might be quick to judge the spiritual condition of other people.

³¹conditions—things we do to fulfill God's promises or warnings.

³²evangelism—the spreading of the gospel to the world.