

## Jonah: Fiery Harbinger of Doom

“Hey, man, where have you been?” asked Kenton. Jaric turned around in the department store line and saw Kenton.

“I haven’t seen you at any of the hangouts, and haven’t heard a peep out of you on social media in weeks,” Kenton said, as he maneuvered his way toward Jaric.

It was true. Jaric drifted off the social radar. Two years ago, Jaric begun drifting away from the Lord. He found himself in choppy waters that threatened his family and his well-being.

Jaric was miserable, but he thought he was masking it. Two months ago, one of the elders Jaric liked least came by the house to visit. His wife, Angel, let him in.

Elder Winton told Jaric about God’s displeasure with his wanderings. The minister warned Jaric about the consequences of his sin for himself and his family.

At Jaric’s request, Elder Winton prayed for him. That night, Jaric shared with Angel how he had called out to the Lord and how Elder Winton was now praying for him. Angel said she had been praying for her husband all along.

“When we turn to God, He will show us His great compassion. He is our help and strength,” said Angel.

“You’re right, sweetheart. God, have mercy on me for my sins,” Jaric had cried.

Jaric was now telling his story to Kenton. He ended by saying, “You can call on Him and feel His compassion too.”

“I need Him,” Kenton said. “Will you help me and pray for me?”

**1.** *How has God helped you or someone you know with kindness and compassion in a time of need after calling on Him?*

**2.** *Why does God call us to show compassion to others?*

**3.** *How can we show compassion to others?*

**LESSON FOCUS:** Call urgently on the Lord, who loves to turn in compassion.

## Nineveh's Inhabitants Repent

*Jonah 3:1-5, KJV*

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.

*Jonah 3:1-5, NIV*

<sup>1</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:<sup>2</sup>"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

<sup>3</sup>Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

<sup>5</sup>The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Previously, God directed Jonah to proclaim a message of judgment and repentance against the inhabitants of Nineveh because of their evil deeds (Jonah 1:1-2). The prophet refused and wound up in the belly of a huge fish after trying to sail away from the Lord. After God rescued the prophet from the large fish, He directed Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and preach (3:1-2). This time, the prophet obeyed.

Verse 3, translated literally, says that Nineveh was a "great city to God." There are at least two differing views concerning how to best understand this reference. One option is that Nineveh was both extraordinary in size and enormous in importance. A second option is that the city was not only prominent in the ancient world, but also of considerable interest to God.

According to verse 4, on the first day of Jonah's excursion through Nineveh, he faithfully declared that the city

would be “overthrown” within 40 days. On the one hand, the prophet might have walked for an entire day through the city before he began to proclaim God’s oracle of doom. On the other hand, Jonah may have pronounced the somber warning throughout the first day’s journey.

Very little time was needed for Jonah’s message to have an effect. In just a single day, the inhabitants of Nineveh were persuaded (vs. 5). We may not know all that the prophet declared to the Ninevites. Yet, its core emphasis was clear.

The Hebrew verb rendered “overthrown” (vs. 4) had a number of meanings. It could refer to an upending, a judgment, a change, a deposing of royalty, or a change of heart. Regardless of which option is preferred, Jonah’s warning was taken seriously by the Ninevites.

Verse 5 says that the city’s inhabitants “believed God.” It’s debatable whether this statement refers to the Ninevites sincerely turning to God or simply to their recognition that God was angry with them. In any case, the inhabitants genuinely took to heart what Jonah had declared.

A religious fervor crossing all class boundaries led the Ninevites to adopt traditional signs of repentance. The people put on sackcloth and fasted to display their grief and anguish over what Jonah had declared against them. Sackcloth was a coarse material woven from the hair of goats or camels. All the people of the city wore the rough garment, from the most important to the least important inhabitants.

**4.** *What led to God speaking to Jonah a “second time” (3:1)?*

**5.** *What was Jonah’s response the second time around?*

**6.** *How did the residents of Nineveh respond to Jonah’s message?*

## Nineveh’s King Repents

*Jonah 3:6-10, KJV*

6 For word came unto the king of

*Jonah 3:6-10, NIV*

<sup>6</sup>When Jonah’s warning

*KJV*

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?

10 And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

*NIV*

reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. <sup>7</sup>This is the proclamation he 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.

<sup>8</sup>But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Jonah 3:6 reveals that it was not long before the prophet’s oracle of judgment “reached the king of Nineveh.” One view is that the monarch got caught up in the wave of repentance that was sweeping through the city. A second view is he sincerely “believed God,” as the citizens of Nineveh did (vs. 5), as shown by the description of the king’s actions in verse 6 and his God-speak proclamation.

The ruler traded his regal attire for an uncomfortable garment made from sackcloth. He also left his impressive throne for a humble seat in a pile of ashes. Along with his nobles, the king issued a decree for the inhabitants of Nineveh.

Presumably, this edict was read aloud in public places as well as posted where the literate could read it. The specifics of the decree included a total fast (that is, no eating food and drinking water) for people and domestic animals (vs. 7).

Moreover, the decree required the people and the animals to wear sackcloth. Perhaps the king wanted the rich ornamentation on harnesses and bridles to be exchanged for sackcloth coverings. In addition, the inhabitants of the city were to pray to God in an earnest, heartfelt manner. Also, everyone was to “call urgently on God” (vs. 8) with their prayers.

Furthermore, the king directed everyone to abandon their sinful actions and violent activities. The latter especially included the “violence” they committed (vs. 8). Whether it was immoral behavior or social injustice, all of it needed to cease immediately.

Clearly, the ruler hoped that the upheaval the prophet declared was not inevitable. The king reasoned that God might reverse course and “relent” (vs. 9) from bringing His intense “anger” on the Ninevites and wiping them out.

The king’s decree was obeyed throughout the city, and God took notice. He was particularly pleased that the ruler and inhabitants of the city had renounced their vile, unjust activities. In turn, God “relented” (vs. 10) concerning the calamity Jonah pronounced.

God had planned from the beginning to anchor His actions to the reaction of the Ninevites. Since they responded favorably to the Lord, He treated them mercifully. Ultimately, it was not God who wavered, but the people and ruler of Nineveh. In canceling His threatened punishment, He was being neither arbitrary nor inconsistent. His warning of judgment on the Ninevites had been conditional and tentative. He wanted His grace to work in the lives of the king and his subjects to bring about their repentant response.

- 7.** *In what way did the king respond to the prophet’s oracle?*
- 8.** *What decree did the king of Nineveh make to his subjects?*
- 9.** *What resulted from the people’s response?*

## Calling on God to Experience His Compassion

Jonah prayed—called urgently on God—from inside the fish, and in answer God delivered Jonah and again gave him a message for Nineveh. God showed compassion to Jonah, an Israelite, but in Nineveh we see God’s compassion on the wicked people Jonah did not consider worthy of compassion.

The people of Nineveh responded promptly to Jonah’s message with tangible actions. They did things that showed they heard God’s warning and believed it would happen. The king urged his people to call on God and to give up their evil ways. God heard their prayers and had compassion.

Often, we call on God when we experience times of trouble or suffering. God sent Jonah with a message to warn the Ninevites they would experience something much greater: complete destruction at His hand for their evil. The reassurance for us in this story is that even if our troubles are the result of our own sin, we can still call on God and He will answer. Over and over again we read in God’s interaction with His people the promise that He will turn in compassion to those who truly repent (for example, Joel 2:12-14).

Today, we normally don’t wear sackcloth or sit in ashes to show sorrow for sin. Even if the manner isn’t the same as back then, the Bible is full of encouragement for us to call on God for His compassion and forgiveness through Jesus; to come near and humble ourselves before Him (Jas. 4:8-10).

We may still experience consequences as a result of our choices, but God can also bring goodness in the midst of trying situations. Once we experience God’s compassion in our lives, we are to extend that same compassion to others.

**10.** *What does it mean to call urgently on God? How can we do this in our daily lives?*

**11.** *Why does God love to turn to us in compassion? How might this look for us today?*

**12.** *How can we show God’s compassion to others?*

## Help Others Experience God's Compassion

Through Jonah, God declared He would destroy the Ninevites for their wickedness. In response, the people called urgently on God in the hope He would relent and have compassion on them. We know people ourselves who are experiencing trouble, perhaps specifically as a result of their sin or wrongdoing, who need to urgently call on God. Like Jonah, we should encourage them to do so.

► *Think about someone you know who needs to call on God and how you could explain to them the way to do that and encourage them to do so today. Write an action plan here or on an index card.*

### KEY VERSE

And God saw their words, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. —Jonah 3:10, KJV

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. —Jonah 3:10, NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

#### Week of May 31 through June 6

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross devotionals* on these passages.)

- Mon.** 1 Samuel 9:5-10—Worried? Seek God's Counsel.
- Tues.** Ezekiel 34:11-16—God Cares for His People.
- Wed.** 1 Timothy 6:17-19—Rich? Set Your Hope on God.
- Thurs.** Matthew 17:14-20—Enlarge Your Faith Practices.
- Fri.** Luke 12:22-34—Overcome Worry through Faith.
- Sat.** Matthew 6:19-24—Serve God with Your Whole Heart.
- Sun.** Matthew 6:25-34—Live Worry Free Every Day.