

"A God Awful Sermon"

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Fourth in a series on the Book of Jonah

Jonah 2:10-4:1

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The LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Yonah on to the dry land.

The LORD's word came to Yonah a second time:

*"Set off,
go to the huge city of Nineveh,
and call out to it
the thing that I'm going to speak to you."*

Yonah set off and went to Nineveh in accordance with the LORD's word.

Now Nineveh was an extraordinarily huge city, three days walk through.
Yonah started to go through the city, one day's walk.

He called out,

"Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overturned."

The Ninevites believed God, and called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the biggest of them to the least of them.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he got up from his throne, took off his robe from upon him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on ash. He got people to cry out in Nineveh, by the decree of the king and his big people:

*Human being and animal (cattle and flock) are not to taste anything.
They're not to pasture; they're not to drink water.
They're to cover themselves in sackcloth, human being and animal,
and call on God strongly.
They're to turn, each one from his bad way
and from the violence that's in their fists.
Who knows, God might turn back and relent,
turn back from his burning anger,
and we may not perish.*

God saw their actions, that they turned back from their bad way, and God relented of the bad thing that he had spoken about doing to them. He didn't do it.

But it seemed bad to Yonah, a very bad thing. He was enraged.

Adapted from a translation by John Goldingay.

It was short. That's one good thing about it. Very short. Besides that, though, Jonah's sermon was awful.

Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overturned!

He gives them no hint about why. Offers no hope of salvation, just destruction. Makes no mention of the LORD at all. I've heard and done bad sermons. This is awful!

When GOD first sent Jonah to Nineveh, the prophet took off the other way, for Tarshish. I bet he imagined he could preach great there. Picture it! After services at First Tarshish United Church, folks would line up to shake his hand. "Great sermon, Jonah!"

Wherever Tarshish was. All that matters was that it was far away, over there somewhere. It's easy to imagine everything perfect in a place that's nowhere in particular.

GOD didn't let Jonah get far, and now has sent him again. To Nineveh.

Unlike Tarshish, Jonah knows all about that place. So he gives them a God-awful sermon.

It was an awful place.

II

Something's peculiar about this Jonah story.

In Jonah's day, Nineveh it wasn't much. It was just a provincial capital in the Assyrian empire. A bit like Winnipeg. Anyone afraid of Winnipeg? Besides, the Assyrian empire had fallen on hard times.¹

In the decades after Jonah, though, things took off. They "Made Assyria Great Again." Nineveh grew in size, splendour and power. King Sennacherib made it magnificent, and the empire's capital. After him Esarhaddon (these kings had great names) made Assyria the biggest empire in the world. Then, Ashurbanipal.

¹ John H. Walton, "Jonah" in John H. Walton (general editor), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 5:102.

After him, the empire crumbled. Nineveh itself was eventually destroyed.²

You need to know something else too. Off to the west, Israel, the country of GOD's People, had split in two. The smaller, southern part, they called it "Judah." The northern kingdom was most of Israel, so that's what they continued to call it. Jonah was from Israel.

When Assyria was getting great again, it pressed against these two kingdoms. Little Judah payed Assyria off and submitted. Bigger Israel, however, got crushed and destroyed.

But all this time, when Nineveh was an "extraordinarily huge city" was after Jonah's day. Hmm.³

III

I figure it like this. Jonah's story was written long after Jonah, after Assyria destroyed Israel, even after Assyria and its capital Nineveh had themselves become memories.

GOD inspired this storytelling.⁴ Let's imagine a long-ago prophet (let's say, Jonah) gets sent by GOD to where he does not want to go. He runs the other way. So GOD gives him the craziest adventure (including a giant fish that smells like death), then sends him again.

Imagine GOD sends him, to the worst place we can imagine. That's right, Nineveh. A place that, we now know, was the capital of the world's mightiest empire. An empire that, we now know, was ruthless and brutal, proficient in massacre, torture, and genocide. An empire that, we now know, ravaged Jonah's Israel, crushed its cities, and struck from history 10 of the 12 tribes of GOD's People.

Imagine GOD sending someone to a place like that! He runs away. GOD still gets him there, this most-reluctant prophet. To deliver a terrible message, all gloom and doom. Not a crowd-pleaser!

² Philip Cary, Jonah. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 35.

³ Walton offers that Jonah was in fact sent to Nineveh when it was "one of the provincial centers of a struggling nation." However, I think the evidence within the story suggests a city much more epic in consequential than that.

⁴ I don't believe "Jonah" to be a historic account of actual events, but rather a short-story satire written much later (perhaps after the Judeans returned from their exile in Babylon). However, this is still a God-inspired story. God can use a variety of literary genres to speak to God's People.

No wonder this Jonah character gives those Ninevites such a half-hearted effort, the bare minimum or even less. This God-awful sermon.

IV

Then God says, "Watch this!"

That old fish? Forget it. This is the greatest miracle in the whole story of Jonah.⁵

The Ninevites hear Jonah's awful sermon, and they believe God.

They have no idea about the LORD God of Israel, the Creator of all things, the Giver of all life, the Judge of all nations. They couldn't care less about teeny, tiny Israel. They have their own great gods: Ashur, Nergal, Shamash, Ninurta, Ishtar, Tammuz, Nisroch, Nabiu. Nineveh is full of their temples.⁶ Jonah never tells them of the LORD God, the only true god. But that's Who they cry out to.

They fast, denying themselves food. They put on rough-clothed grieving clothes, denying themselves comfort.

It's a popular outpouring of grief and repentance. A miracle!

The king — it doesn't matter which one it was — hears about it. He rules with absolute power, god-like. Yet this time, he follows his people. His orders ratify what they're already doing.

And he goes further. Assyria is very rich. He shuts down the economy (that's what all that stuff about livestock is about).⁷ Assyria is very violent. He orders widespread disarmament "from the violence that's in their fists."

The great empire falls . . . to its knees. The great city overturns . . . from its evil ways.

Jonah's God-awful sermon? It turns out to be unimaginably successful.

This prophet, sent by GOD, does pretty much everything wrong. This city, evil before

⁵ Cary, 110.

⁶ Wikipedia contributors, "Nineveh," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nineveh&oldid=969328753> (accessed July 23, 2020).

⁷ Cary, 116ff.

GOD, does everything astonishingly right!

V

That's the satire! That's the surprise!

And that's us.

Sailing along. Thinking you're heading as far from God as you can. Then, suddenly, a Divinely-conjured gale starts punching. Heaven-sent storm starts swinging. Awe-full! But almost before you can say, "Man overboard!" a crew of ungodly sailors from anywhere and everywhere are on their knees, celebrating GOD! You were sure you'd left God behind. Surprise!

Going under. Certain you are dead. Then, suddenly, a Holy terror from the deep chomps down on you, then holds you in the depths of what feels like hell, imprisons you in a stomach-shaped coffin, then throws you up. Awe-full! But stuck in the middle, you rediscover the glory of GOD, who is your Saviour! You were sure God had left you behind. Surprise!

Trudging through the streets. The last place you want to be. A slurry of evil sludges through the gutters. Sneers of hatred glare and scowl. The words "God-Forsaken" seem scrawled on every street sign. Awe-full. You do your bit, as tiny as you can make it. Then, you get out. But God stays. In fact, God has always been there. Yes, even there. Soon their heads are buried in their tears, hoping in God more than you ever have.

Surprise!

VI

It humbles me, and also comforts me, that a guy like Jonah could preach such an awful sermon . . . and see such an extraordinary impact. I see what GOD does with even our worst efforts, and I am "God awe-full" . . . full of awe for GOD.

What's GOD doing through you. You might think you have too little to offer. Well, you can't do much worse than Jonah. Look what GOD did through him!

It challenges me, and also encourage me, that a place like Nineveh can be such a moral mess, a terrible den of evil, cruelty, oppression, and destruction . . . and see such a profound change. I see what GOD does with even our worst places, and I am full of awe for God.

What are the worst places, the worst messes around today? You might think they have no hope. Well, they can't be any worse than Nineveh. Look at what GOD did for it!

I think this story of Jonah is a hilarious satire that flips things on its head. The great prophet acts like a disaster. The disastrous people turn out great. This is GOD at work, and this is the sort of thing GOD loves to do.

What do you think? Jonah thinks it is awful. Even so, as we'll see next week, and, again, in spite of himself, Jonah shows us something else that is so good about GOD.