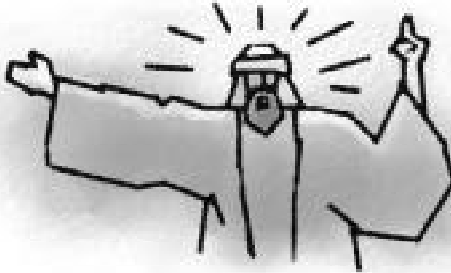


Jonah, the Amazing Evangelist



Sabbath Afternoon

JONAH ARRIVES IN THE Assyrian capital city of Nineveh. He proclaims the announcement that God has given him. What happens in the city is remarkable. We find a picture of true repentance from people whom we would not expect to be repentant. In fact, their repentance far exceeds anything seen so far in the prophet Jonah.

What accounted for this remarkable turnaround? The text really doesn't say. When we consider that conversion is personal and often rare, the fact that a whole city of pagans undergoes such an experience is amazing. No doubt here, as in many Bible narratives, a lot of details are missing; thus, we can go only with what we have, which is enough to give us another view of God's love toward sinners.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What was the essence of Jonah's message? What *didn't* Jonah's message say? How long were the people given before judgment would fall? How did the people respond? How did the king respond? In what ways does their action reveal the link between faith and works?

What lessons can we, as a church, learn about faith, repentance, and obedience from the experience of the Ninevites?

MEMORY TEXT: “ ‘So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it’ ” (Isaiah 55:11, NASB).

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

PREACHING IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF ASSYRIA.

“And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jon. 3:4).

It would be fascinating to have Jonah’s sermon outlines or sermon notes; that is, to know what Jonah preached that had such a powerful impact upon this pagan nation.

All we know is what we have been told here in the text, and notice, according to the text, what his sermon notes probably didn’t contain. He wasn’t preaching monotheism (that there is only one God) or about God’s infinite love or about the hope and promise of eternity. Nor was Jonah commissioned to seek ecumenical unity. Instead, Jonah had one specific message for the Ninevites. Turn from your evil ways or face divine judgment.

What did Jonah specifically warn them about? Jon. 3:4.

Judgment is a key theme in the Bible; it’s as pervasive in Scripture as is the theme of salvation, which makes sense, because both concepts are related. For the wicked, judgment leads to death and destruction; for the righteous, judgment promises vindication, justice, and salvation. Either way, in the end, no one—neither the righteous nor the wicked—escape judgment.

The concept of judgment appears in various ways in Scripture. Look up these texts. Taken together, what do they tell us about judgment? Gen. 15:14; Pss. 1:5; 19:9; Eccles. 3:17; 12:14; Dan. 7:22; Luke 21:36; John 12:47; Acts 17:31; 1 John 4:17; Rev. 20:12.

Theologians say that God’s last word isn’t judgment but salvation. Look at John 12:47: Here is the essence behind all God’s judgments, which is His desire to save. He judged Egypt only after its continued rebellion; He judged the world with the Flood only after people refused to hearken to His words; and even now, with Nineveh, He uses the warning of judgment in order to save them. In other words, He threatens them with destruction as a means of preserving them.

Though we don’t have the details of what Jonah presented to the Ninevites, why did it appear to be a gloom-and-doom message? *Unless you obey, you will be destroyed.* How do we reconcile that idea with the notion of God wanting us to serve Him only out of love, not fear?

YET FORTY DAYS.

How long does God give the Ninevites before the city will be overturned? In what other instances is that same number used? Gen. 7:17; Exod. 24:18; Num. 14:33, 34; Matt. 4:2; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2; Acts 1:3. Are there any parallels to the uses of that number in these texts and what happens here in the book of Jonah? If so, what are they?

Whatever Jonah said, in detail, to these people, there's no question: It worked. The phrase in Jonah 3:5 "from the greatest of them even to the least of them" (literally, "from their greatest to their least") is a common way to express totality in Hebrew. The entire city of wicked Gentiles accepts what Jonah says about judgment as the truth.

As we saw with the pagan mariners of chapter 1, here again non-Israelites turn to the God of heaven. The notoriously wicked pagan citizenry of Nineveh accept Jonah's judgment message with all seriousness. They believe he is proclaiming the words of God.

When Jonah presents the dire warning to the city of Nineveh, what is the astonishing result? Jon. 3:5.

Notice, the Ninevites didn't just believe Jonah; they *believed God* (Jon. 3:5). In this case, worshipers of other gods are not necessarily unaware of or resistant to the one supreme Deity and Judge, and when confronted with His word, they respond.

In this case, the Ninevites accept that the threatened judgment is deserved. This reminds us of the biblical perspective that there is in each person, whether a pagan or a believer, a conscience that can be touched by the power of God.

Look again at Jonah 3:5. The people "believed God." The Hebrew word there for "believed" comes from the same Hebrew word found in Genesis 15:6, regarding Abraham and his faith. Though the book of Jonah isn't talking about any kind of deep Pauline conception of justification by faith, it still, nevertheless, stressed their belief. Do you think this "belief," as expressed here in Jonah, is the same thing as faith, as commonly understood in Christianity? (See also Heb. 11:6.) Give reasons for your answer.

A PAGAN CONVERSION EXPERIENCE (See Jon. 3:5-8).

The Ninevites admit the divine judgment is deserved. And they display their conviction through outward signs of repentance: fasting and wearing sackcloth. This self-humiliation is a means of expressing submission to God. When we think of all the work often needed to bring one soul to genuine repentance, it's amazing here to see a whole city (pagans, no less) doing it, as well.

Who else besides the general population heard the call to judgment? Jon. 3:6.

The kings of these ancient Near Eastern nations weren't known for their humility or attitude of repentance, especially before a "foreign" God. However, something powerful happened to this one here.

The title "king of Nineveh" would more generally be described as the "king of Assyria." But Assyria is never mentioned in the book. Thus, the writer underscores how the book of Jonah is concerned specifically with Nineveh. This also accords with the accepted practice of permitting the name of a chief city to stand for a country in written documents. In the city of Nineveh, we find the king including himself in the earnest supplication of God.

What does the king do in response to Jonah's message?

Notice the movement of the unnamed king. He goes from sitting on a throne and wearing his royal robe to being covered in sackcloth and sitting in ashes. From a throne to ashes, from a royal robe to sackcloth. If this doesn't sound like true repentance, what does?

This heathen ruler does not use modern techniques of denying culpability. He has been wrong, and he is honest enough to admit it. Far from considering himself in a category apart from the morality of the citizenry of Nineveh, the king sets an example to his people by acknowledging his own need to repent. He does not doubt that God is right to be angry with Nineveh. And thus, this pagan king repents before the King of kings.

However dramatic the king's example, what happened to him that needs to happen to all those who would become true followers of the Lord? Why, in a sense, does what happened to the king need to happen to us every day? (See Luke 18:13; 1 Cor. 15:31; Col. 2:6.)

THE KING CALLS NINEVEH TO REPENTANCE.

What is the remarkable pronouncement the king then issues? Jon. 3:7-9.

A fast is one thing; to not drink is another. And when one usually thinks of a fast, one doesn't usually think of it applying to animals, as well. However, for whatever reasons, even the beasts aren't to eat or to drink. Whether the Lord required that or not is questionable. What isn't questionable is that the Ninevites take Jonah's words very seriously. Also, mention of flocks and herds suggests that the heralds journey beyond the city walls to the rural areas generally surrounding major walled cities then.

What else does the king urge the people to do? Jon. 3:8.

The king urges the Ninevites to "call insistently/mightily to God" in earnest prayer. Both humans and animals are to be clothed in sackcloth, the garb of penitence. Sackcloth expresses witness for grief of sin that makes a person vile. Wearing it gives evidence of the bankrupt state that sin brings. Its coarseness reminds the wearer of the vulgarity of transgression. It prompts remembrance as to how a sinner appears in the presence of a holy God. The ashes speak of the fire that consumes and what the ultimate end of sin will be.

What further action does the king urge upon the people of Nineveh? Jon. 3:8.

Note the striking picture of a pagan king urging pagan people to call upon God earnestly (the pagan sailors had done this already). The king also singles out a particular vice prevalent in Nineveh. Of all the spectrum of evils that could have been cited, the king singles out violence. God had not been mistaken in His call to judgment. Violence was a characteristic of the Assyrians. It still is graphically visible in carefully carved granite panels archaeologists have found, that portray Assyrian violence in military conquests. The king himself readily acknowledges the violent nature of Nineveh's culture.

Why is the call to change their actions so important here? The people believed God (faith), and they covered themselves in sackcloth and fasted (repentance). But what would their repentance have meant if they didn't change their ways, as well?

A PICTURE OF TRUE REPENTANCE.

What urgent motivation does the king now add to his proclamation? Jon. 3:9.

The king realizes that forgiveness for their sin was dependent upon the mercy of the great God of heaven and earth. The king is as perceptive as is the sea captain during the terrifying storm in chapter 1, when he implores Jonah to pray: “*Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish*” (Jon. 1:6, NKJV, emphasis supplied). Notice how this parallels what the king himself is thinking (Jon. 3:9). In both cases, neither the king nor the sea captain are sure what is going to happen; in both cases, they rely totally on the mercy of a God more powerful than they. And in both cases, only by God’s grace do they have any chance at all.

What was it about their actions that causes God to “repent” (actually, the Hebrew word often, and unfortunately, translated “repent” carries with it the idea of “feeling compassion”)? In other words, of all the things the previous texts say the Ninevites did (believed, fasted, put on sackcloth, had their animals fast), what does the text specify that the Lord “saw,” which causes Him not to do what He said He would do? What point should that make for us? (See also James 2:2-26.)

How is the depth of their repentance later recalled? Matt. 12:41.

Their repentance is later mentioned by Jesus. Jonah’s own people, the Israelites, despite their special covenant relationship with God, don’t have this same kind of corporate experience. Ultimately, they fail to repent and, therefore, experience judgment.

We are thus reminded once again that God deals with all humanity on the same basis, without partiality. Ultimately, both Nineveh and Jerusalem are destroyed. God deals evenly with the human race.

It is remarkable and sadly ironic how much more trouble God has had with Jonah, one of His own people, than with the worst of the heathen world! How amazing the willingness of the Ninevites to turn away from and forsake their evil ways. What specific lesson should we, as Seventh-day Adventists, learn from this point? Is not there some Jonah in us, as well?

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, “The Measure of Forgiveness,” in *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 243–251; “Who Is My Neighbour?” pp. 376–389.

Nineveh, wicked though it had become, was not wholly given over to evil. He who ‘beholdeth all the sons of men’ (Psalm 33:13) . . . perceived in that city many who were reaching out after something better and higher. . . . God revealed Himself to them in an unmistakable manner, to lead them, if possible, to repentance.” —Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 230.

“ ‘And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.’ In the ages of darkness that had preceded the advent of Christ, the divine Ruler had passed lightly over the idolatry of the heathen; but now, through His Son, He had sent men the light of truth; and He expected from all repentance unto salvation, not only from the poor and humble, but from the proud philosopher and the princes of the earth. ‘Because He hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead.’ As Paul spoke of the resurrection from the dead, ‘some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.’ ” —Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 239.

“The pardon granted by this king represents a divine forgiveness of all sin. Christ is represented by the king, who, moved with compassion, forgave the debt of his servant. Man was under the condemnation of the broken law. He could not save himself, and for this reason Christ came to this world.” —Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 244.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Someone once said, “How can we tell when a sin has been pardoned? By the fact that we no longer commit that sin.” Nice thought, but do you agree? Support your answer.
2. Look again at Jonah 3:10. It says that God decided not to do what He said He would do. What does that mean, and what implications could it have for us, both as individuals or as a church body? How does this quote help us understand this principle? “It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional.” —Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 695.

SUMMARY: The Ninevites bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. What a lesson for those quick to judge the spiritual state of others.



Transformed Lives

J. H. Zachary

Willie and Charlotte Walkus are native Americans living on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. They had let alcoholism rob them of a meaningful life, dignity, and happiness. “For 20 years I lived only for the next drink,” Willie said. “I slept wherever I could find shelter, often on the city streets.”

Charlotte remained at home with their children, but she, too, struggled with alcohol. “I often verbally and physically abused my children when I was drunk,” she admits.

In sober moments Willie remembered his godly grandfather, who prayed every day. “I knew that there was a God somewhere, but I did not know where to find him,” Willie said.

Willie had a Christian aunt who fasted and prayed for him. One day while the aunt was praying, Willie reached for a bottle of alcohol and held it to his lips, “but I could not swallow,” he said. Then a strange sensation moved through his body, and he became paralyzed; he could not even speak. Someone called an ambulance, and Willie was rushed to the hospital. He thought he would die there.

Lying in the hospital, Willie prayed, “God, if you are there, please help me. I will serve you the rest of my life.” God saved Willie’s life. But Willie returned to the streets and soon was drinking again.

Willie realized that in his own strength he could never keep his promise to God. One day he prayed a different prayer, “Lord, I am yours, please help me.” About the same time Charlotte also turned her life over to God.

The couple began attending the Adventist church and started on the long journey of spiritual growth. “Our lives have been totally changed,” she says. “God has freed me from evil habits, made me a better mother and a good example to my children.” The transformed Walkus family is a powerful example to others of what Jesus can do in their own lives.

“My family has felt the precious love of God,” Willie said. “I want everyone to know that no matter who you are or how far you have fallen into sin, God will hear your cry and come to help.”

J. H. Zachary is coordinator of international evangelism for The Quiet Hour.

*I
n
s
i
d
e

S
t
o
r
y*