

May 21 Lesson 12

Forgiving Love

Devotional Reading: [Acts 11:11-18](#)
Background Scripture: [Jonah 3](#); [Nahum 1-3](#)

JONAH 3



¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Key Verse

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.—[Jonah 3:10](#)

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Introduction

A. Limited-Time Offer

Some matters are easy to forgive. But occasionally a news report will tell of a person who forgives a killer who took the life of a family member. Most, however, find it impossible to forgive when a person kidnaps, tortures, or takes the life of a loved one.

Even so, there are examples of people who befriend the criminal in prison. Upon release, he or she is invited to share a meal or even live in the same house until a job and permanent housing are obtained. The emotions go from hatred to compassion to forgiveness.

Even given the absence of criminal behavior, people find it very difficult to request, offer, and/or receive forgiveness. When someone is offended, months or years may pass with no contact between parties. Eventually, one may extend an olive branch. Communication grows over a period of time, forgiveness is extended and accepted, and the parties eventually interact as if nothing ever happened. To seek forgiveness requires maturity. So does offering it.

Think about that from God's perspective as you imagine yourself sitting on a hillside overlooking a modern city at dusk. The sun goes down and lights appear. The city bustles in the darkness as hundreds or thousands engage in sin. When the accumulated impact of thousands of sinful acts is considered, you may wonder why God does not act to rid the world of all sin!

But God *has* acted: he sent his Son to redeem humanity from sin. This act is described in these well-known words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" ([John 3:16](#)).

God wants to forgive, and he does. But on a day known only to God, it will be too late either to seek or accept forgiveness because it will no longer be offered (see [Acts 17:30, 31](#)). The residents of Nineveh knew their time would be up in 40 days, and they repented. Since we do not know when Jesus will return, repentance is all the more imperative!

B. Lesson Background

The city of Nineveh is the place for the events considered in today's lesson. This city is first mentioned in the Bible when a descendant of Noah's son Ham built it ([Genesis 10:11](#)). It was a major city in the Assyrian Empire and became its capital about 700 BC. This is often misunderstood, for many think it was the capital in Jonah's day, but it was not. Jonah's time period was more than 50 years prior to the city's becoming the capital.

King Sennacherib was the Assyrian ruler who selected Nineveh as his capital. He is the one who greatly enlarged it and built a very large palace. He is also the one who lost 185,000 troops in a single night (see [2 Kings 19:35](#); [Isaiah 37:36](#)). The city was sited on the eastern side of the Tigris River; its ruins are across the river from the modern city of Mosul in Iraq.

Major cities often seem to be cesspools of sin. This was certainly true of Nineveh. The reason given for Jonah's mission to Nineveh was that the wickedness of the city had got God's attention ([Jonah 1:2](#)).

Sin and wickedness often produce feelings of guilt. When a city experiences a tragedy, conscientious people may wonder whether their sin is the cause. The nation of Assyria was in a period of temporary decline during Jonah's day. Provincial leaders acted as kings in their respective regions. This is normal in and of itself, but there were conflicts among them. These were exacerbated by famines. The area also experienced devastating plagues in 765 and 759 BC. The ancients considered eclipses to be bad omens, and a solar eclipse occurred on June 15, 763

BC, visible over much of Assyria. Jonah's message of impending doom may have had a greater impact because of some or all of these astronomical, economic, and political events.

I. Repeating the Commission

([Jonah 3:1-4](#))

A. Mission Stated ([vv. 1, 2](#))

^{1,2} Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

The command is very similar to the commission given in [Jonah 1:2](#) (see the Lesson Background). That previous instruction was for Jonah to "preach against" the city; here Jonah is informed that he must *proclaim* what God tells him to preach. Jonah is not to come up with his own set of sermons, but is to use those provided by God.

Jonah's location at the time of his second call is not revealed. We know the fish vomited him on "dry land" ([Jonah 2:10](#), last week's lesson), perhaps on a beach in Samaria. Or time may have passed so that Jonah has already been walking toward Nineveh now for several days. Some propose that he has returned to his ancestral home in Gath Hepher ([2 Kings 14:25](#)). The possibilities are endless and speculative. A minority view is that the fish took Jonah on a wild ride of over 1,500 miles, traveling first west, then north around Asia Minor, then east into the Black Sea to be vomited on a beach north of Nineveh. But that would still leave 350 miles to travel.

B. Mission Begins ([vv. 3, 4](#))

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.

The distance from Samaria (the capital of Israel) to Nineveh is about 550 miles. Some believe Jonah to be an official prophet for King Jeroboam II ([2 Kings 14:23-25](#)). This would enable him to carry official credentials.

It will take Jonah about six weeks for this overland trip. This is calculated by assuming that he can average at least 15 miles per day over varying terrain, with no travel on the Sabbath. The evidence suggests that he does not look forward to arriving at the destination, so he may travel at a slower pace.

The record of Nineveh's size as needing *three days to go through* has been criticized on the supposition that there is no city in antiquity so large as to require three days to traverse. This skepticism has drawn various responses. One response is that the three days include the time required for Jonah to stop and preach. Archaeological excavation reveals Nineveh to be at least 1,730 acres in size. Ancient cities have between 160 and 200 residents per acre; therefore the city's total population computes to between 276,800 and 346,000 (compare [Jonah 4:11](#)). That's

huge for this era! For Jonah to preach neighborhood by neighborhood will easily require three days.

A second proposal is that the three days include the villages in the immediate vicinity of Nineveh. In such a case, Nineveh-plus-suburbs is an area with a 60-mile circumference. A third possibility is that a journey of three days is a figure of speech to describe an official visit to a major city. The first day is for exchange of greetings and getting settled. The purpose of the visit is carried out on the second day, and the guests depart on the third. These are all reasonable ways to interpret the language.

⁴ Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

The first half of this verse tends to confirm the first option given above. The message Jonah proclaims after passing through a huge city gate is very brief—just five words in Hebrew. He does not offer any hope—just words of doom.

Recent disasters (see the Lesson Background) probably have a significant effect on the superstitious audience. Jonah's prediction makes those disasters seem as mere previews of the major event that will come in *forty more days*. Such precision enhances the effectiveness of Jonah's preaching.

II. Reactions to the Message

([Jonah 3:5-9](#))

A. By the People ([v. 5](#))

⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Several startling events are recorded in the book of Jonah, but one of the greatest is the tremendous response to Jonah's pointed message. Jonah ends up being one of the most successful preachers of all time, as repentance is demonstrated at all levels of Ninevite society, from *the greatest to the least*.

The astonishing scope of the repentance is underlined when contrasted with the skepticism toward Jesus and his message. Jesus preached to fellow Israelites, and his ministry was accompanied by miracles; the resulting unbelief drew the divine denouncement of [Matthew 11:20-24](#).

On the other hand, Jonah's preaching to foreigners was well received, and there is no record that he performed any miracles in Nineveh. Jesus himself drew the contrast: "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here" ([Matthew 12:41](#)).

Jonah's proclamation is followed by a proclamation by *the Ninevites* themselves. Fasting can indicate deep sorrow (example: [Judges 20:26](#)) as can the donning of *sackcloth*—a coarse, rough fabric (example: [2 Kings 19:1](#)). Putting both together adds intensity to the picture (compare [Psalm 35:13](#)). The Ninevites have no assurance that their demonstration of repentance will result in the prophesied disaster's being averted. But they desperately want to do whatever it takes to preserve themselves.

B. By the King ([vv. 6-9](#))

⁶ When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

Usually people do as the king decrees or does. But here we have the reverse—another surprise!—as *the king of Nineveh* exchanges his royal clothing for sackcloth. But since leaders lead, he takes the additional step of sitting *in the dust*. Dust is associated with ashes ([Genesis 18:27](#); [1 Samuel 2:8](#); [Job 30:19](#); [42:6](#); [Psalm 113:7](#); [Ezekiel 27:30](#)), leading some to think that the king's use of dust/ashes connects with a conqueror's practice of burning enemy cities. Thus dust/ashes associate with death and destruction (compare [Jeremiah 31:40](#)).

This additional step by the king reinforces the actions of the people. A king with more pride may be tempted to execute the messenger in order to squash a disturbing message. Fasting, sackcloth, and ashes are mentioned together in [Esther 4:3](#); [Isaiah 58:5](#); and [Daniel 9:3](#). "Dust" is also used in [Nehemiah 9:1-3](#). Repentance "in dust and ashes" is seen in [Job 42:6](#).

Critics have questioned the accuracy of this account by charging that a king would not have lived in Nineveh during Jonah's day because the city did not become Assyria's capital until later. But Nineveh was a major city in the nation, and kings did reside there occasionally. Further, the hectic conditions in Assyria at the time may have caused some provincial leaders to assume titles of royalty. Earlier in the history of the Israelites, Joshua's forces defeated 31 kings ([Joshua 12:7-24](#)). Each was a king over what is called a city-state (compare "king of Jerusalem" in [Joshua 10:1, 3](#); [12:10](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Assyria Uh-sear-ee-uh.

Assyrian Uh-sear-e-un.

Damascus Duh-mass-kus.

Gath Hopher Gath Hee-fer.

Jeroboam Jair-uh-boe-um.

Jonah Jo-nuh.

Nineveh Nin-uh-vuh.

Ninevites Nin-uh-vites.

Samaria Suh-mare-ee-uh.

Sennacherib Sen-*nack*-er-ib.



**STAND FIRM
AND
PREACH
THE TRUTH**

—Jonah 3

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“How can Christians who are not pulpit ministers by vocation accept this challenge?”

Graham went on to become a spiritual adviser to American presidents, beginning with Harry S. Truman. For a time, Graham was considered America’s conscience. His name has appeared dozens of times in the annual top-10 listings of most admired people—more than anyone else—as published by Gallup. If anyone could be considered to have been preacher to both king and commoner in the twentieth century, it was Billy Graham.

But Graham was not the first preacher able to reach all strata of society. Jonah found himself in that position some 28 centuries before Graham. If Jonah could be persuasive to king and commoner despite his own unwillingness, how effective might modern preachers be, were they to embrace God’s calling with greater enthusiasm? How can we help them do so?—C. R. B.

⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

Kings don't always have the full support of those who serve in their courts (example: [Jeremiah 38:24-27](#)). But this one apparently does, and *the decree of the king* has extra weight, given that it is supported by *his nobles*. The Hebrew behind that designation is also translated “great men” in [Nahum 3:10](#) in a prediction of Ninevites to be “put in chains” when the city falls to enemies in 612 BC.

The actions of fasting decreed are unusual in that they apply also to livestock! Many households of the era include livestock of various kinds. Merchants in Nineveh have livestock for sale. Staples such as milk, meat, and eggs require nearby sources since there is no refrigeration. Therefore the fasting requirement will have a greater impact than what we may first think.

Noise! The fast prohibits both eating and drinking. This means that there will be great noise—from the crying of hungry children to the bellowing and complaining of the livestock. The noise will increase as expectations for food and water at customary times continue to go unmet.

8. “But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

For the decree to include a mandate that *animals be covered with sackcloth* seems strange! But adherence to this provision will further show that the repentance is genuine.

This requirement is sometimes cited to confirm that Jonah's preaching begins in the outer suburbs, where the larger flocks are pastured. But this supposition is unnecessary since it is customary to have animals in the towns.

The king strengthens the impact of the fast by further requiring that the people turn to God and away from wickedness. By this the people will show that their repentance is more than fasting and wearing sackcloth. There must also be the actions that are the fruit of repentance.

9. “Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

The king seriously reflects on whether all this will get God's attention. He certainly hopes so!

The word translated *relent* involves emotion. In this case, it carries the idea that God will look *with compassion* on those turning to him. As they do, perhaps God will *turn from his fierce anger*.

Self-preservation is basic for everyone. Each person wants to live at least another day. In this situation, the king reviews all that they have done and wonders whether it is enough. The ultimate purpose in all the self-depriving actions is *that we will not perish*. The primary motivation is obviously fear.

III. Response by God

([Jonah 3:10](#))

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

An important lesson about prophecies is illustrated here. Some prophecies are absolute; they will be fulfilled, no matter what (example: [2 Kings 24:1-4](#)). Other prophecies are conditional; Jonah's prophecy falls into this category. When the various actions of the king, his nobles, and the people of Nineveh combine to demonstrate sincerity, God cancels his plan to visit judgment destruction on the city. But although the desired result is achieved, the king and people of Nineveh won't know it for sure until the 40 days elapse. (We don't know whether God reveals his decision to Jonah before the 40 days are up; opinions have been expressed both ways.) Showing sincere repentance for 40 days is much more difficult than showing it for 40 hours!

As we look back on our lives and the lives of biblical characters, we know that repentance even for 40 days doesn't guarantee repentance for a lifetime. That fact is demonstrated by the subsequent history of the nation of Assyria, with Nineveh as its capital, which becomes infamous for its atrocities on captured peoples.

In 655 BC, the prophet Nahum pronounces doom on Nineveh. This time there is no reprieve. Its demise becomes reality in 612 BC when a coalition totally destroys the city.

Conclusion

A. The Need to Be Forgiven

Fred had just become a Christian, and he was fully aware of God's forgiving love. Fred had a great memory, and he could recall things he had done that were wrong. His conscience would not let him brush them aside.

With thoughts of restitution, Fred decided to visit an acquaintance in the same town. After being invited in, Fred took some currency from his billfold, pushed it toward the other man, and said, "I owe you this." The offer was resisted with the protest, "Freddie, you don't owe me anything."

Fred then confessed to a time he had stolen a pig and sold it when he was running low on cash. He was sure that there were so many pigs in the herd that one would not be missed. He was right; it was not. Even so, Fred insisted on restitution, and the money was accepted. Fred also asked for forgiveness for taking advantage of a friend. The forgiveness was granted, and the forgiveness in love strengthened a friendship in Christ.

Repentance is demonstrated in its fruits. This was just as true of the ancient Ninevites as it was for Fred. Where's your fruit?

B. Prayer

Father, your love and desire to forgive are more than we can understand. Help us to model your example to forgive in love. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Repent for a lifetime to receive God's forgiving love for an eternity.