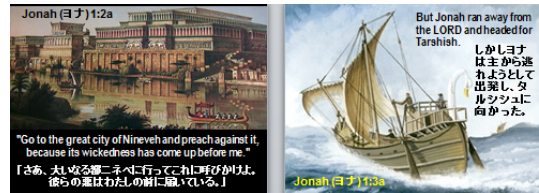


I. Introduction

Good morning! Let's begin with a quick review. In **Jonah 1:2**, the Lord commanded the prophet saying, **"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."** We might have expected that Jonah would obey this clear command. However, in **Jonah 1:3a**, we read, **"But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish."**



Jonah's disobedience nearly resulted in the ship he was on being lost in a storm. But when Jonah offered his own life as a sacrifice and was cast into the sea, the seas calmed and the sailors on the ship turned to the Lord. In the sea, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. After that, he finally called out to God. **Jonah 2:1**, **"From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God."** God heard Jonah's prayer and saved Jonah from the dark place of the fish's belly. **Jonah 2:11**, **"And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."**



The sailors on the ship were idol worshippers and Jonah was a runaway prophet. But the Lord did not give up on any of them. God's relentless grace pursued them. Today, we will see how the Lord also brought the people of Nineveh to repentance from their violence and sins.



Let's read Jonah 3:1-10.

II. Scripture Reading (Jonah 3:1-10, NIV 1984)

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 important city--a visit required three days. 4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 6 When the news 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 Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 8 But let man and beast 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 had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

III. Teaching

The people of Nineveh repented when they heard Jonah's warning. They fasted and wore sackcloth to humble themselves. And God saw their repentance and had compassion on them. Notice also what **Jonah 3:10** says about their repentance, **"they turned from their evil ways."** True repentance is more than feeling bad about our sins and making a show of humility. True repentance includes a change of direction, a turning away from evil and toward God. This is important, so let's take a minute to think about.

Here is a simple example. Suppose that your boss told you to go to Tokyo



for a business meeting. So you got up at 5:00 am and headed to Shin-Osaka station. You were still very sleepy and as soon as you got on the train you fell asleep. An hour later, you woke up and looked out the window and saw that you were at Okayama. You were on the wrong train! You were going in the wrong direction! Your stomach knotted up and you wished you had been more careful.

That feeling of being sorry for your mistake is important, but by itself it is not repentance. To repent, you have to get off that train and catch a different train, one going toward Tokyo. Of course, getting on the wrong train is not really a sin; it is just a simple mistake. But this example teaches us that repentance includes taking action to correct the situation; it is more than just feeling sorrow.

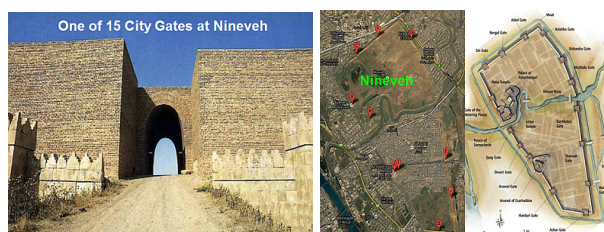
In **2 Corinthians 7:10**, Paul wrote, **“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”** There is a worldly sorrow that does not bring repentance and does not save anyone. But Godly sorrow brings repentance and leads to salvation. Sadly, many people make no real effort to repent, even though they feel bad about their sins. For example, someone may feel bad about stealing, yet continue to steal because of their greed. But **Ephesians 4:28** says, **“He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.”**

True repentance is more than just feeling sorry. True repentance is a change of heart that leads to a change of behavior. Stealing is one example, but Paul goes on in the following verses to name some sins that we may not always think of. **Ephesians 4:29-32**, **“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”** Crimes like stealing or violence are obvious sins, but hurtful words or hateful attitudes are also sins. Repentance from these sins should be marked by kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

Let’s get back to Nineveh. Nineveh was known for its violence and wickedness. It was an ancient city and in the time of Jonah it was the capitol city of what historians call the Neo-Assyrian Empire. From 934 BC to 609 BC, this Empire was probably the most powerful nation in the world. And Nineveh was one of the largest and greatest cities in the world.



Nineveh has been partially excavated by researchers and some of the gates of the city have been rebuilt to attract tourists. Notice how this gate was designed so that defenders of the city could catch attackers in a cross-fire of arrows and rocks from above. Twelve kilometers of imposing walls guarded by trained soldiers enclosed the main part of the city.



On this slide, I tried to match the map scales to show how large Nineveh was compared to central Osaka. Nineveh would have stretched from Umeda to Tennoji, covering over half of the area inside the loop line. If we can imagine that area enclosed by high stone and brick walls, we can begin to see how big Nineveh was. The people of the city probably considered themselves safe from any enemy behind their stone walls. From within these walls, the king of Assyria reigned over a vast empire held together by violence and terror.



According to historians, Jonah probably arrived at Nineveh during the reign of King Adad-nirari III. This stele commemorating the wars of Adad-nirari III was found by archeologists in 1967. It is thought that Adad-nirari III was quite young when he inherited the throne and he may have still been a young man when Jonah came to Nineveh.



Let's take a closer look at a few verses. **Jonah 3:1-2**, "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 Lord gives people a second chance and very often many chances after that. This is a great encouragement to us because many of us have failed to do the right thing the first time and we often need to try again and again before we learn to trust and obey the word of the Lord. The Bible is full of people who didn't get it right the first time, but who eventually went on to serve the Lord in important ministries and with great faithfulness.

Here, Jonah is given a second chance to obey God's command to go to Nineveh and this time he obeys. Notice that the Lord also gave Jonah the message he was to proclaim. What was this message? **Jonah 1:4**, "On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: **'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.'**" If these were the only words spoken by Jonah, I don't think the Ninevites would have understood that Jonah was a prophet of the Creator God and that they might be spared from destruction if they repented from their sins. So, I think this is just a summary stating the main point of Jonah's preaching.



What is truly remarkable is the response of the people of Nineveh. **Jonah 1:5**, "The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth." All of the people of Nineveh believed the message and repented. We are even told that the king himself put on sackcloth and sat in the dirt and issued a command that everyone should repent and pray.

The king explained his thinking in **Jonah 3:9**, "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." We can see that the king had hope that God would have mercy if they repented. In our day, we can see the proof of God's mercy, grace, and love throughout the whole Bible. In contrast, the king of Nineveh probably knew only what the prophet from Israel proclaimed. But God does not focus on how much knowledge we have; God focuses on the condition of the heart. As **Psalms 51:17** teaches us, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Jonah 3:10, "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." God spared the people of Nineveh when He saw how they had repented of their evil ways after they heard the preaching of Jonah. So, in the time of King Adad-nirari III, the people of Nineveh repented of their sins and God spared them.

However, repentance is not hereditary; every generation has to repent of its sins. In the case of Nineveh, the children and grandchildren once again turned to evil. So, about 150 years later, God once again directed the prophets of Israel to speak against Nineveh. **Nahum 1:14**, "The LORD has given a command concerning you, [Nineveh]: **'You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the carved images and cast idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile.'**" This time, there was no repentance and Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC.

But still, the repentance of Nineveh at the time of Jonah is a clear example of how repentance leads to life and how God's mercy is available to all who call on His Name. Jesus even used the example of Nineveh's repentance as a warning to the Jews in **Matthew 12:41**. "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 one greater than Jonah is here." The Lord is patient and He is always ready to show His mercy to those who repent. But His patience does not last forever. In the end, when later generations returned to doing evil, Nineveh was destroyed.

Before moving on, I should mention an issue that bothers some people. **Deuteronomy 18:22** says, "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him." Prophets of God should speak only the words of the Lord and the Lord does not make mistakes. Yet, Jonah prophesied that Nineveh would be destroyed in 40 days but it didn't happen. Does this make Jonah a false prophet? The answer is no.

We know Jonah was a true prophet of the Lord because Jesus Himself calls Jonah a prophet.

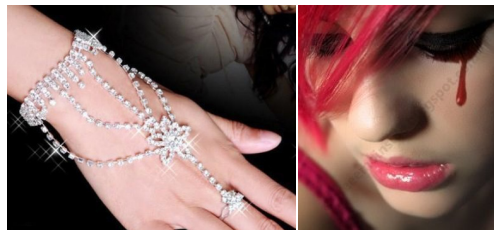
Therefore, although we are not given the details, it is clear that Jonah's prophecy was meant to be conditional. The words of Jonah's prophecy that are recorded for us do not state that the prophecy is conditional, but in the full context it is clear. The meaning was that Nineveh would be destroyed in 40 days if they did not repent. What is recorded is probably just a short summary of Jonah's message.

In fact, prophecies against nations and kingdoms should probably always be taken as conditional, as the Lord explains through **Jeremiah 18:7-8**: **"If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned."** This conditionality of prophecies of destruction is not always clear in our Bible translations, but I think it must have been clear to the people in the language and culture of the times when the prophecies were given.

IV. Conclusion

The nations and peoples of the world seek after wealth and power and they are often willing to use violence and deception to take what they want. This is what happened with Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire. The same thing happens again and again in our time. But the nations that repent of their evil and call on the Name of the Lord are shown mercy and compassion. This begins, however, with individuals who repent of their sins.

Sometimes there may seem to be profit or pleasure in sin. But the wealth and comforts of this world are worthless compared to the eternal riches of the Kingdom of God. As Jesus said in **Matthew 16:26**, **"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"** The condition of our hearts and the security of our souls are far more valuable than anything this world has to offer.



Nineveh heard the warning from the prophet Jonah and repented. We have the testimony of the whole of the Bible and the promises of salvation through the cross of Christ. Everyone who trusts in Jesus as Lord and Savior will receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven with Him. I pray that every person here and also all of our loved ones will repent and turn to the Lord so that we might all receive His grace and mercy and experience the wonders of His love.

Let's close with Jesus' words from **Mark 1:15**, **"The time has come," he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'"**



V. Prayer