



WEEK FIVE HANDOUT – **A Grave Misunderstanding**

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*And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”
And the people of Nineveh believed God.
- Jonah 3:24-5 ESV*

- **A bad case of déjà vu**

- The openings of chapter 1 and chapter 2 are mirror images of one another

CH 1 *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai...*

CH 3 *Then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time...*

CH 1 *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”*

CH 3 *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”*

CH 1 *But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish...*

CH 3 *So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh...*

CH 1 *... from the presence of the LORD.*

CH 3 *...according to the word of the LORD.*

- This was all like a recurring nightmare
- He had escaped death, but not God’s call
- He quickly discovered that nothing had really changed
- Four things remained the same:
 1. God’s mission for Jonah
 2. God’s message for Nineveh
 3. Nineveh’s wickedness
 4. Jonah’s hatred for the Ninevites

- This was all like a recurring nightmare
- Jonah had escaped death, but not God's call
 - o Jonah has been thrown overboard
 - o His fate is seemingly sealed
 - o And chapter 2 records his prayer

"Nineveh was still there, and the people of Nineveh were just as wicked as they had ever been. But there was one more thing that remained unchanged: God's plan for the city and its inhabitants. And whether Jonah liked it or not, God was going to use him to pour out a blessing on the immoral and totally unworthy people of Nineveh." – Ken Miller, *Devotionary™ on Jonah*

- **The nasty Ninevites**

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh... – vs 3

"Nineveh, with its heterogeneous population of people from throughout the Assyrian Empire, was one of the most beautiful cities in the Near East, with its gardens, temples, and splendid palaces." – Gwendolyn Leick, *The A to Z of Mesopotamia*

- Appearances can be deceptive
 - o The Assyrians were highly civilized
 - o But they also had a well-deserved reputation for:
 - immorality
 - idolatry
 - cruelty

"I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile...I flayed many right through my land [and] draped their skins over the walls" – Albert Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*

- **Proclaim to them the proclamation**

- The first time, God's message concerned their evil
"...call out against it, for their evil" – 1:2
- And Jonah will assume that is still the case
- God must still be upset about their wickedness
- Look closely at the message God gives to Jonah the second time
"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" – 3:4

The author describes Nineveh as “an exceedingly great city” In Hebrew, the phrase actually says, “a great city even in God’s sight.” The word translated as “exceedingly” in the ESV is actually 'ēlōhîm, which was most commonly used to refer to a god or divine being. Throughout the book of Jonah, the author substitutes the name 'ēlōhîm for Yahweh when speaking of God in association with the Gentiles.

So, when he describes Nineveh as ‘great,’ he is essentially saying that “Nineveh was a great metropolis belonging to God.” Another interpretation of this enigmatic phrase is “an important city for God’s purposes. – Ken Miller, *Devotionary™ on Jonah*

’îr Gāḏôl ’ēlōhîm – “a great metropolis belonging to God”

- Conveys **possession** or **sovereignty**
- Nineveh is not **King Sennacherib’s** city
- It did not belong to their false god, **Ishtar**
- This **great** city existed for God’s glory and use

“God’s mercy is as broad as His sovereignty. Though Jonah readily acknowledged God’s sovereignty over all the earth (1:9), he struggled with the equally universal scope of God’s mercy, once he realized that not even Assyria, Israel’s dreaded enemy was excluded.’ – Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah*

- **More than a case of semantics**

- God says He is going to **overthrow** Nineveh
 - What do you think Jonah heard God say?
 - Judgment
 - Destruction
 - Death
 - But is that what God meant?
- The meaning of this word is critical
 - hāpāk** – (haw-fak’) – to turn (57x), to overthrow (13x)
 - It most often means to repent, return, or convert
 - In this context, it seems to mean “to be changed”
 - God is telling Jonah that in 40 days, the people of Nineveh will turn to Him
 - But that’s not what Jonah heard
 - It’s also not how Jonah delivered the message

To him, the meaning of God’s message was clear: The Ninevites were about to face the wrath of Yahweh. So, he eagerly and enthusiastically walked the streets of Nineveh, delivering God’s divine ultimatum. – Ken Miller, *Devotionary™ on Jonah*

- Jonah is delivering God’s message with **missionary zeal**
 - But he is hoping for **condemnation**, not **converts**

- He wants to see Nineveh **overthrown** or **destroyed by God**
- All in God's good timing
 - Notice the emphasis on time
 - The city is **3-days'** journey across
 - Jonah only goes **1-day's** journey inside
 - He proclaims their overthrow in **40 days**
 - There is a **temporal** nature to all of this
 - But God operates outside of **time**
- **Unbelievable belief**
*And the people of Nineveh **believed God**.* – vs 5
 - This statement was meant to shock
 - The author's audience would have found it **unbelievable** and **convicting**
 - It had taken the Ninevites just **1 day** to turn to God, not **40 days**
 - And that fact would have struck a nerve
 - **40 days**
 - That number had special significance to the Israelites
 - It would have reminded them of the 40 years their ancestors spent wandering in the wilderness
 - Because they had failed to **believe God**
 - Because they had failed to **obey God**

*“How long will these people **treat me with contempt**? Will they never **believe me**, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them? I will disown them and destroy them with a plague. Then I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they are!”* – Numbers 14:11-12 NLT

*The Israelites had traveled in the wilderness for forty years until all the men who were old enough to fight in battle when they left Egypt had died. **For they had disobeyed the Lord**, and the Lord vowed he would not let them enter the land he had sworn to give us—a land flowing with milk and honey.* – Joshua 5:6 NLT

 - The Israelites had failed to **believe** God
 - Yet the pagan Ninevites **believed** God
 - **3 Important Facts:**
 1. Jonah never even mentioned God's name
No, “Thus says Yahweh...”
 2. He never clarified their crime
No mentions of what they had done
 3. And he offered no call to repentance
He doesn't tell them what to do
 - Yet, they believed **'ēlōhîm**
 - With no aid or assistance from the prophet of God

- Jonah never interceded on their behalf
 - Compare his actions to that of Moses
- Deuteronomy 9 - the Golden Calf
- “So while the mountain was blazing with fire I turned and came down, holding in my hands the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant. There below me I could see that you had sinned against the Lord your God. You had melted gold and made a calf idol for yourselves. How quickly you had turned away from the path the Lord had commanded you to follow! So I took the stone tablets and threw them to the ground, smashing them before your eyes.” – Deuteronomy 9:15-17 NLT*
- “Then, as before, I threw myself down before the Lord for forty days and nights. I ate no bread and drank no water because of the great sin you had committed by doing what the Lord hated, provoking him to anger. I feared that the furious anger of the Lord, which turned him against you, would drive him to destroy you. But again he listened to me.” – Deuteronomy 9:18-19 NLT*
- Jonah was the **reluctant prophet**
 - Now he was the **uncompassionate prophet**
- Believed – '**āman** – (aw-man) - to trust, to believe in
- “They trusted God”
 - Did they become Yahweh worshipers?
 - Did they give up all their false gods?
 - Historically, that seems unlikely
 - But God was doing something extraordinary
 - He was giving a glimpse of His redemptive plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles
 - God can and will redeem men from every tribe, nation, and tongue
- Fasting and sackcloth
- This whole thing began at a grass roots level
 - But the whole nation was impacted
 - And the entire nation displayed their penitence
 - From the greatest to the least
 - What a contrast to the people of Israel
- “I **overthrew** some of you,
as when God **overthrew** Sodom and Gomorrah,
and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning;
yet you did not return to me,” declares the Lord. – Amos 4:11 NLT*
- The story of the Centurion and his servant – Matthew 8:5-13

The Centurion:

“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed.” – Matthew 8:8 NLT

Jesus:

“I tell you the truth, I haven’t seen faith like this in all Israel! And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” – Matthew 8:10-12 NLT

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Discuss what you think was going through Jonah’s mind as he watched all of this transpire.

Why do you think God allowed these pagan Assyrians to hear and respond to His message the way they did? Keep in mind, they couldn’t have done it without Him.

Read Romans 1:16-17. How would you relate these verses to the story of the Ninevites?