

JONAH GOES TO NINEVEH

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Lessons: Jonah 3 and 4

After the Prophet Jonah had been swallowed by the great fish and saved from death only by the mighty power of the Lord, he realized that it was impossible to flee from the face of the Lord or to enter into any place where the Lord could not find him. His heart had been softened by the dangers he had been through and he was willing now to do faithfully whatsoever the Lord told him, whether he might understand it or not. Then the word of the Lord came to him again, saying, "Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee" (Jonah 3:2).

So Jonah went to Nineveh, a city far distant from the land of Israel. It was so large that it took three days for a man to cross on foot from one side to the other. Jonah walked a day's journey through the city until he came near the center of it, and then he began to cry in the streets: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). To the men of Nineveh, who were wealthy, who dwelt in fine houses and dressed in silks and linens, and who lived in ease and luxury—for their city was very wealthy—to them Jonah was a strange sight with his rough coat of skins, his leathern girdle and the signs of poverty that were characteristic of the ancient Israelitish Prophets. Small wonder they were frightened. They could see at once he was not one of their own cities. He was a stranger from a strange land crying in their streets that their city was to be destroyed. Surely he must be sent by God to foretell their destruction. And they were sore afraid, from the king down to the lowest servant.

Then the king rose from his throne, put on sackcloth and sat in ashes and proclaimed a fast, saying that neither man nor beast should be given food nor water; but let every one turn from his evil way and from doing violence that God might be turned away from his anger, and the city perish not. Then when the Lord saw that the people of Nineveh hearkened to the voice of His Prophet Jonah, that they were sorry for the evil they had committed and that they repented of all their wickedness, He turned away from his anger and spared the city; neither did He destroy it as He had said that He would do.

When therefore the forty days were up and Nineveh was not destroyed, Jonah was very angry. Why had the Lord told him to cry through the streets the destruction of Nineveh and then had not fulfilled the word of His prophecy? Nineveh was a great enemy of the Jews and Jonah did not want to see the city spared. He wished it to be destroyed. So he was very angry. And the Lord said to him, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4) But he would not hearken but went out of the city and built a booth in which to live while he watched

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what might happen to the city. For he would not return to his own country until the words of his prophecy had been fulfilled. Then the Lord caused a plant to grow, called a gourd. It had great heavy leaves that came up and shaded Jonah from the hot rays of the sun, and he was very glad of the gourd. But later the Lord caused a worm to come and eat away the roots of the plant so that it withered and died, and then there was no more shade for Jonah and the sun beat down upon him with a great heat, so that he fainted and wished that he might die.

Then the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And Jonah answered, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death." Then said the Lord, "You have had pity on the gourd for which thou have not labored or made grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. You would have saved this plant from the worm that destroyed it because you loved the plant that gave you pleasant shade and protected you from the hot rays of the sun. And should not I not pity Nineveh? For I myself have built it up. I watched it grow, and have tended it carefully, day by day. And in this city there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know the difference between right and wrong, children who have no knowledge of Me, and who did wrong without realizing what they did. And there are great herds of sheep and cattle that cannot do what is wrong. Yet all these, whom I love, must be destroyed, if Nineveh should be overthrown. Surely, if those who have knowingly done the wrong have repented in sackcloth and ashes, it is right that I should spare the city" (see Jonah 4:9-11)

By all this the Lord taught Jonah, and through him the Jews, and through them all people everywhere that He shows favor to no one in the whole world. He is just as kind to one, He cares as much for one as for another. We are apt to think that God takes special care of us, and that those who are against us, those whom we do not like, those who do not belong to our country, nor to our church, He does not love so much. The Jews thought that He loved them above every nation in the world and that He would make them rulers over all the others. But that this was not the case was shown in this story, and also by the Lord Himself when He came into the world. For then He said that at the last day when all people should be judged in the other world, the men of Nineveh, although they were idolaters, yet would they be better than the Jews. Because when Jonah cried in their streets that the city was to be destroyed they believed and repented. But when the Lord, who was far greater than Jonah, came Himself to the Jews they would not believe, but persecuted and crucified Him. So we ourselves must be careful not to be like Jonah. To think that the Lord loves us above all others, and to be angry when He shows mercy and kindness to others—this is to love ourselves and not to love the Lord. If we love the Lord truly, then will we delight in every good that befalls another, and will be glad that he is made happy, finding our own happiness in the knowledge that others have been blessed.