

May 30 Lesson 13 (NIV)

PREACHING TO ENEMIES

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jonah 2

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jonah 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

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD’S COVENANT

Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. A Satisfying End
- B. Lesson Context
- I. The Word of the Lord (Jonah 3:1–4)
 - A. Repeated (vv. 1–2)
 - B. Revealed (vv. 3–4)
 - Whom to Exclude?*
- II. The People of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5–10)
 - A. Repenting (vv. 5–8)
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 - B. Hoping (v. 9)
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- A. Grace Without Borders
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Assyria *Uh-sear-ee-uh*.

Elohim (Hebrew) *El-o-heem*.

Jonah *Jo-nuh*.

Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh*.

Ninevites *Nin-uh-vites*.

Yahweh (Hebrew) *Yaw-way*.

Introduction

A. A Satisfying End

Imagine that you are nearing the end of a book you just can't put down. You anticipate a satisfying ending. But the book actually ends by telling you that the whole thing had been a dream. *What? Why was I so invested in this? That's unfair!* Few things are more frustrating to a reader than an unsatisfying ending to an otherwise excellent book.

Or what if the book ended in the middle of a sentence and offered no resolution to any of the conflicts contained within it? What makes a really atrocious ending to a book is when that ending has nothing to do with the book itself, or it explains away the drama of the book in a ridiculous

manner, or it fails to actually end up somewhere. Such endings make an entire read feel like a waste of time because nothing that happened actually mattered.

All Jonah wanted was an ending that made sense to him regarding the story of the Ninevites. They deserved to be destroyed. They had done *nothing* to merit a happy ending. Everyone for miles around could see that they should be destroyed. But how would God write the ending of this drama?

B. Lesson Context

Though the book of Jonah is only four chapters long, it has much to teach us about the character of God. But the book reveals Jonah's character as well. He reacted to his call like no other prophet in the Old Testament. Those prophets consented to speak for God even when they would rather not (Exodus 4:10–12; Jeremiah 1:6–9; etc.). Jonah chose not only to keep his mouth closed but also to try to run away from God (Jonah 1:1–3).

Jonah appeared to have been willing to live in self-imposed exile rather than deliver a message of repentance to wicked Nineveh, an important city of the aggressive Assyrian Empire. In this way, Jonah held a mirror up to Israel, a nation that would prefer to believe that God's choosing them meant he cared about them *exclusively*. Perhaps Jonah and his fellow Israelites needed to read the "all nations on earth" part of Genesis 18:18; 22:18; and 26:4 again!

Even so, Israel had good reason to desire God's sole protection. Assyria was a powerful, expansive nation when Jonah received his call from God in about 780 BC. (See the Lesson Context of lesson 10.) The city of Nineveh, to which Jonah was called, was a royal residence for the king of Assyria. The city was massive (see Jonah 3:3, below) and had a reputation for violence and cruelty (see 3:8, below). Jonah was not someone who had fallen into provincial small-mindedness. His nation—in fact the known world—would be safer if the barbarous Assyrians were destroyed.

Ultimately, Israel's fear of Assyria was justified. Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, plundered it, carried people into captivity, and resettled the territory (2 Kings 17). While history doesn't provide detailed accounts of the Assyrian invasion, we have no reason to believe that the aggressors didn't commit atrocities on the northern kingdom of Israel as done elsewhere.

That was after Jonah's time. Even so, he certainly preferred to avoid his assigned task entirely. In addition to his escape attempt (Jonah 1:3), Jonah later revealed his deep disappointment in God (4:1–3). However, God insisted that Jonah fulfill his prophetic tasks. Even Jonah didn't dare try to escape God's calling a second time.

I. The Word of the Lord

(JONAH 3:1–4)

A. Repeated (vv. 1–2)

1. Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

Jonah would not be relying on his own counsel when on his mission (see Lesson Context). He was the chosen messenger of, for, and by *the Lord*. Jonah is designated as a prophet in 2 Kings

14:25, and the formula in the verse before us is associated with other prophets (examples: Jeremiah 1:1–2; Hosea 1:1). Jonah’s prior disobedience had not disqualified or exempted him from being God’s chosen vessel (see Jonah 1:3).

2. “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

This command repeats what God originally told Jonah. Noticeably missing is the previous emphasis on the city’s evil, seen in the phrase “its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). The prophet was already aware of that fact, but didn’t see the remedy as God saw it. Jonah’s desired remedy was fiery judgment; God’s remedy was repentance (see 4:1–2, not in our lesson text). *Proclaim to it the message I give you* is a command for Jonah to speak only what God would tell him—nothing more, nothing less. Jonah’s marching orders had not changed.

We wonder why would God send an Israelite prophet to a nation that threatened his chosen people. The answer is found in the last verse in the book:

Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left? (Jonah 4:11)

In other words, God’s love is not determined or constrained by national boundaries. We live in a world in which nationalism is on the rise—and so it has always been. Exceptionalism, a cousin of nationalism, is the belief that a certain society is superior to all others. Ancient Israel had nationalistic and exceptionalistic pride due to the fact that they were chosen by God uniquely (compare Deuteronomy 9:4; Matthew 3:9). It’s not hard to see that trait in Jonah himself when we read the entirety of the book.

B. Revealed (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.

His time inside the great fish had taught Jonah the price of disobedience (Jonah 1:17–2:10). Here we see the evidence of having learned that lesson. The *three days [it took] to go through it* ironically matches Jonah’s three days in the fish (Jonah 1:17).

One suggestion regarding the meaning of *a very large city* that takes three days to pass through is that it includes the time necessary for Jonah to stop and preach neighborhood by neighborhood. Archaeology has determined the size of Nineveh to have encompassed some 1,730 acres. Combining this with the population figure we see in Jonah 4:11 gives us a hint of the strength of the Assyrian Empire.

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

Jonah walked one-third of the way into the city before delivering God’s message. Given his lack of enthusiasm to this point, the prophet likely was giving God bare minimum obedience. We do much the same when we obey the letter of God’s law but do not allow our hearts to be changed by his commands.

The recorded sermon is simple but powerful, just five words in the Hebrew. This could be all that Jonah said, or it could be a summary of a longer sermon. Lacking from the recorded text here is a call to repentance. This seems to be in keeping with Jonah’s mind-set to this point: he seems

not to have wanted to mention the possibility that God would forgive. After all, the Ninevites were an evil people who deserved judgment!

The number *forty* has symbolic meaning in the Bible. Rain fell for that number of days in judgment on wicked humanity (Genesis 7:17). Forty was the number of years the Israelites wandered in the desert because of their faithlessness (Numbers 14:33–35). It was the number of days Jesus fasted before facing the tempter (Matthew 4:2–10). In each case, God considered the completion of this number of days or years to be sufficient to excise evil or prove its absence. Nineveh's having that amount of time before being *overthrown* was nothing more than fair in God's reckoning.

II. The People of Nineveh

(JONAH 3:5–10)

A. Repenting (vv. 5–8)

5a. The Ninevites believed God.

Several startling events are recorded in the book of Jonah, but one of the greatest is the tremendous response to Jonah's pointed message. The faith of *the Ninevites* depended not on Jonah's rhetoric or enthusiasm for the subject (see Jonah 3:4, above). Instead their reaction speaks to the work of the Spirit of God in their midst, although not specifically stated as such.

The Ninevites, of course, had their own gods. Nineveh was home to the temple of Ishtar, goddess of love and war. Ashur, from which Assyria got its name, was both a city and a god. Other gods of Assyrian or Babylonian invention were also worshipped in Nineveh. But at this point the people *believed God*, the underlying Hebrew of that designation being Elohim, not Yahweh (see notes on these names in lesson 12, page 325). When the word *Elohim* is used without the word *Yahweh* being adjacent, the implication is that of the Creator of the universe (Genesis 1).

Of course, the Lord is both Creator of everything in the earth and Ruler over Israel specifically. Old Testament texts, especially the Psalms, often use the names interchangeably. But the Ninevites' belief seems to have been tied only to God as he makes himself known through creation (see Romans 1:18–20), rather than to God as he reveals himself more fully in the Law of Moses.

5b. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Fasting from food or drink was a common religious practice in many nations during biblical times. It could be practiced privately or corporately. The practice indicated self-denial, repentance, and/or humility. In the case of the Ninevites' fasting, all of these applied. *Sackcloth* was a rough material that was generally made from goat hair; wearing sackcloth signified submission (example: 1 Kings 20:31–32) or intense distress (example: 2 Kings 19:1). Fasting combined with wearing sackcloth added intensity to the picture (compare Psalm 35:13). A spiritual change was happening throughout that city!

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.

The Hebrew behind the phrasing *when Jonah's warning reached the king* is structurally similar to the phrase "The word of the Lord came to Jonah" in Jonah 1:1 and 3:1. This implies that a true word from God made it to the ruler *of Nineveh*. But unlike Jonah, the king didn't attempt to flee from God. Instead, he humbled himself and exchanged *his royal robes* for the coarse clothing of the penitent masses. His sitting *in the dust* may have been a sign that the king took additional responsibility for the cities he had destroyed by fire (compare Jeremiah 31:40).

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 (compare the various "king of ..." designations in Joshua 10:3).

Here we see a pagan monarch responding to God in a more obedient fashion than God's own prophet! This upended expectations about who responds to God appropriately. The Assyrians in Nineveh responded in submissive humility while the prophet from Israel had done the opposite. Righteous reactions from outsiders are seen in such important later events as the wise men's intent to worship the young Jesus (Matthew 2).

7–8a. 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. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God.

The king showed his support for the fasting initiative not only by participating in it, but by intensifying its terms. The fast was originally limited to the citizens of *Nineveh*, but livestock were also to be denied food and water. To cover these animals in *sackcloth* was a symbol of the city's repentance. Though we often think of the consequences of sin being confined to humans, this verse underscores that the natural world also suffers because of sin (Romans 8:19–22). God's last recorded response to Jonah also reinforced the fact that God cares for *all* of his creation, not just the human parts (Jonah 4:10–11).

For the king to risk the health of the city's livestock by causing them to fast indicates that he believed that destruction was imminent. If *God* didn't see genuine repentance, the well-being of the livestock wouldn't matter anyway.

8b. "Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

The king seems to have recognized that empty ritual would yield no benefit (compare Isaiah 58:3–7). True repentance begins with the heart and is verified through righteous behavior. For that reason, the king commanded his people to reject their *evil* lifestyle. The word *ways* refers to well-established patterns of sin, which must be forsaken (compare Jeremiah 25:5).

The *violence* of Assyria is seen in archaeological discoveries. Assyrian reliefs and written descriptions record atrocities committed against prisoners of war. These artifacts depict scenes of gruesome torture. Those not tortured to death were deported to Assyrian cities to work as slaves on building projects. The Assyrians indulged in these monstrous tactics to strike fear in the hearts of any nation who dared to oppose them. The city of Nineveh was called on to repent of a way of life built on such violence.

B. Hoping (v. 9)

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

When the king says that *God may yet relent*, the idea here is of God’s changing his mind about something and then acting in accordance with that change of mind. *Turn* is a great image for this (compare Jeremiah 18:8; 26:3). A change of God’s mind would result in a change of his action. The king’s hope in this regard was not unfounded, but it also wasn’t assured. The people had been told they would *perish*. For God to follow through on his word to them would be just.

C. Spared (v. 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.

As the king and the people hoped, *God saw* their repentance as demonstrated by *what they did*. In similar language, *God relented* of what he had planned to do, *and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened*. God does indeed visit judgment, sometimes in the form of destruction, on people in keeping with his just nature (example: Genesis 18:20–19:29). But this time we see an exception.

This verse is one of the key passages in Jonah. It captures God’s forgiving nature (compare Jonah 4:2–3, 8–9). Here we see seeds of the gospel. Salvation is offered to all peoples—regardless of nation, language, or culture. The apostle Peter wrote that God was “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). For God has *always* so loved the world (John 3:16).

The historical record tells us, however, that Nineveh’s repentance didn’t last. The prophet Nahum, who came along about 150 years after Jonah, catalogued specific sins of which Nineveh was guilty. These included violence, corruption, and idolatry (Nahum 3).

Nineveh suffered destruction in 612 BC. Before that, God used the Assyrian Empire as an instrument of his wrath against his rebellious and idolatrous covenant people. But Assyria went too far in this role and ended up on the receiving end of what they had inflicted on others (Isaiah 10:5–19).

Conclusion

A. Grace Without Borders

Throughout Scripture, we witness time and time again that God loves mercy (Exodus 33:19). The story of Nineveh illustrates this in extreme fashion: the enemies of God’s own people were spared when they turned their hearts toward him.

God’s intention for *all* humanity is to encounter his love and remain in it. The apostle Paul catalogued all of the forces incapable of separating God’s people from God’s love (Romans 8:38–39). No outside force can cause that separation. But we can voluntarily cause it ourselves by rejecting his will as we become as the Ninevites had been. When we do so, repentance is the cure, as the Ninevites discovered.

Today, we also should accept the reality that God's work will not be limited by geopolitical lines. We see Jonah's attitudes in both individuals and faith communities who fixate over which groups of sinners are too far beyond the reach of God's love. Meanwhile, we are reminded that we have a Savior who dined with sinners (Luke 7:34) and reserved his fiercest anger for the self-congratulating Pharisees (11:39–52).

Our Lord intends to establish a new people, from every tribe and tongue (Revelation 7:9). God's love will go everywhere. We can experience joy at the prospect, or we can resist this reality. Our attitude does not change what God will do for our enemies, but it will change how we react to his blessing those we would curse.

Think about it: if God was concerned for a petulant prophet and a morally bankrupt city, then his loving commitment to us will remain unshaken. We can celebrate that God is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Jonah 4:2). And in the face of divine kindness, we, like the citizens and rulers of ancient Nineveh, can repent.

B. Prayer

God, you disregard our borders and share your love wherever you please. We praise you for this because we are dependent on your mercy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

No human boundaries limit God's grace.¹