

# The Ninevites Believed God

## 3: 3b-10

**DIG:** What was the size of the city? What was the message to be proclaimed? In response to God's word, what did the Ninevites do? What does their king do? How do you account for their response to Jonah's message? Did ADONAI change His mind? What does this say about the LORD's will? What does this say about God's use of us to achieve it? What does **scene five as a whole say about God?**

**REFLECT:** Does God seem to make a point of putting you into situations that seem too big for you to handle? Choose two of the following examples of ADONAI giving what seemed to be unrealistic assignments: Jeremiah's call and commission (Jeremiah 1:4-19); David and Goliath (First Samuel 17:20-51); Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al (First Kings 18:17-40). Then answer these three questions: How were they outmatched? How did they feel about the situation? How did God equip them to handle the situation?

**Short description of scene five:** Now the spotlight is on Nineveh. Seven times the city is named in the two scenes of Jonah chapter 3 verse 2, twice in verse 3, then in verses 4, 5, 6-7. To open **scene five**, Yonah pulls the name of the city around in front of the verb to emphasize it: **Now as for Nineveh**. This scene reports Jonah's words in the city (3:3b-4), the reactions of the people (3:5) and their king (3:6-9), and finally the response of God.<sup>79</sup>

**Commentary on scene five:** Yonah obeyed the word of ADONAI and went to Nineveh (3:3b). In keeping with the writer's concise style, no mention is made of the long journey from Joppa where he was regurgitated by the whale. It is perhaps amazing that having focused so much attention on the efforts to get the reluctant prophet to Nineveh, his activity there is reported with such remarkable brevity. **Now as for Nineveh, it was a great city**. A city of two miles in diameter was a colossal size in the ancient Near East that it is not surprising that it was called a great city. **It took three days to bring him to the inner and most densely populated quarter of the city (3:3c)**. It is true the circumference of Nineveh's inner wall, according to archeologists, was less than eight miles. So the diameter of the city, less than two miles, was hardly a three-day journey. One day's journey in open territory was usually about 15-20 miles. However, this was not only a description of the city itself, but also the entire Nineveh triangle mentioned in Genesis 10:11-12. There was the main city of Nineveh, and then a triangle of three other cities that served as its greater suburbs: Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen. **The four cities together are called the great city of Nineveh (3:2)**. So taking three days to go through such a city and its suburbs is reasonable since Jonah stopped and preached along the way.

Jonah immediately began by going a day's journey into the city. The message he proclaimed was very simple and direct: **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown (3:4)**. **Forty days**, associated with the Flood (**Genesis 7:17, 8:6**), with Moshe's stay on Mount Sinai (**Exodus 24:18**), and with Elijah's journey to Horeb (**First Kings 19:8**), had become a period of special significance (compare **Matthew 4:2** and **Acts 1:3**).<sup>80</sup> The Hebrew word translated **overthrown** is a technical term that means **complete destruction** like *the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah*. The point of **Jonah's** message was that within **forty days** **ADONAI** would **overthrow Nineveh** in the same manner that **He** overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. **The LORD** was threatening **Nineveh** with the same kind of destruction Sodom and Gomorrah received (see my commentary on **Genesis Fa - The LORD Rained Down Burning Sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah**). No one would be left alive.

As the unknown foreigner preached doom and gloom, the Ninevites believed God. They believed the truth of the prophecy, and in doing so acknowledged their own sinfulness. The sudden and complete repentance of the Ninevites is in marked contrast with the unbelief and indifference with which the Israelites received their prophets, and is therefore greatly emphasized. Action was immediate: a fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth (3:5). Only a portion of the population would hear Jonah himself, but his message was repeated rapidly until all of them knew about it. If Jonah had gone to the great city during the reign of the Assyrian king Ashur-dan III, the prophet may have found the city psychologically prepared for his message by two foreboding famines (in 765 BC and 759 BC) and a total solar eclipse on June 15, 763. People in those days often took such events as indicators of divine wrath.<sup>81</sup>

When Jonah's warning reached Ashur-dan III (772-754 BC), the king of Nineveh, he responded the way his people did. He rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust (3:6). The self-abasement of the king, who deliberately stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes in order to be one with his own people in their mourning, symbolized the repentance of the whole city.<sup>82</sup> To substitute a capital city like Nineveh for the particular country like Assyria is fairly common in the TaNaKh.

Some find such an extensive turning to God unbelievable. True, Assyrian records make no mention of this city-wide repentance, but official historical records often delete events that were especially embarrassing to them. For example, Egyptian records make no reference of the loss of all Pharaoh's army, all of his horses, six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots in Egypt (see my commentary on **Exodus Ci - The Waters Were Divided and the Israelites Went Through the Sea on Dry Land**). Nor did the Assyrians record the loss of 185,000 soldiers in a single night as they were poised to destroy Yerushalayim (see my commentary on **Isaiah Gw - Then the Angel of the LORD Put To Death a Hundred and Eighty Five Thousand Men in the Assyrian Camp**).

**Yeshua** comes under the same scrutiny. Most people today consider the bodily resurrection of **Messiah** unbelievable. The message of **God's** free gift of salvation was then, and still is, considered mere foolishness. Rabbi Sha'ul wrote: **For Messiah did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel - not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (First Corinthians 1:17).**

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Indeed (First Corinthians 1:18), the TaNaKh says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent" (Isaiah 29:14).

Where does that leave the philosopher, the Torah-teacher, or any of today's thinkers? Hasn't God made this world's wisdom look pretty foolish? For God's wisdom ordained that the world, using its own wisdom, would not come to know Him. Therefore ADONAI decided to use the "nonsense" of what we proclaim as his means of saving those who come to trust in Him. Precisely because Jews ask for signs and Greeks try to find wisdom, we go on proclaiming a Messiah executed on a stake as a criminal! To Jews this is an obstacle, and to the Greeks it is nonsense, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, this same Messiah is God's power and God's wisdom! For God's "nonsense" is wiser than humanity's "wisdom" (First Corinthians 1:20-25 CJB).

This is the proclamation the king issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil (Hebrew: *ra'ah*) ways and their violence, which they must turn by making preparation. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (3:7-9). This fear of judgment from God is startling because the Assyrians were a cruel, violent nation (Nahum 3:1-4) fearing no one (Second Kings 18:33-35).

Was **their** conversion genuine? Or was **their** response merely superficial as in the case of King Ahab (1 Kings 21:27-29)? And if **their** conversion was genuine, why did the Assyrians continue **their** violence later on? And why did **they** soon destroy the northern kingdom of Isra'el in 722 BC? The answer to these questions is that our faith is not inherited. **Jonah's** message concerned repentance from evil to avoid judgment. Perhaps **many** did intellectually believe the truth of the threat of judgment without trusting in YHVH as the only true God. But however deep the mourning of the Ninevites might have been, or however sincere **they** appeared, it seems that most only responded out of fear. Apparently this repentance lasted for just one generation because **their** children continued down the same destructive path. Like Messiah's offer of the messianic Kingdom to the nation of Isra'el, it was a legitimate offer (see my commentary on [The Life of Christ Ee - Come to Me, All Who are Weary and Burdened, and I Will Give You Rest](#)), but most refused to take advantage of it.<sup>83</sup>

The king's intent was to avoid the destruction of the city. This pagan Gentile king understood that unless Nineveh repented, everyone would be destroyed. Judgment was not unavoidable, otherwise, there would be no need for the warning. HaShem did not send any prophets to Sodom and Gomorrah to warn them of their coming destruction, but the Ninevites were duly warned. But Yonah was not a happy camper.

**Reflection on what scene five as a whole says about ADONAI:** When God saw what they did and how they turned (Hebrew: *shuv*) from their evil (Hebrew: *ra'ah*) ways, He relented (Hebrew: *nhm*) with compassion and did not bring on them the destruction (*ra'ah*) He had threatened (3:10). This is the key verse in the book of Jonah. It not only saves the Ninevites, it is also the subject of Jonah's protest from chapter one, and it will be the point of contention to the end of the book.<sup>84</sup>

When God threatened punishment He provided a dark backdrop on which to etch most colorfully His forgiving mercies. This emphasized His grace most forcefully to the sinners' hearts. ADONAI's readiness to have compassion on a wicked but repentant people and to withhold threatened destruction showed Isra'el that her coming judgment at His hand was not because of His unwillingness to forgive, but because of her unwillingness to repent.

We can't adequately describe God. We humans have to use our limited vocabulary in our attempts to understand and communicate about Him. Any terminology we use will inevitably diminish the fullness of who the LORD is, since our language is so inadequate for the task. For instance, the Bible says ADONAI's hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear (Isaiah 59:1). God is spirit. He made the human body but is not limited to its functions. Yet phrases like these enable us to better relate to Him. Unfortunately, many translate the Hebrew verb *nacham* in 3:10 as "repent," and this, quite naturally, creates difficulties for many readers. When the word "repent" is used in reference to HYVH, it does not have the same implication as it does when we repent.

A human being repenting normally suggests that he or she has sinned and needs to turn (*shuv*) from wickedness (Hebrew: *ra'ah*). Since we know that HaShem is free from sin, the idea of His repenting seems contradictory until we discover that the Hebrew verb (*nhm*) can also be translated *moved to pity*. When Scripture speaks of God repenting, it doesn't mean that He's done something wrong or made a mistake; rather that He's chosen a compassionate response as a result of another's decision. God really hadn't changed His mind . . . Nineveh had<sup>85</sup> (the English verb *relent* conveys a better meaning of the Hebrew verb and that is why I use it in this commentary). Furthermore, as Jeremiah 18:7-8 makes clear, prophetic pronouncements of judgment were not absolute, but conditional: **At one time, I may speak about uprooting, breaking down and destroying a nation or kingdom; but if that nation turns from their evil, which prompted Me to speak against it, than I relent concerning the disaster I had planned to inflict on it.**