

Who Knows?

Long Beach Alliance Church • July 25th, 2010 • Pastor Chris Lankford

**Who knows, God may turn and
relent and withdraw His burning
anger so that we will not perish.**

~Jonah 3:9 (NASB)

1) Jonah's Prophetic Words For Nineveh

- A) After a long journey (probably between 40-50 days) and an entire day surveying the city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-4), Jonah begins to "cry out" to the Ninevites God's impending destruction of the city (3:4).
- B) Jonah's preaching is briefly recorded (undoubtedly, there was more), but the essence of the message is delivered in the text – "repent or be destroyed" (3:4).
- C) The response to Jonah's message is extraordinary (Jonah 3:5)! The people respond in belief which results in actions of repentance! They respond to Jonah's prophetic words with immediate fasting and mourning (3:5).
- D) Responding with "fasting" (abstinence from food/water) and "sackcloth" (an ugly, hairy, and uncomfortable outer garment worn directly against the skin) were purposeful outward actions of weakness and disadvantage which reflected the reality of the soul.*

2) The Whole City Is Swept Into Repentance

- A) Many an effective grass-roots movement has been effectively destroyed when political leaders become involved in the process – but not in Nineveh! Even the king repents and mourns (3:6).
- B) The king is so moved by Jonah's proclamation of Nineveh's impending destruction he issues a decree that everyone (even the animals) must repent and mourn from wickedness and violence (3:7-8).
- C) Why would the king, the people, and even the livestock, be moved to respond in this fashion? Isn't God's Word final to the Ninevites? Prayer & fasting doesn't change God's mind (cf. 2nd Samuel 12:1-23), correct? As the king of Nineveh says, "who knows...?" (Jonah 3:9).
- D) Jonah's declaration of God's intentions toward Nineveh are presented as a certainty. Clearly though, the people (3:5ff), the king (3:9) and even Jonah (4:2) understand that if they repent, God may relent (cf. Jeremiah 18:7-8).
- E) And in this case, God does relent (3:10). Note that God "saw their deeds..." The sure sign of a changed heart is changed actions! God changes hearts & actions still!

* Fasting in the Old Testament could apply either to an individual or to the whole community. When David's child became deathly ill, the king wept and fasted for a week (2nd Samuel 12:16). Ancient Israel "proclaimed a fast" when facing a dire military threat (Jeremiah 36:9; 2nd Chronicles 20:3), when God's guidance for the community was especially needed (Ezra 8:21), or in connection with a legal procedure (1st Kings 21:9, 12). A natural disaster, such as a grasshopper plague, could occasion the calling of a fast (Joel 1:14, 2:15). A fast was an intergenerational event for the whole community, including the children (2nd Chronicles 20:13; Joel 2:16; Jonah 3:5) and even the animals (Jonah 3:7-8; Judith 4:9-11). Actions associated with the fast demonstrated or brought about humility by taking away beauty. Those fasting wore sackcloth, put dirt on their heads, and sat in ashes (Jonah 3:6-9; Jeremiah 4:8; Nehemiah 9:1). Since fasts were occasioned by national emergencies, fast days were proclaimed as needed; in a later period, there were also set times for fasting (Zechariah 7:3, 5, 8:19). Postexilic prophecy delivered a critique of a kind of fasting that was not coupled with social justice and love for the hungry and poor (Isaiah 58:3-9). Collected from various sources, especially *Jonah* by James Limburg, ©1993 The Old Testament Library, pages 80-81.