



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for March 7, 2010  
Released on Wednesday, March 3, 2010**

**"Mission to the Community"**

**Lesson Text:** Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-9

**Background Scripture:** Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-9

**Devotional Reading:** Matthew 21:28-32

**Jonah 1:1-3**

- 1 Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
- 2 Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.
- 3 But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

**Jonah 3:1-9**

- 1 And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying,
- 2 Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.
- 3 So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.
- 4 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.
- 5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.
- 6 For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.
- 7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:
- 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.
- 9 Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

**TODAY'S AIM**

**Facts:** to show how Jonah was called to a special mission to the community of Nineveh.

**Principle:** to show that God wants all people to be a part of His own community and gives us the opportunity to respond to Him.

**Application:** to show that when we respond to God's mission to our community, we become part of His very own people.

## **INTRODUCTION**

God created us to be social beings, for He sets the example in His own triune nature. He recognized our social nature when He established marriage (Gen. 2:18), but He also recognized the multitude of other social needs we have that are not fulfilled in the intimacies of the marriage relationship (Eccles. 4:9-12). Thus, He has provided numerous opportunities for community relationships. Even our spiritual bonds with Him are enhanced by the fellowship of the church, His spiritual community (1 Cor. 12:4-28; Eph. 4:11-16).

The first four lessons of this quarter, two from Jonah and two from Ruth, demonstrate how God expressed His love to groups outside Israel's community of faith. Jonah's experience in particular reminds us that even the most wicked are not outside the pale of God's love and forgiveness. While He detests their sin, He is gracious and forbearing in seeking to draw them to Himself.

## **LESSON BACKGROUND**

Solomon, the wise king of Israel, died about 930 BC. He was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, who immediately demonstrated that his wisdom was inferior to that of his father. The result was that Israel divided into two nations: Judah as the southern nation and Israel as the northern one.

The two nations had times of mutual hostility and friendship as well as oppression from other nations. Oppression changed to prosperity when Uzziah (also called Azariah) became king over Judah. At the same time Jeroboam II was king in Israel. Both nations expanded their territories so that the combined dominion was about the same as in the days of Solomon. The outward wealth of Israel in the days of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC) fulfilled a prophecy that was made by Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25. This helps to date the approximate time of Jonah's ministry. The educated guesses for his trip to Nineveh range between 790 and 760 BC.

The traditional view is that Jonah himself wrote the book that bears his name. The book tells of the journeys of Jonah, and it also serves as a self-indictment of his attitudes and actions. By writing the book he demonstrated a repentance similar to what his preaching prompted for the entire city of Nineveh. It is interesting that the book of Jonah is still read each fall on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. It is read in the afternoon service to emphasize the theme of repentance.

The book of Jonah provides a journal of jealousy, jeopardy, joy, and judging. The book is the fifth book in the Minor Prophets, which are the last 12 books of the Old Testament. It is different from the others in that it is primarily a narrative. (A more typical approach is to blend prophetic utterances with sections of history or personal experiences.) Jonah is the only prophet among the Minor Prophets who rebelled against God and then recorded a factual account of his actions.

## **JONAH'S FIRST RESPONSE TO THE LORD'S COMMISSION (Jonah 1:1-3)**

### **1. What do we know about Jonah, apart from what the book of Jonah reveals?**

The account of Jonah's mission to Nineveh begins abruptly. However, from 2 Kings 14:25, the only other reference to this prophet, we learn that he prophesied during (or perhaps slightly before) the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 B.C.). He was an inhabitant of the town of Gath-hepher in the tribe of Zebulun. His only recorded prophecy foretold the restoration of territory once lost to the Syrians.

### **2. Where did the Lord command Jonah to go, and why (Jonah 1:1,2)?**

The opening phrase of the book, *the word of the Lord*, offers the standard prophetic formula that prophets often use when they proclaim or write their messages from the Lord. Jonah's identification as *the son of Amittai* reflects the custom of providing the name of the father as a means of more precise identification. The extra identification is not as essential in this case, for Jonah is the only person in the Bible with that name. The word *Jonah* means "dove."

The Lord commanded Jonah to "go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it" (Jonah 1:2). Nineveh was one of the most ancient cities in the world, having been built shortly after the great flood (Genesis 10:11, 12). It is located in what is now Iraq.

It reached prominence as the major city in the Assyrian Empire. Nineveh is here called a great city. Archaeologists have documented the large size of the city (by ancient standards), but the term "great" also intimates Nineveh's large population and its political importance in Assyria.

God instructed Jonah to preach against Nineveh's wickedness—a wickedness that had come up before Him. In Scripture human sins are often portrayed as increasing to the extent that they come to God's notice and demand His intervention (cf. Gen. 6:13; 18:20-21; Ezra 9:6; Rev. 18:5). The Assyrians' sins had become so blatant as to demand immediate judgment. In His mercy, God wanted to send a messenger to inform them of this fact.

### **3. How does the wickedness rampant in our big cities affect you?**

Often we simply shake our heads and think, "What an awful place; I'm glad I'm not there!" But our ultimate response must reflect God's heart. That may involve going to such a city personally to evangelize. Or it may involve helping to recruit and send teachers to such hard and sinful places. The church must not content itself merely with occupying the suburbs and exurbs. To do so will result in a faith that embraces the comfort of isolationism. To do so will leave the devil on a playing field without an opposing team in the big cities.

Most major cities have a variety of Christian service organizations doing battle there. Perhaps we can look for trustworthy individuals and groups already serving in those cities as we seek active participation in stemming the onslaught of unrighteousness. Instead of head-shaking, there should be saber-rattling of the sword of the Spirit.

### **4. What kind of reputation did the ancient Assyrians have?**

The Assyrians' were known for their wickedness. Their absence of moral and spiritual value is confirmed by both Scripture and other ancient records. The pride of their kings was extraordinary (cf. Isa. 10:13-14). Their royal annals consist of a long, tiresome series of reports on their conquests of all the neighboring kingdoms.

Their cruelty was also legendary (cf. Nah. 3:1, 10, 19). They gloried in the numbers of heads they had taken in battle, of persons they had skinned alive or impaled on stakes, and of pregnant women they had cut open. Through systematic terrorization they kept their subjects from revolting against them. Surely their wickedness was grievous and cried out for God's punishment.

### **5. What characteristic of God led Jonah to disobey His command (v. 3)?**

The first two words of this verse reveal that Jonah is about to become a reluctant, rebellious, runaway prophet. Instead of following God's command, this prophet, incredibly, fled in the opposite direction. Later Jonah revealed the reason for his flight he knew the Lord was gracious with sinners and would not carry out His threatened judgment (4:2).

Why was this not a desirable trait? It seemed so when God was merciful to sinning Israel, but this time His mercy would benefit a pagan kingdom that Jonah perceived to

be Israel's enemy and future oppressor. Already Israel had been threatened by Assyrian power, and he may well have heard prophecies of an Assyrian takeover (Hos. 9:3; Amos 5:27; 6:7-8; 7:17). Jonah therefore did not want the Ninevites to repent; he wanted them destroyed. So he fled as far from them as he could.

In fleeing his responsibility to Nineveh, Jonah headed for Tarshish, which, it is generally agreed, lay in the opposite direction. Most likely it lay in the area that is now Spain. His westward flight is confirmed by the fact that he boarded a ship at Joppa, a nearby port on the Mediterranean Sea.

### **JONAH'S SECOND RESPONSE TO THE LORD'S COMMISSION (Jonah 3:1-4)**

#### **6. What prepared Jonah to obey the second time God called him (Jonah 3:1)?**

The intervening verses (not in today's text) give the familiar account of Jonah's experiences after his departure from Joppa, and demonstrate the folly of running from God's will. The great storm, the expectation of drowning, and the rescue through the great fish (1:4-17) convinced Jonah that a sovereign God still had a plan for him to fulfill. His prayer (2:1-9) reveals that he had thrown himself on the Lord's mercy and vowed to obey His commands. He was thus brought back for a second opportunity to do so (v. 10).

#### **7. God often gives second chances. What does that say about Him? What does that say about us?**

Peter knew something about second chances, because he experienced this himself (John 21:15-19). Perhaps he was remembering his own second chance when he wrote, "The Lord is ... not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God's desire is for all to be saved from sin. Yet He created us with free will, and He gives us opportunities to use it. We are flawed creatures who make sinful choices. We desperately need multiple opportunities to repent—and God gives them! Will we recognize and use those opportunities?

#### **8. What was the message Jonah gave to Nineveh? What element of grace did it include (vs. 2-4)?**

The second summons for Jonah has a new element. Previously Jonah was told that he is to preach against *Nineveh*. This time he is informed that he is to speak only what God tells him (v. 2). The implications are that he must wait until God is ready and that he is neither to add to nor subtract from God's message.

This time Jonah obeyed without hesitation and went to Nineveh (v. 3). The three-day factor is subject to different interpretations. It may refer to the fact that preaching through the city in all its neighborhoods takes three days. Some consider it to mean that anyone who wishes to tour the city will find that it takes three days; the inner wall has a circumference of eight miles, and that is huge by ancient standards (compare Jonah 4:11). It may be that the general area of Nineveh and its suburbs requires a three-day trip to get there from a certain point.

Jonah now entered the city and covered a distance of one day's journey (v. 4 of lesson). *Jonah* is a representative of the God of Israel, and this somehow prompts the people of *Nineveh* to give him an audience. The message of the prophet is very brief: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). The nearness of judgment was due to the consistent, repeated, and excessive wickedness of the Assyrians. The cup of God's wrath was about to overflow. Yet the giving of a warning forty days before the event was itself an act of God's grace. It implied that repentance might still turn aside His anger.

### **THE NINEVITES' RESPONSE TO JONAH'S MESSAGE (Jonah 3:5-9)**

#### **9. How did the people of Nineveh respond (v. 5)?**

Those who hear Jonah are convinced! This is indicated by three responses: belief, a *fast*, and the wearing of *sackcloth*. This verse does not state how the decision to mandate a fast is reached and announced. But the next verse suggests that the king and his nobles may be the ones behind these extraordinary actions that involve every level of society. No one is above or beneath the need to repent. These outward expressions are dramatic, and they are typical for the people of the time who wish to show repentance or extreme agony.

The word *repent* is not used in the account as it is given by Jonah. But Jesus uses that term when He commends the people for repenting at the preaching of Jonah. Jesus then condemns the people of His day for a lack of repentance (Matthew 12:41, 42). Jonah's preaching triggers one of the greatest citywide revivals of all time.

### **10. Why might the Ninevites have responded so readily?**

Why would this wicked people respond so readily? One reason may have been the vulnerable condition of their empire at this time. Jonah's mission occurred probably at a time of national depression, when men's minds were disposed to expect calamity, and anxious to avert it by any means.

Another reason for their response may have been the person of Jonah himself. They had heard much of the God of the Hebrews, much of the doings of his great prophets Elijah and Elisha; and now they had in their midst one of those holy men (Jonah). Jesus later stated that he was "a sign unto the Ninevites" (Luke 11:30). Though we are not told how he fulfilled this role, it is likely that the story of his disobedience, discipline, and deliverance had become known to his audience. He thus was an object lesson of God's grace. If the Lord spared this rebellious but repentant prophet, He might spare them as well.

### **11. What did the king of Nineveh order his people to do (vs. 6-8)?**

The king of Nineveh apparently had some understanding of God's justice and hatred of sin. If his people forsook their sins, He might "turn away from his fierce anger." Jonah's message contained no hint that He would do so; it only foretold judgment. So this was only a vague hope, perhaps kindled by the mercy God had already shown to Jonah.

In truth, not a single sinner has a right to expect God to call back the judgment He has already decreed. It is His grace alone that withholds punishment from those who repent. This grace can operate only because Christ has taken the punishment for sin on Himself.

### **12. Why is the concept of the ungodly perishing at the hand of a God of fierce anger not a greater motivation for evangelism and missions? How can it be?**

It is difficult for many to accept the idea of a God who is so holy that His holiness demands punishment for sin. We would rather emphasize the love of God! That is important to do, but we dare not minimize His holiness in the process.

Some people simply do not believe in Hell, so they do not accept the concept of "perishing." We need to hear again these words of Jesus: "Fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Few of us today share Jonah's hatred for the enemies of God's people—a hatred so intense and deep he could take no pleasure in their repentance. But do we want them saved? If we do, are we willing to make the sacrifice God requires?

### **13. How lasting was the Ninevites' repentance? How did God respond (v. 9)?**

Was the repentance of the Ninevites sincere? Did they have a saving faith in the God of Israel? Only God knows, but it is not likely. Theirs seems to have been a variety of

"foxhole religion"—a repentance born of fear and easily forgotten when the threat of judgment is past. The later history of Nineveh gives no evidence of lasting change. Idolatry persisted, and extreme violence re-turned with a vengeance.

But whatever the depth of the Ninevites' repentance, God honored it and turned from the judgment He had vowed to bring upon them (Jonah 3:10). This response, which He also showed on other occasions (cf. 1 Kings 21:27-29), does not mean God is fickle or superficial in dealing with sin. It means He has seen in men an awakening of conscience that warrants further opportunities to abandon their wickedness and come to know Him fully (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9).

God thus recognized what Jonah had failed to see—that all human beings deserve the opportunity to hear His message and respond. He reminds us to lay aside our national and ethnic prejudices and extend His gracious message to all.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **God Commands Repentance!**

The apostle Paul gave his famous Sermon on Mars Hill when he was in Athens. He noted in that sermon that God commands everyone to repent (Acts 17:30). Several conclusions may be derived from that sermon and the story of Jonah.

- 1.** Repentance is something that can be commanded. It may involve the emotions, but repentance is primarily an act of the will. It is a deliberate choice.
- 2.** Repentance is a decision that is made after the individual examines his or her own life, the goodness of God, and the consequences of not repenting.
- 3.** Sincere repentance involves both present and future obedience. Repentance is not a one-time event, but is a continuing process (1 John 1:9). The actual need for repentance may diminish as growth in Christ continues, but sensitivity about sin will increase.
- 4.** Repentance is a personal matter. The people of the city of Nineveh repented, but it is fundamental to understand the importance of the individual as part of the whole.
- 5.** Repentance is to be followed by a changed life—the fruits of repentance.

If repentance is a command for everyone, then there should be sermons and lessons about it. Do we hear these as much as we should?

## **PRAYER**

Lord, thank You for this lesson, which compels us to examine our lives. May we find areas in which we need to repent and change. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

"All should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

## **PRACTICAL POINTS**

- 1.** A person may run from the clear word of the Lord, but he can never escape the sovereign will of the Lord (Jonah 1:1-3).
- 2.** By His grace, God often gives His children a second chance to obey (3:1,2).
- 3.** When God speaks, obey, despite the size of the task or *your* own misgivings (vs. 3,4).
- 4.** No sinner is beyond God's mercy; they can still repent and believe (v. 5).
- 5.** Wise is the leader who leads his people to God by repentance and faith (vs. 6,7).
- 6.** True repentance always requires a forsaking of sin (vs. 8,9).

## **ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Next week we move further in our exploration of the theme of community. We cannot ignore the fact that there is a whole world out there that needs to hear of the

redemptive work of our Lord Jesus. They are our community to redeem. Jonah teaches us how. Study Jonah 3:10-4:5 "A Community to Redeem."

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