

Jonah's Preaching in Nineveh

In Jonah's time, Nineveh was a city great in power, culture, and size. It was the last capital city of Assyria, the largest gentile power at that time. Here were stationed the fierce troops and the swift cavalry of the king. The citizens of Nineveh felt secure behind its massive walls – some 30 metres high and broad enough for three chariots to be driven abreast on the roadway running along their top.

It is not impossible that Nineveh may have had a population of half a million inhabitants. Chapter 4 mentions there were "*more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot tell their right hand from their left*" (verse 11). We understand this as referring to children who had not yet reached the age of discretion (Deuteronomy 1:39). Adding an older brother or sister and two parents to the family of each of the 120,000 gives a rough estimate of perhaps 500,000 inhabitants in Nineveh.

The city also contained heathen temples, magnificent palaces, parks, gardens and, later (650 BC), the famous library of Ashurbanipal, with more than 100,000 volumes. Ancient Nineveh was the New York or London of its day.

Jonah got up and went to Nineveh (3:3). Wherever he found people - in the doorways, in the shops, on the streets - he proclaimed, "There are still forty days until Nineveh will be overthrown!" (v.4)

Critics who challenge the historicity of Jonah claim the Ninevites would not have understood the Hebrew language Jonah spoke. Yet, both Hebrew and the Assyrian language belonged to the Semitic language family, so there was some basic similarity. In addition, one must remember Jonah could have spoken Aramaic, the language of commerce and diplomacy in the ancient Near East. Aramaic was spread by merchants everywhere. The Israelites were also acquainted with Aramaic (Isaiah 36:11). The question of what language Jonah used really is not important, since the text assures us that the Ninevites did hear and understand Jonah's preaching.

Was Jonah's message to the people of Nineveh just these handful of words (only five in the Hebrew) and no more? We are not told, but in view of the results it is reasonable to assume that what we have here is only a summary of everything he said. But even this summary contains the truths of God's Word necessary for conversion, namely the Law and the Gospel. "*Still forty days*" was the Gospel, stating the time of grace God was giving the Ninevites to repent of their sins and come to Him for forgiveness. That the Ninevites subsequently came to faith ("*the people of Nineveh believed God*" verse 5) and trusted in

God's mercy for forgiveness ("*they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth,*" verse 9) shows the gospel had done its work.

"Until Nineveh will be overthrown" was the message of the Law in Jonah's preaching. Implied was, "You have forty days to repent, but if you don't, you will be destroyed as God's punishment for your sins." That the Law had its desired effect is shown by the fasting, and the putting on of sackcloth (verses 5- 6).

We can learn a dual lesson from Jonah's effective preaching. First, he was brief and to the point. He let the Word do the talking for him. He proclaimed God's Law simply, directly, and with no holds barred. God does not trifle with sin but punishes it with His wrath and eternal judgment. Only when the severity of the Law is realised will the sinner be led to truly grieve over sin and seek the Saviour's forgiveness. Then Jonah proclaimed the Gospel, again simply and directly. There is forgiveness with God because His Son died to pay for all sins. No further payment of any kind is demanded by God. No conditions are to be attached to the Gospel.

Second, Jonah did not seek to draw attention to himself by his preaching. Note that once Jonah proclaimed his message, his name is not mentioned again in this chapter. At this point he was no longer important. Accordingly, the account does not say, "The people of Nineveh believed Jonah," but "*The people of Nineveh believed God,*" (v. 5). Jonah did his job well; he let God have all the glory. What an admirable quality in a preacher - to impart to his listeners God's message so fully and clearly that he himself recedes into the background! It is sad today that so many preachers want all the glory for themselves.

Today, we continue to preach the same Law and Gospel message as Jonah. Although our nation has repeatedly spit in the face of God by allowing the murder of unborn children and giving its nod of approval to homosexuality, just to name a couple examples, and it is becoming more difficult to lead a Christian life in Australia, nevertheless, we continue on unperturbed. We bring to the world the same message of Jonah, and indeed John the Baptist, and Jesus Himself, "Repent!" A day of judgment is fast approaching, and time is indeed short. NOW is the time to seek out Jesus, to *repent, and believe in the Good News!* (Mark 1:15)