

Jonah

Bible Study – Scene 5

Jonah 3:4-10

Dr. Reed Lessing in his Concordia Commentary (CC) of Jonah divides his remarks on Jonah into seven scenes. This is the fifth section.

Little effort, poor skills, a short sermon—and total success! Even with crooked human writers, Yahweh writes straight. Jonah’s message in 3:4 is concise and blunt. Jonah apparently hoped that the outcome would be the destruction of his hearers (see 4:1). His sermon says nothing explicit about salvation and states no contingencies or qualifications depending on how the Ninevites respond. At face value, the prophecy seems to assume the people will ignore it. Yet in the next verse (3:5), the pagan Gentiles believe in ways that are simply amazing! The astonishing salvation of Gentiles through faith, by the power of the preached Word, will recur on a far larger scale in the NT and in subsequent world history, as countless Gentiles are grafted into the true Israel of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 10:10–17; Gal 6:16). (CC)

But *these* Ninevites are spared. The conflict between Yahweh and these former idolaters is resolved. But as soon as chapter 4 begins, we discover that this closure regarding the converted Gentiles is only masquerading as a resolution to the book. The festering problem is not Nineveh, but the Israelite Jonah. (CC)

1. Verse 4 speaks of “40 days.” What are some other situations where then number “forty” is used?
2. How did the Ninevites respond (v. 5) and what was some evidence of their repentance?
3. Considering that the king was not a believer, why is he response so significant?
4. Read verses 7-8. What commands did the king make of the people?
5. Why do you think the king had any hope of being spared?
6. Why do you suppose that God relented? Read Luke 15:7 and 1 John 1:9.
7. What can you learn from these verses?

Some Answers to the above Questions:

1. Moses was exiled for 40 years after his murdering of an Egyptian. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus was tempted for 40 days.

The number forty is often associated with testing and judgment. (PBC)

2. The Ninevites repented and believed. Nineveh’s repentance manifests itself in a form that rivals even the most pious Israelite times of repentance. Not only the king, but all the people and even the livestock put on sackcloth and fast (Jonah 3:5–8). Jonah 3:8 is worded to suggest that just like the people, the livestock too covered themselves with sackcloth! In that way, the Ninevites’ penitence exceeds any recorded for Israel. (CC)

3. The reaction of the Ninevite king is all the more remarkable in that elsewhere in the OT Assyrian kings are portrayed as an arrogant, boasting monarchs who not only defy Yahweh and threaten Jerusalem, but also argue that their power is greater than Yahweh's because they have been able to defeat the God of Israel/Judah just as they defeated the gods of other nations. (CC)

4. King wanted the nobles to ensure that everyone in Nineveh got the message and responded to his decree (v. 7). (TLSB)

Including animals underscores urgency of repentance. Greek historian Heroditus reported that in Persian times, animals were sometimes made part of the mourning process. Tertullian: “[They were] starving out even the cattle with which God was not angry” (ANF 4:106) (v. 7). (TLSB)

Verse 7 also states Let them not feed or drink water. This was applied to humans as well as animals, this enforced the completeness of the fast but also suggests it was of short duration. (TLSB)

Inclusion of the domestic animals was unusual and expressed the urgency with which the Ninevites sought mercy (v. 8). (CSB)

The people were to call out mightily to God (v. 8). In contrast to the sailors who “called out to the LORD” (1:14), the king used the general divine term “God” when ordering the people to pray. (TLSB)

They were to give up their evil ways and violence (v. 8). Assyrian warfare was exceptionally violent.

5. God often responds in mercy to man's repentance by canceling threatened punishment (v. 10). See Jer. 18:7–10. (CSB)

6. God is always faithful to those who repent.