

Jonah 3:5-9

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The king and the people of Nineveh respond positively to Jonah's message. They abandon their evil behavior and turn to God.

When Jonah began to proclaim God's plan to destroy *Nineveh* within "forty days," *the people of Nineveh believed in God*. The word translated as *believed* means to be secure or to be firm. It expresses the idea of trusting someone or accepting something as true (Deuteronomy 27:15–26).

Therefore, the statement that *the people of Nineveh believed in God* means that they took the warning to heart. They took Jonah's words seriously as a message coming from God. And as they heeded the righteous declarations they heard from the prophet, and trusted the divine message, *they called a fast*.

This *fast* refers to abstaining from food deliberately for religious purposes. Fasting is not a way of asserting one's will, but a means of opening oneself to God, expressing grief and sorrow over sins, and redirecting oneself to God. It involves making petitions to God and seeking guidance and wisdom. In this sense, it is a process leading to purification (Psalm 69:10). The Ninevites understood the seriousness of Jonah's message, so *they called a fast* to seek God's forgiveness and mercy.

Not only did the Ninevites *fast*, but they also *put on sackcloth*. In the ancient world, people who mourned usually girded themselves with *sackcloth*, a garment made of goat or camel hair. This garment was rough and uncomfortable. The wearing of *sackcloth* symbolized grief or despair. For example, the prophet Joel asked the *priests* to wear *sackcloth* and lament to express their loss because the locust plague had devastated the land of Judah (Joel 1:13). Similarly, the *people of Nineveh put on sackcloth* to express their grief over their sins. All the Ninevites did so, *from the greatest to the least of them*. This expression means that everyone was involved, regardless of their social rank or age.

Jonah's message not only touched the lives of the *people of Nineveh* but also reached the royal palace. When *the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes*. The term *ashes* refers to the powdery residue left after burning a substance. Like *fasting and wearing sackcloth*, *ashes* are expressions of penitence and humility, implying an earnest desire to seek forgiveness.

Thus, the statement that the *king of Nineveh sat on ashes* signified that he mourned and repented (Job 2:8; Luke 10:13). He humbled himself before the LORD, the King of Israel. He removed himself from the seat of power by exchanging his royal clothes for *sackcloth*. In so doing, he acknowledged God as the all-powerful One and came to Him with a broken and contrite heart. Then, *he issued a proclamation*.

In the Hebrew text, the statement that the *king of Nineveh* issued a proclamation is literally “he cried out.” The verb “cry out” often speaks of a cry for help. It describes someone in acute distress seeking deliverance (Genesis 27:34). This meaning makes clear that the *king of Nineveh* understood the seriousness of the situation. He knew that God would destroy the great city of *Nineveh* within forty days if the circumstances remained the same. He also knew that he alone could not make the necessary changes. So, he petitioned the people of his city and said, *In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.*

The *king of Nineveh* responded positively to Jonah’s preaching. He issued a joint *decree* with his *nobles* and declared a city-wide fast, reinforcing the people’s decision (v. 5). But the *decree* called for extreme measures as the king prohibited human beings and animals from tasting anything. They were not to *eat* or *drink water*. They were to focus their attention on God to petition Him for forgiveness and mercy.

Not only were human beings and animals to refrain from eating and drinking, but they were also to take the posture of humility as they sought forgiveness from God. The king recommended that *both man and beast be covered with sackcloth*. In other words, the *people of Nineveh* were to wear *sackcloth* and put *sackcloth* on all their animals. And in doing so, the people would express their sorrow and grief over sins and redirect themselves to God. As the king declared, *Let men call on God earnestly.*

The verb translated as *called out* is “qāra’” in Hebrew. It occurred several times in the previous chapters (Jonah 1:2, 6, 14; 2:2). In the Bible, the verb often refers to a cry of lamentation addressed to God (Psalm 79:6; 116:4). In the previous chapter, Jonah cried out to God out of his distress (Jonah 2:2). Here, the *king of Nineveh* commanded that his people cry out to God.

Not only were the *people of Nineveh* to cry out to God, but they were to do so *earnestly*. The word translated *earnestly* literally means “in strength” or “with strength.” The phrase is used elsewhere to indicate severe physical force or vigor. For instance, in the book of Judges, we learn about a Canaanite king named “Jabin” who oppressed the Israelites “*severely* for twenty years” (Judges 4:3; see also Judges 8:1 and 1 Samuel 2:16). Here, in our passage, the phrase describes an intense spiritual effort. The *people of Nineveh* were to seek God genuinely and strongly like a mighty man using his strength and techniques to fight. The purpose was so *that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.*

The verb *turn* depicts a change of direction. It is a departure from an established course. The word translated as *wicked* is “ra’ah” in Hebrew. It refers to something evil. In our context, the *way* of the Ninevites was evil. The term *way* is the Hebrew word “derek,” which denotes a road or path. Here, however, it is used figuratively to describe the wicked condition of the Ninevites, which the King further characterized as *violence*.

The term translated as *violence* is “chāmās” in Hebrew. It ranges from murder and rape to wickedness and bloodshed (Obadiah 1:10). This description fits *Nineveh* because it was one of the cruelest cities in the ancient world (Nahum 3). Thus, the King asked the people to stop their

evil behavior and *violence*. And not knowing how God would respond to their plea, the King declared, *Who knows, God may turn and relent*.

The phrase *who knows* is a humble way of expressing hope (Joel 2:14). It implies that nobody knows what God may want to do since He is God. Simply put, God's actions are not dependent upon man's demands. God is God and "He does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3b). Although the king did not know how God would respond to the plea, he reasoned that God might show compassion and *relent* from sending the judgment.

The verb *relent* means to abandon a severe intention or a cruel treatment. That is, God would change His course of actions. Instead of destroying the Ninevites, He would have a change of heart, causing Him to *withdraw His burning anger so that they would not perish*. In essence, God would have mercy on the Ninevites.

Biblical Text

⁵ Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. ⁷ He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. ⁸ But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."