

Q. Who is it that might be considered “profane” and out of bounds in today’s society by the church?

5. Some would consider Jonah to be a comfortable believer. In the face of God’s call he was unable to let his understanding of God and of his people to be challenged and changed. Faithfulness to such a limited vision in the first call upon Jonah’s life proved to be unfaithfulness where the living God was concerned.

Q. What parallel’s can you think of where a limited vision in today’s church might prove ultimately to be faithlessness?

#3 Transforming a city

**Jonah-
Reluctant to Serve**

Introduction

Jonah 3:4

He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

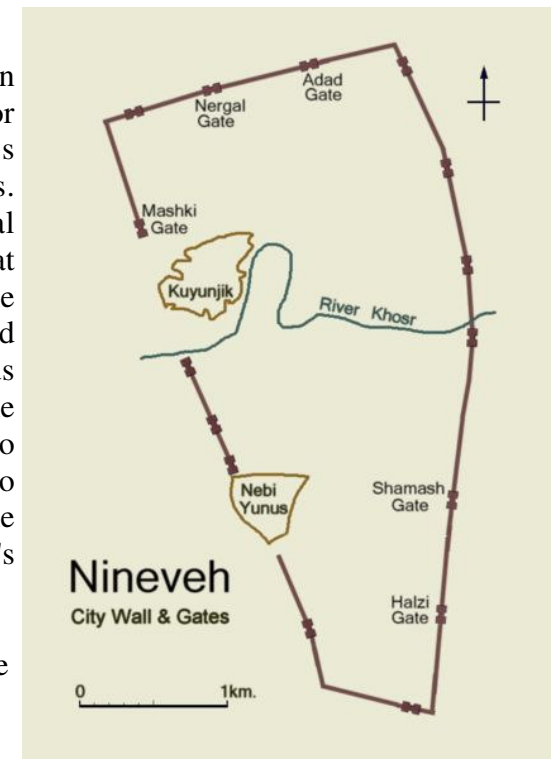
Recap

Having run far from God to avoid the call upon him as a prophet, and having survived the ordeal of the ship, the storm and sea creature, Jonah is the beneficiary of God’s patience and mercy and receives a second call. He must go to a pagan city; a great city, and proclaim the coming time of judgement.

A great city

Nineveh was an important junction for commercial routes crossing the Tigris. Occupying a central position on the great highway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, thus uniting the East and the West, wealth flowed into it from many sources, so that it became one of the greatest of all the region's ancient cities.

Jonah 3:3 emphasizes the city’s importance in



Jonah's time and gives a the reader a sense of the hugeness of the task and journey for Jonah as he undertakes to bring his message to the people outside the land of his own people.

Assyria

Assyria dominated the ancient world from the ninth century to the seventh century B. C. After defeating the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B. C., the Assyrians carried away thousands of Israelites and resettled them in other parts of the Assyrian Empire. The early inhabitants of Assyria were ancient tribesmen (Gen. 10:22) who probably migrated from Babylonia. They grew powerful enough around 1300 B. C. to conquer Babylonia. For the next 700 years they were the leading power as rivals to Babylon.

Tiglath-Pileser I (1120-1100 B. C.) built the Assyrian kingdom to the most extensive empire of the age. But under his successors, it declined in power and influence. This decline offered the united kingdom of Judah, under the leadership of David and Solomon, the opportunity to reach its greatest limits. After the Assyrians had languished in weakness for an extended period, Ashurnasirpal (884-860 B. C.) restored much of the prestige of the empire. His son, Shalmaneser III, succeeded him, and reigned from about 860 to 825 B. C. and was the first Assyrian king to come into conflict with the northern kingdom of Israel. In an effort to halt the Assyrian expansion, a group of surrounding nations formed a coalition, of which Israel was a part. Ahab was king of Israel during this time. But the coalition eventually split up, allowing the Assyrians to continue their relentless conquest of surrounding territories.



3. Although the city of Nineveh was eventually destroyed by a coalition of the Medes, Babylonians and Scythians in 612 B.C. the repentance accounted for in Jonah's story must have had a significant effect on the city for some years. The people of Israel would have heard news of such an incredible change in such a notorious city. Jesus himself used the story of Jonah in Matthew 12:41 to show the bankruptcy of the religious authorities who claimed to have all the necessary credentials required by God. Jesus said: "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."

Q. What was Jesus referring to? How does his reference to Jonah's story impact upon our view of the religious authorities of Jesus' time? What warning does it send to us?

4. In chapter 3 Jonah changes direction. Having previously fled in the opposite direction to God's call, he now heads in the right direction and again travels afar; in fact, more than 1400 kms in the right direction! He crossed cultural and religious boundaries, moving from Israelite territory to Gentile heartland; from the sacred to the profane. But just as God had been with him in the depths, so God also went before Jonah into Nineveh. Read Acts chapter 10 and 11 to see how God needed to awaken the Apostle Peter to the extent of God's program for salvation.

Q. What are the points of partiality and prejudice that potentially hinder the progress of the Gospel today?

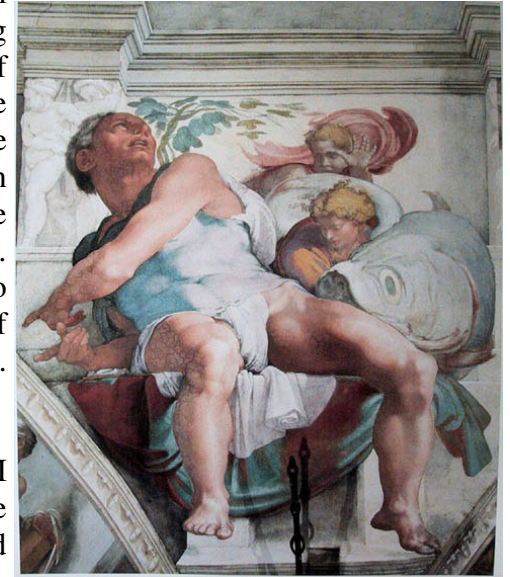
Going Further

1. Note God's call upon Jonah's life in 1:1 and 3:1. God doesn't negotiate the nature of the call upon Jonah. His call could be considered quite unreasonable. So it was for the fishermen and tax collectors responding to Jesus in the New Testament. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Cost of Discipleship* contends that those who speak of those who followed Jesus immediately as having known of Jesus and made some previous assessment of him have actually missed the point of the narrative (p.48). He believed the point is that when God calls, the imperative is so strong, one has little choice but to obey. The call to leave their families, jobs, country was indeed unreasonable from a human point of view (as was the call to Jonah to address the Ninevites). What we must realize is that the God who calls is the God who empowers and liberates his people. What he calls us to do, we can do in Him.

Q. What, among the calls and commands of Jesus in the New Testament, would you rate as "unreasonable" like the call upon Jonah?

2. Why did God send Jonah to speak to Nineveh? Jonah is the Old Testament prophet in the Bible sent to speak to a pagan nation, as opposed to God's own people, to tell them to repent. Ironically, the Ninevites actually responded repentantly. What might God be wanting Israel and us to understand through these events?

During the period from 833 to 745 B. C., Assyria was engaged in internal struggles as well as war with Syria. This allowed Israel to operate without threat from the Assyrian army. During this time, Jeroboam II, king of Israel, was able to raise the Northern Kingdom to the status of a major nation among the countries of the ancient Near East. Traditionally this is thought to be the date of the writing of the book of Jonah (approx. 760 B.C.).



The rise of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B. C.) marked the beginning of a renewed period of Assyrian oppression for the nation of Israel. Tiglath-Pileser, known also in the Bible as PUL (2 Kin. 15:19), set out to regain territories previously occupied by the Assyrians. He was resisted by a coalition led by Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel. These rulers tried to force Ahaz, king of Judah, to join them. When Ahaz refused, Rezin and Pekah marched on Jerusalem, intent on destroying the city. Against the counsel of the prophet Isaiah, Ahaz enlisted the aid of Tiglath-Pileser for protection. This protection cost dearly. From that day forth, Israel was required to pay tribute to Assyria and was forced to adopt some of the religious practices of the Assyrians (2 Kings 16).

Tiglath-Pileser was succeeded by his son, Shalmaneser V (727-722 B. C.). When Hoshea, king of Israel, who had been placed on the throne by Tiglath-Pileser, refused to pay the required tribute, Shalmaneser attacked Samaria, the capital of Israel. After a long siege, Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B. C., perhaps to Sargon II; and

27,000 inhabitants of Israel were deported to Assyrian territories. This event marked the end of the northern kingdom of Israel. Most of the deported Hebrews never returned to their homeland.

Israel's sister nation, the southern kingdom of Judah, also felt the power of the Assyrian Empire. In 701 B. C., Sennacherib, king of



Here is more irony. The repentant Ninevites don't know what the sometimes faithless prophet actually knows (see 4:2). See in the following texts how this expression may be a sign of genuine faith:

- ⇒ Jonah 1:6 & 1:14 (the same word in the question: “who knows?” or “perhaps?”)
- ⇒ 2 Samuel 12:22
- ⇒ Joel 2:13-14

3:10 "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." In other words, **God changed his mind.**

Note the exact parallel in the words that describe Nineveh's turning from evil in 3:8 now used of God in verse 10. God is responsive to human actions and reciprocates their actions. God's readiness to relent from punishment that is due is represented in the Hebrew word *naham* is a rich and profound concept. It means a change of heart in our English idiom and yet can be translated simply “repentance” or “compassion”. It contrasts to the word *sub* to describe the Ninevites' turning away. God has freely and compassionately recognised the cry of faith in the people in response to Jonah's message and relents from punishment that was justified to mete out.

Read Hosea 11:8-9 and discuss how this same compassionate love is offered to the Assyrians in the book of Jonah.

Q. How does this compassionate love of God challenge the view some people have that the God of the Old Testament is different to the God of the New Testament?

Alternatively, verse 4 may well be a summary for a much more substantial message that Jonah delivered. Consider how it may have included God's call also for repentance by looking at the Ninevite response (see v.5).

3:8 Notice how the king's instructions heighten the drama played out in the story. As one translation puts it: "let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them **cry mightily** to God".

- See how the words "cry mightily" can be seen as key words in the story so far:
 - ⇒ 1:2
 - ⇒ 1:6
 - ⇒ 1:14
 - ⇒ 2:2
 - ⇒ 3:2
 - ⇒ 3:4
 - ⇒ 3:5
 - ⇒ 3:8
- The reference to clothing the beasts in sackcloth probably indicates how the king wished to symbolize a wholehearted turning to the Lord for the whole city. How does this response compare to the other responses to God in the story so far? What's so significant about Ninevah's wholehearted repentance?

3:9 "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

Assyria (705-681 B. C.), planned an attack on Jerusalem. However, the Assyrian army was struck by a plague, which the Bible referred to as "the angel of the Lord" (2 Kin. 19:35). Thousands of Assyrian soldiers died, and Sennacherib was forced to retreat from his invasion. Thus, Jerusalem was saved from Assyrian oppression by divine intervention.

The religion of the Assyrians, much like that of the Babylonians, emphasized worship of nature. They believed every object of nature was possessed by a spirit. The chief god was Asshur. All other primary gods whom they worshiped were related to the objects of nature. These included:

- Anu, god of the heavens;
- Bel, god of the region inhabited by man, beasts, and birds;
- Ea, god of the waters;
- Sin, the moon-god;
- Shamash, the sun-god; and
- Ramman, god of the storms.

These gods were followed by five gods of the planets. In addition to these primary gods, lesser gods also were worshiped. In some cases, various cities had their own patron gods. The pagan worship of the Assyrians was soundly condemned by several prophets of the Old Testament (e.g. Isa. 10:5; Ezek. 16:28; Hos. 8.9)



Archaeologists have discovered that the Assyrians were merciless and savage people. The Assyrian army was ruthless and effective. Its cruelty included burning cities, burning children, impaling victims on stakes, beheading, and chopping off hands. But, like Babylon, whom God used as an instrument of judgment against Judah, Assyria became God's channel of punishment and judgment against Israel because of their sin and idolatry.

Because of the cruelty and paganism of the Assyrians, the Hebrew people harbored deep-seated hostility against this nation. This attitude is revealed clearly in the Book of Jonah. When God instructed Jonah to preach to Nineveh, Jonah refused and went in the opposite direction. It should not surprise us that Jonah was disappointed with God because He spared the city.

Nineveh today

It is interesting to note that on 15 October 2005, the province of Nineveh (Ninawa) cast the deciding votes in the referendum for Iraq's Constitution.

Nineveh was one of three mostly Sunni Arab provinces whose veto could defeat the constitution. Nineveh was closely watched through the extended electoral count. Home to a majority Sunni Arab population and ethnically diverse minority which includes Kurds (Yezidi and Sunni) and Assyrian Christians, as well as the oil processing center Mosul (which is often considered to be the modern Niniveh city, and is called so by Aramaic speakers), the province of Nineveh promises to play a large role in Iraqi politics into the future.



Study— Chapter 3

3:1 "The word of Adonai came to Jonah a second time"

Note the repetition we have from 1:1. Has Jonah learned his lesson....?

Imagine the storyteller as he proceeds with chapter 3, building some suspense by saying: "So Jonah arose....and..... .went to Nineveh." (compare 1:1)

Note that God makes no mention of Jonah's past failure, nor does God leverage Jonah by way of mentioning how recently God saved Jonah from Sheol! Instead, God gives room for Jonah to say Yes or No. God assumes that Jonah as the capacity to rise above his previous response and gives grace for him to do so.

Q. How might this be encouraging to Christians today?

3:4 "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Consider the importance of the reference to "forty days" and "overthrown" in the following texts:

- Genesis 7:4,12,17
- Genesis 50:3
- Exodus 24:18
- Genesis 19:21,25,29;
- Deuteronomy 29:23
- Job 12:15

If verse 4 represents the full content of the message God gave Jonah to present, then it seems God has a message of judgment with no escape clause or grace attached. Is this why Jonah at last obeys? Is it because he sees that they will get their due?