

Jonah 3:1-4:4

- Who knows? Will God show compassion? -

Author: Evert Jan Hempenius

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Introduction

- ❖ The story of Jonah is not merely a children's story, although to many children it is a favourite or a story people can tell each other sitting by the fireplace. The story is questioning the reader all the time. Do you believe and accept that the LORD is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity?" (Jon 4:2). Can you act accordingly towards others?
- ❖ The message is in the details. This message can be discovered by telling the story over and over again. Every word is well-chosen and in the right place. The following example might suffice.
 - After Jonah preached the message of God, the king and his nobles issued a decree. He said: "Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." (ESV)
 - God showed his compassion: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (ESV). The NIV translates: "...he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."
 - After this, Jonah prayed: "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." (ESV)
 - "Who knows?" "I knew", Jonah prayed. He knew that God is a God who relents from sending calamity. For readability, the translator can choose an

alternative translation like the NIV does, but the internal references within the text get lost for the reader who is not familiar with Hebrew.

- ❖ The book of Jonah is different from the other minor prophets because it tells a story about the prophet narrated by somebody else. He preached to the people of Assyria only these words: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jon 3:4). The book narrates his actions and words in connection with an assignment that he found difficult to accept from the Lord: to preach to an enemy nation (Nineveh, the capital of Assyria) with the possibility that they would respond in such a way as to be shown mercy by God, an outcome that Jonah was determined to resist.¹
 - The reader gets the message of the book mainly by evaluating what happened to Jonah and what he, and the other characters, did in response rather than by analyzing what God told Jonah to say.²
- ❖ The main thought is found in Jonah 2:9: "Salvation comes from the LORD." But this was a lesson for Jonah to apprehend. It permeates his personal experience.
 - Jonah knew this before as is clear in a second prayer to the LORD (Jon 4:2): He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Book of Jonah. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a "stand-alone". You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons. There are four available.

Form and structure

- ❖ The Book of Jonah can be divided into two parts: the first and the second commission to preach against Nineveh. See below.
 - Each part has different scenes at different locations.

¹ Stuart, D. (2012, p. 455). *Jonah, Book of*. In M. J. Boda & G. J. McConville (Eds.).

² Stuart, D. (2012, p. 456). *Jonah, Book of*. In M. J. Boda & G. J. McConville (Eds.).

- Scene 2 has subdivisions marked by the nature of the sea: a. a violent storm; b. getting rougher and tougher; c. growing even wilder; d. becoming calm again.
- Scene 3 has a subdivision marked by the result of the preaching of Jonah: a. the preaching; b. the effect on the people of Nineveh and consequently the compassion of God; c. Jonah displeased.
- It is interesting to note that the two discourses together feature an ABB'A'-structure:
 - A. The mercy of God (4:2);
 - B. The angriness of Jonah (4:3);
 - B'. The angriness of Jonah (4:9);
 - A'. The mercy of God (4:10-11).
 - Between both discourses, the growth and the withering of the vine are told.
- The prayer of Jonah has several features resembling the Psalms.
- ❖ **The book ends with a question, the reader needs to answer.**

PART I. First commission to preach against Nineveh (Jon 1-2)	
On the run (Jon 1:1-3)	
Scene 1 <i>(verse 1:1-3)</i> LORD – Jonah	The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.
At Sea (Jon 1:4-17) – the violent storm	
Scene 2a <i>(verse 1:4-10)</i> LORD sailors – gods	Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.” Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.”

Jonah – LORD	<p>They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”</p> <p>He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”</p> <p>This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)</p>
Scene 2b <i>(verses 1:11-12)</i> Sailors – Jonah	<p>The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”</p> <p>He replied, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”</p>
Scene 2c <i>(verses 1:13-14)</i> Sailors – LORD	<p>Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried to the LORD, “O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased.”</p>
Scene 2d <i>(verses 1:15-16)</i> Sailors – LORD	<p>Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.</p>
Inside the fish (Jon 2) – the prayer	
Scene 3 <i>(verses 1:17-2:1)</i> LORD (his God) – Jonah The prayer <i>(verses 2:2-9)</i>	<p>But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.</p> <p>From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said:</p> <p>“In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.</p> <p>You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.</p> <p>I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’</p>

<p>(verse 2:10)</p>	<p>The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.</p> <p>But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.</p> <p>“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.”</p> <p>And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.</p>
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PART II. Second commission to preach against Nineveh (Jon 3-4)

At Nineveh (Jon 3:1-4:4)

<p>Scene 3a (verses 3:1-4) LORD – Jonah</p>	<p>Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”</p> <p>Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.</p> <p>Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.</p> <p>On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”</p>
<p>Scene 3b (verses 3:5-10) God – Ninevites</p>	<p>The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.</p> <p>When the news 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. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion</p>

	<p>turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”</p> <p>When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.</p>
<p>Scene 3c (verses 4:1-4) LORD – Jonah</p> <p>The first discourse: prayer and answer by question</p>	<p>But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD,</p> <p>“O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”</p> <p>But the LORD replied,</p> <p>“Have you any right to be angry?”</p>
<p>East of Nineveh (Jon 4:5-11) – the lesson</p>	
<p>Scene 4 (verses 4:5-</p> <p>The second discourse: outcry and answer by question</p>	<p>Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.</p> <p>Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.</p> <p>But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint.</p> <p>He wanted to die, and said,</p> <p>“It would be better for me to die than to live.”</p> <p>But God said to Jonah,</p> <p>“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”</p> <p>He said,</p> <p>“I do. I am angry enough to die.”</p> <p>But the LORD said,</p> <p>“You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”</p>

Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

Author

- ❖ The author of this book is not known. He is very skilled in story-telling.

Date of writing and setting

- ❖ The date of writing is not known.
- ❖ The date of the setting is also not exactly known. The book refers to cities, and the king of Nineveh but doesn't mention his name. The opening verses do not refer to any reign of the kings of Israel and Judah, like some other prophetic books:
 - “The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isa 1:1).
- ❖ The only reference we have is 2 Kings 14:25. Based on the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel (793–753 BC or 786–746 BC). Jonah's ministry as a prophet could have occurred in the first half of the eighth century B.C. plus ten years (740 B.C.). This is a mere indication.
 - Nahum, who also prophesied against Nineveh, must be dated several decades later when Assyria had waged war against Israel and Judah.

Jonah

- ❖ His name means “Dove.”
- ❖ Little is known about the prophet himself. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25:
 - “He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.”
 - “He” is Jeroboam II, King of Israel.
 - This word of the LORD might answer the question of why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh.
 - A weak or even destroyed Nineveh was no threat to the restored boundaries of Israel, whereas a strong Nineveh and Assyria could become a threatening power to these boundaries. This indeed has happened (734–722 BC).

LORD (Yahweh)

- ❖ “The divine names vary (‘Yahweh,’ ‘Elohim,’ ‘ha-Elohim,’ ‘Yahweh-Elohim’), for the most part according to who is addressing the deity (generally, the pagans use ‘Elohim,’ and Jonah uses ‘Yahweh,’ as might be expected).”³ See also Psalm 95:3-5.

³ Stuart, D. (2012, p. 459). *Jonah, Book of*. In M. J. Boda & G. J. McConville (Eds.).

- ❖ He is the God of heaven: “He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, **the God of heaven**, who made the sea and the land” (Jon 1:9). This designation is especially used in pagan contexts:
 - Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon (Dan 2:18, a.o.);
 - Cyrus king of Persia (2 Chron 36:23; Ezr 1:2, a.o.);
 - Darius king of Persia (Ezr 6:8);
 - Artaxerxes (Ezr 7:12; Neh 1:4, a.o.).
 - Interesting are also Revelation 11:13 and 16:10, 11:
 - "At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and **the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.**"
 - “The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. **Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.**”
- ❖ The LORD is described as governing his creation (the sea; a storm (heaven); dry land; a fish; the sun; a scorching east wind, a vine, a worm). “He **provided** a great fish” (Jon 1:17; see also 4:6, 7, 8). Jonah knew that the LORD had sent this storm, and he was thankful to God for his salvation by the fish but seems to have forgotten all this when he was angry about the withered vine.
 - He is not only the LORD of the natural world but also the nations, and the sailors were instruments in his hands.
- ❖ Three statements of Jonah are important:
 - “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (Jon 1:9).
 - “But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD” (Jon 2:9).
 - “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jon 4:2).
 - They reveal also the contradictions found in the belief system of the believer.
- ❖ Person notes: “Jonah, the helmsman, and the king of Nineveh all suggest (at least implicitly) that the Lord is compassionate.”⁴

⁴ Person, R. F., Jr. (1996, p.60).

The captain/helmsman:	Call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish " (1:6).
Jonah:	Salvation comes from the LORD" (2:9).
The King	"God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish " (3:9).
Jonah	"You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2).

- The LORD is also depicted as a God who gives a second chance, especially to Jonah.

Geography

- ❖ The Book of Jonah mentions several geographical names.
 - Home (Jon 4:2) This is probably Gath Hepher (2 Kgs 14:25), a fortified town in Israel, the Northern Kingdom. Jerome, in his commentary on the book of Jonah, locates Gath-Hepher two miles from Sepphoris, on the road to Tiberias. This fortified city was occupied until the Assyrian conquest. In the Persian period, the site was again inhabited.⁵
 - Joppa (Jon 1:2). A town on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was an important harbour. Timbers from Lebanon were shipped to Joppa, where they were unloaded and carried overland to Jerusalem (2 Chr 2:16; Ezra 3:7; see also Acts 9:36).⁶
 - Tarshish (Jon 1:2). The location of this port is not clear. A tentative conclusion, based on the story, might point to the south of Spain (Tartessos). There existed trading contacts between the Phoenicians (Tyre, Lebanon; Ez 27:12) and the people of Tartessos. Instead of going to the east (Nineveh), Jonah wanted to travel to the West as far as possible. But, "because of the ambiguity regarding the identification of Tarshish, we are not able to say with confidence where Jonah was heading when he set sail from Joppa. All we can be sure of is that he was going west, and that he thought he would be leaving his God behind."⁷
 - These ships could carry a sail and sailed close to the coastline.
 - They set sail during the spring and the summer season (April-September). During the autumn and winter season the weather could become rough and travelling at sea was impossible.

⁵ Greenberg, R. (1992, Vol. 2, pp. 909–910). *Gath-Hepher (Place)*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.).

⁶ Kaplan, J., & Kaplan, H. R. (1992, Vol. 3, p. 946). *Joppa (Place)*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.).

⁷ Baker, D. W. (1992, Vol. 6, p. 333). *Tarshish (Place)*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.).

- Nineveh was one of the major cities of the Assyrians located on the east bank of the river Tigris, opposite modern Mosul, and very populous by the standards of those days. It became the capital of Assyria by the decision of King Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.).

Historicity

- ❖ For a discussion pros and cons of the historicity of the Book, see D. Stuart.⁸

Exposition

PART II. Second commission to preach against Nineveh (Jon 3)

- ❖ Part II must be read with Part I in mind, the refusal of Jonah to go to Nineveh, and his miraculous salvation from drowning.
 - Allen summarizes: “Jonah has been face to face with death—and with exceptional grace which saved him from death. He who had run away from Yahweh met him in the sea and in the fish as Judge and Savior.”⁹

Verse 1-4 (Scene 3a – Jonah obeys the LORD)

- ❖ **“The word of the LORD came to”**
 - “This kind of formula became the standard form of introduction to the prophetic books when the individual messages were collected.”¹⁰
 - **“The word (...) came to”** indicates an official commission by the LORD.
 - **“The LORD”** – This Name refers to the revelation of God to Moses (Ex 3:14-16):
 - “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.’”
 - He is the creator, He is the eternal one, who is present, who is faithful to himself, He is the Almighty God. He entered into a covenant with Abraham from generation to generation.

⁸ Stuart, D. (2012, p. 460). *Jonah, Book of*. In M. J. Boda & G. J. McConville (Eds.).

⁹ Allen, L. C. (1976, p. 220).

¹⁰ Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978, p. 49).

- **“A second time:”** Jonah receives a second chance. He now knows that he cannot flee from the LORD. He has to go...
- **“Go to the great city of Nineveh.”** Compare this commission with the first one: **“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me”** (Jon 1:2)
 - “The Hebrew verb *qum*, which precedes **“go”**, is frequently used with a so-called ‘inceptive’ force to mark the beginning of an enterprise **or to indicate that the action required is to take place immediately.**¹¹ NASV translates: **“Arise, go to Nineveh.”**
 - The LORD is not only concerned with the behaviour of his people of Israel but also with the surrounding peoples and countries. Occasionally, his prophets had to prophesy and preach against them. An example:
 - “This is the word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations:” (Jer 46:1; Egypt (46:2-28); Philistines (47:1-7); Moab (48:1-47); Ammon (49:1-6); a.o.).
 - The reason for this commission is not repeated. Jonah was well aware of it, as the unfolding story makes clear.
- **“and proclaim to it the message I give you.”**
 - **“preach against it”** and **“proclaim to it”** is in Hebrew the same = לִּיְהוָה וּקְרָא
 - **“the message I give you”** is added compared to Jonah 1:2. Did God want to certify that Jonah was to preach? It also serves to guarantee that the words **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned”** were commissioned by the LORD.
- **“Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.”** Obviously, Jonah has learned a lesson. It is impossible to run away from the LORD.
- **“Now Nineveh was a very important city—”, “a city great to God”** (Heb.) or a big city, as is also made clear by the number of inhabitants, **“has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left”** (Jon 4:11).
 - Price and Nida comment: **“The form of this explanatory note and its insertion here give every appearance of referring to a city which was**

¹¹ Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978, p. 50).

once of importance, but at the time of writing was no more than a ruin,"¹² or greatly reduced in size and importance.

- **“a very important city.”** This is a superlative, literally “great to God,” and beyond the imagination of the people in Israel. Perhaps a few Israelites might have visited the city.
- **“a visit required three days.”** It took three days to preach at every corner of the streets to reach all the people.
 - Price and Nida comment: “The last part of the verse, *that it took three days to walk through it*, has presented difficulty for some translators, in view of the contradiction between this statement and the size of Nineveh as revealed by archaeology. The circumference of the ruins is about eight miles, and even if this were the length from one end to the other, it would not require as much as one day to cross the city on foot.”
 - In this case, it is necessary to use the imagination. If Nineveh had large avenues, and it was easy to walk through the city from one end to the other, the words **“a visit required three days,”** pose some exegetical and historical problems. But it must be remembered that the streets were very crowded with people, and the cities were more densely populated. Although Jonah did not visit Nineveh as a tourist, a comparison might help. A visit to London, Paris, Rome, or any other major city can serve as a comparison. A visit to the city centres of these cities would take more than three days to visit all the places of interest. And it was not the intention of the narrator to give an accurate description of the distance.
 - Try to imagine that while Jonah was preaching the message to the city, the people could have asked Jonah several questions: “Why, how, and when will this happen?” He couldn't just walk through the city. And if he wanted to reach all the people, he had to take his detours to the alleys.
 - This passage must be read in context.
 - **“Three days”** is followed by **“on the first day”** and by the message **“forty more days.”** Jonah had time enough to proclaim the word of God.
 - **“started into the city,” “Jonah began”** (NASB95). This indicates that he did not complete his mission, perhaps only on the first day. He did not go to the palace (Jon 3:6). The news was spread by the Ninevites themselves.

¹² Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978”, p. 91).

- **“On the first day, Jonah started into the city.” “Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk”** (NASB95), “Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day’s walk” (Tanakh). See above.
- **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”**
 - The number **“forty”** occurs very often. Symbolically, it indicates a period of preparation, probation, or testing. **“Forty more days”** implies that there is a possibility to avert the destruction. If the people wanted, they had time to flee from the city.
 - **“overturned.”** See Genesis 19:18-21, where the LORD overturned Sodom and Gomorrah (Am 4:11).
 - Some commentaries point to the ambiguous use of the **“overturned”** = “ :”פך2. to turn upside down, to **overthrow**: to **demolish**; (...) 4. a) to **change**, (...) to turn the heart.¹³ The context points to 2., and not to 4, although the result of the proclamation turns out to be a change of heart.
 - Jeremiah 18:7-8: “If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.”
 - Price and Nida comment: “It is as though Jonah is only concerned to carry out his commission to the absolute minimum, and he seemingly has no concern for the well-being of those to whom he preached.”¹⁴
 - Did God intend this period also as a period of testing for Jonah?

Verse 4- 9 (*Scene 2b – The Ninevites believed God*)

- ❖ Smith and Page comment: “The Ninevites’ reaction is conveyed by three verbs: **“believed ... declared ... put on.”** **These describe three stages of response: inward, articulated, then outward.**”¹⁵ This reaction is remarkable when compared to the fate of Jeremiah (Jer 26:8).
- ❖ **“The Ninevites believed God.”**
 - The Ninevites understood the message of Jonah, as a message from God. The proclamation of Jonah had been convincing. But why did they believe a prophet

¹³ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 253).

¹⁴ Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978, p. 92-93).

¹⁵ Smith, B. K., & Page, F. S. (1995, p. 260).

coming from a small country? They could easily have declared him insane and thrown him outside the city.

- Did the proclamation of Jonah appeal to their conscience?
- There is no reason for what Smith and Page suggest: "There can be no question that the change was relatively short-lived, but it seems that at least a few experienced a repentance that led to eternal life."¹⁶

❖ **"They declared a fast."** Fasting is a sign of repentance and humiliation before God.

❖ **"and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."**

- **"from the greatest to the least."** Price and Nida offer some equivalent translations: "including both the rich and the poor" or "including those who command and those who obey" or as in some instances "including those in the center of town as well as those who live in the outskirts" or "from the shopkeepers to the beggars."¹⁷
- **"sackcloth" = "שֵׂמֶרֶט"**: is a large woven cloth, usually woven from goat-hair, and therefore usually black in the East.¹⁸ People had this cloth available for mourning.

❖ **"When the news reached the King."** The story reaches a climax.

- Which news? It seems that this news was both about the proclamation of Jonah and the reaction of the Ninevites.
-

Towards a climax		
<i>The Ninevites</i>	<i>The King</i>	<i>The decree of the King and his, the nobles</i>
The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast,	When the news reached the king of Nineveh,	Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

¹⁶ Smith, B. K., & Page, F. S. (1995, p. 262).

¹⁷ Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978, p. 95).

¹⁸ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 1530).

and all of them,
from the greatest to the least,
put on sackcloth.

he rose from his throne,
took off his royal robes,
covered himself with sackcloth,
and sat down in dust.

But let man and beast
be covered with sackcloth.

Let everyone call urgently on
God.
Let them give up their evil ways
and their violence.
Who knows? God may yet relent
and with compassion turn from
his fierce anger so that we will
not perish.”

- ❖ A. **“he rose from his throne,**
- ❖ B. **took off his royal robes,**
- ❖ B'. **covered himself with sackcloth**
- ❖ A'. **and sat down in the dust.”**
 - This is a very graphic representation of the actions of the king. This description appeals to the reader's imagination.
- ❖ **“Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh.”** He takes the news which reached him very seriously. The proclamation shows urgency.
- ❖ **“By the decree of the king and his nobles:”** Compare Daniel 6:17. This decree is a climax.
 - **“Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything;**
 - **do not let them eat or drink.**
 - **But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth.”**
 - **“beast” = “בְּהֵמָה”**: domestic animals¹⁹ especially in the geographic context of a large city.
 - **“herd” = “בֶּקָר”** : **cattle, herd, ox**²⁰
 - **“flock” = “צֹאן”**: **small cattle, sheep and goats**²¹

¹⁹ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 112).

²⁰ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977, p. 133).

²¹ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977, p. 838).

- Even the innocent animals are included a show the signs of penitence. The LORD mentions the innocent animals explicitly (Jon 4:11).
- ❖ **“Let everyone call urgently on God.”** This is the second time that people are crying out to God. Whereas the sailors didn’t know what was the cause, the king, his nobles, and the Ninevites do know that their evil ways are the cause of the wrath of God.
- ❖ **“Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.” “Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands”** (ESV).
 - The sort of evil ways and violence the people were doing is not explained. Suffice to know that the Ninevites themselves knew and turned away from it.
- ❖ **“Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”**
 - Price and Nida remark: “In this respect, **the person whose words come closest to those of the classical prophets is not Jonah, but the king**, as can be seen by comparing this verse with Jeremiah 25:5, 35:15, Zechariah 1:4, and particularly Jeremiah 26:3, where God’s willingness to relent is linked, as in these two verses, with reformed behavior on the part of Israel.”²²
 - **relent** = “**נָחַם**”: nif. to **regret**:
 - a) *to become remorseful* (Ex 13:17; Ju 2:18 (**נָחַם** because of), 1 Sam 15:29; Jr 4:28; 15:6; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Jl 2:14; **Jon 3:9**; Zech 8:14; Ps 106:45; 110:4;
 - b) **נָחַם עָלַי** = to **regret something** Ex 32:12, 14; Is 57:6; Jr 8:6; 18:8, 10; Jl 2:13; Am 7:3, 6; **Jon 3:10 4:2**; 1 Chron 21:15.²³
 - This passage not only serves as a narrative or a historical account but confronts the reader and questions the reader. Do you take this pagan king as an example? Do you take the impact of his decree seriously?
 - This implicit question is addressed to first listeners, at the time of writing of this book in a situation that the ethical behaviour of the Israelites was probably similar. See for example Amos 4.
 - Jesus refers to the repentance of the Ninevites: “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they

²² Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978, p. 99).

²³ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 688).

repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here” (Mt 12:43).

- The same question is asked to
 - **“Who knows?”** Jonah knows (Jon 4:2)! But he wanted to withhold this revelation of God’s compassion from the people of Nineveh.
- ❖ **“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.”**

Who knows?	
God may turn and relent	and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”
When God saw what they did , how they turned God relented that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. (ESV)	from their evil way , of the disaster

- A more literal translation (ESV compared to NIV) shows the internal references and connections within the text, made visible by highlighting. The verb **“turn”** is used thrice. Twice, God is the subject, once the Ninevites. The verb **“do”** is also used thrice, again twice, God is the subject. **“evil/disaster”** (רַע) and **“relent”** are used twice.
- **“How they turned from their evil ways.”** The decree of the king and his nobles had its effects. They showed remorse and changed their way of life.
- **“he (God) had threatened”** through the proclamation of Jonah.
 - **Jeremiah 18:7-8:** “If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.”

Verse 4:1-4 (Scene 3c, Jonah is angry)

- ❖ This passage concludes the previous scene and introduces the next and final.
- ❖ **“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”**

- “But” **contrasts** both the Ninevites' turning away from their evil ways and God's turning away from his anger (Jon 3:9, 10). Was he hoping for the destruction of the city? It has less to do with Nineveh than with the compassion of God.
- The Hebrew text plays with the verb “רעע”, the substantive “רעה”, and “evil/disaster” “רע”. The following translation (Naardense Bijbel) makes this clear:

	Naardense Bijbel (Dutch) ²⁴	NIV
3:8	they will cover themselves with sackcloth, man and beast, and cry aloud to God,- and turn, everyone from his evil way and from the violence with the palms of their hands;	But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.
3:10	When God sees their works that they have turned from their evil way ,- God will repent of the evil that he has said to do to them, and he has not done it.	When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways , he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.
4:1	But this is evil for Jonah, a great evil ,- and it is kindled in him.	But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

²⁴ Naardense Bijbel. (n.d.). <https://www.naardensebijbel.nl>

- ❖ **“And he prayed to the LORD and said.”** This is the second prayer of Jonah. The first prayer, was in a situation of personal distress because he was almost drowned, and miraculously saved by the LORD. In this prayer, Jonah is angrily complaining.
- ❖ **“O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish.”** Now the reason is given why Jonah ran away from the LORD (Jon 1:1-3).
- ❖ **“for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”**
 - **“gracious” = “חַנּוּן”**: **merciful (God), gracious.**²⁵ **gracious, compassionate, pertaining to being merciful to the needy and repentant.**²⁶
 - **“merciful” = “רַחוּם”**: **compassionate, merciful, favourable, pertaining to showing favour, and not punishment as is often deserved, implying a forgiving relationship.**²⁷
 - **“slow to anger” = “אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם”**: **patient, slow to anger, tolerant, enduring, (...)** pertaining to not being easily angered in a potentially hostile situation.²⁸ **It means the ‘patience’ that does not react impulsively but waits.**²⁹
 - **“abounding in love” = “קָסָד”**: **steadfast love, kindness, faithfulness, loyalty.** The core idea of this term relates to loyalty within a relationship. In relation to the concept of love, it denotes God’s faithfulness to his people.³⁰
 - Exodus 34:6: The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” See also Psalm 86:15 and Joel 2:13.
 - Psalm 103:8: “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”
 - The self-expression of the LORD (Ex 34:6) is not limited to his people but extends to the nations. This is obvious because He is **“the LORD, the God of heaven, who made**

²⁵ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 333).

²⁶ Swanson, J. (1997).

²⁷ Swanson, J. (1997).

²⁸ Swanson, J. (1997).

²⁹ Jenni, E., & Westermann, C. (1997, p. 458).

³⁰ Nettelhorst, R. P. (2014). Love. In D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, & R. Hurst (Eds.).

the sea and the dry land” (Jon 1:9). Jonah understood well what this meant for his message and its possible effects.

- **Jonah has a serious problem with the compassion of the LORD!**
- ❖ **“relenting from disaster”** See also Exodus 32:14.
- ❖ **“Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”**
 - Price and Nida comment: “as a ground for thankfulness, but as a ground for complaint that God could not be counted upon to be consistent in punishing those who deserved to suffer.”³¹ **“It is evident that the confession of Israel’s faith stated here in Jonah was a familiar one during centuries of her history. Only here is it used as a ground for criticism of God’s nature.”**³²
 - Why? In chapter 2, Jonah prayed: “I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. (...) I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. (...) But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”
 - Why? The answer of Jonah is implicitly given in the final question: “But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jon 4:11). Jonah’s answer might have been “no”, but who dares to say “no.” The answer of the reader must be an emphatically “yes.”
- ❖ **“And the LORD said, ‘Do you do well to be angry?’”**
 - Jonah stays silent. He doesn’t answer this question. Why not? Compare Genesis 4:6.

Application

Before

- ❖ Tell the story vividly as is indicated above. Be aware that the listeners already know the story and its outcome. It is important to summarize chapters 1 and 2.

³¹ Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978, p. 104).

³² Price, B. F., & Nida, E. A. (1978, p. 105).

Praise and knowing God

- ❖ Praise the LORD for his power and his strength as the LORD, the God of heaven, creator of the sea and the (dry) land.
 - “Many people in the world today ignore God and assume that he also ignores them. Many believe that God set the world into motion and allows it to continue along unnoticed. This text portrays God as one who notices, as a God who is active, and as a God who takes sin seriously,”³³ and not only of his people but also of other peoples (Nineveh).
- ❖ Emphasize 4:2 and praise the LORD for his mercy and patience. See also
- ❖ 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."
- ❖ 1 Timothy 2:4-5: "who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,"
 - Stuart remarks: “The Ninevite repentance became justly famous as an example of a turn toward righteousness by a people undeserving otherwise of mercy.”³⁴
- ❖ Does God change his plans?
 - Smith and Page remark: “The very thought of God ‘changing his mind’ causes difficulty for some believers. In perfect consistency with his justice, righteousness, and mercy, he spared Nineveh. There is absolutely no contradiction here. God’s character and his promises do not change, as James 1:17 says (cf. Num 23:19). But many other verses show that God does change his plan of action according to his purposes.”³⁵
 - God is a creative God. When he created this world, he didn't create a determined and static world. In that case, the world would resemble a kind of machinery. A machine can only do what it is built for. God created a world full of life. Mankind was created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-28). Man was created as a relational being, and has a relation to God, his creator, other humans, the animate and inanimate world and also to himself. As

³³ Smith, B. K., & Page, F. S. (1995, p. 226).

³⁴ Stuart, D. (1987, p. 496).

³⁵ Smith, B. K., & Page, F. S. (1995, p. 269).

relational beings, humans act and react. And God acts and reacts, and holds humans responsible.

Jonah

- ❖ Sometimes a commentary depicts Jonah as a rebellious unwilling prophet: “Jonah has standing in the tradition mainly because of his ongoing resistance to God’s call. He opposed God. The story-teller shows that Jonah’s response leads to chaos, storm, death, compromise, hypocrisy, self-regard and logical but irresolvable anger. Only the continuing presence of the Lord could restore to Jonah the peace and joy he had lost by running away from God.”³⁶ But we must remember that Jonah is just as human as we are.
 - He knows his calling and acts contrary to the grain, ignores the possible consequences, endangers the lives of others, tries to withhold the mercies of God from the Ninevites, arouses the wrath of God, and in the end, it is better to choose death than to live.
 - Jesus told two parables in which he depicts people like Jonah:
 - 1. The elderly brother of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32);
 - 2. The unmerciful servant (Mt 18:21-35).
 - **Jonah has a serious problem with the compassion of the LORD!**
 - Just like the elder brother and the unmerciful servant.
 - This story is not told as a children’s story or a story people can tell each other sitting by the fireplace. The story is questioning the reader all the time.

The preaching

- ❖ Although Jonah was reluctant to proclaim the message God had given to him, the proclamation had a profound effect.
 - The Ninevites showed penitence and changed their way of life.
 - God revealed his compassion, mercy, and lovingkindness towards men and animals.
 - Already in the Old Testament, the prophetic message was not confined to the Israelites.
- ❖ The church today has a similar call as Jonah: to preach the Gospel among the nations (Mt 28:19). The apostle John was told: "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings" (Rev 10:11). He knew that he would meet resistance and face persecution.

³⁶ Nixon, R. A. (2003, p. 70, 71).

- And Jesus said: “Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Therefore go and make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
- ❖ Preaching also involves warning and promise when political, social, economic, and environmental issues are involved. This world belongs to God.

The world

- ❖ The Ninevites responded to the preaching of Jonah and set an example for the readers, the Israelites. The prophets were sent to the people of Israel with similar messages but they did not repent. See also the words of Jesus (Mt 12:41 and Lk 11:30-32).
 - You could compare this to the behaviour of men, individuals and societies, in the world today, where people can be an example to the church in caring for this world, for the sick, the needy, and the oppressed.
- ❖ Are you concerned about the fate of this world, your country and neighbourhood, your family and friends?

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