

# Bite Size Bible Study

## Jonah #245

By Lee Logue

In the book of Jonah, we find the story of how God directed Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to them about repenting of their wicked ways.

*“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”*  
Jonah 1:2 NIV

Nineveh is a large and wicked Assyrian city. Jonah knows of this city’s reputation, where God is sending him to preach repentance. Initially, Jonah attempts to flee from this assignment, but after being swallowed by a great fish, is miraculously released.

As often happens when we read a story in the Bible, we pick up on the wrong (or minor) part of the story and fail to see the real thrust of the story. The great fish is a perfect example of this. We question was it a whale, an extinct fish, a Leviathan or what? Further how could someone live for three days in its belly? But that makes little difference to the point of the story.

Jonah finally obeys God and goes to Nineveh. It was a very large city because it took at least three days to walk through it. It probably took him much longer as he preached God’s warning to each part of the city.

*When Jonah’s warning 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.*  
Jonah 3:6 NIV

Unexpectedly the people of Nineveh, including the king, respond with widespread repentance, fasting, and mourning, leading God to spare the city from destruction. However, later Nahum, prophesied that Nineveh will ultimately cease to exist because they will have returned to their former wickedness. This prophecy is eventually fulfilled in 612 BCE when Nineveh is conquered by the Medes and Babylonians.

*The Lord has given a command concerning you, Nineveh: “You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the images and idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile.”*  
Nahum 1:14 NIV

*All who see you will flee from you and say, ‘Nineveh is in ruins—who will mourn for her?’ Where can I find anyone to comfort you?’*  
Nahum 3:7 NIV

This brings two questions to my mind.

### First Question:

When God says about Nineveh, *Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!* (Nahum 3:1) Why does he spare them in Jonah’s time?

I think the answer is in Jonah 4:10-11, *But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”*

I think that this shows again that God is intimately concerned with His creation, both the parts that are following the ways that they were created to be, as well as those who have gone against their created order. His love extends to all of His creation (even the animals) not just to a few that are following their created order.

Because of their repentance, God chooses not to destroy Nineveh, demonstrating his mercy and willingness to forgive even those who are considered His enemies.

Nineveh serves as a powerful symbol of the potential for repentance and the consequences of persistent evil. It also demonstrates God’s universal love and willingness to extend mercy to all people.

**Second Question:** This one is a little harder to answer.

Nineveh was a real city, the capital of the Assyrian empire, located on the Tigris River in what is now northern Iraq. Archaeological discoveries have confirmed the existence of the city and its impressive structures, including the city walls and the palace of King Sennacherib.

Who was King Sennacherib and who were the Assyrians?

**WARNING** the following speaks of graphic violence.

When God sent Jonah to tell Nineveh to repent of its wickedness, the following is what Jonah knew of the Assyrians and the city of Nineveh. Knowing what he knew gives you a good understanding of why he ran the other way. He was scared and rightly so.

The Assyrians were hated and feared for their cruelty by surrounding nations. Monumental carvings from King Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh that depict captives being flayed alive or impaled alive on spikes.

It’s tempting to think that gory images were just legendary fictions. But in recent years, researchers have discovered that violence was far from uncommon in the ancient world. When they examine human remains, they find a shockingly high rate of evidence of death by homicide. In some tribal societies, ones chance of dying a violent death was 1 out of 6.

From its beginnings, Assyria was a warrior nation, bent on conquering all it encountered. After subjugating all of Mesopotamia, lusting for more blood and booty, the

Assyrian armies marched beyond their own borders to expand their empire, looking for plunder and resources to further expand their empire. By the mid-ninth century B.C.E., the Assyrian armies posed a direct threat to the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

In a detail from a series of reliefs, found at Nineveh, in which Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.E.) recorded the exploits of his invasion of Judah in 701 B.C.E. we find two Assyrian soldiers erecting a stake with an impaled, naked man beside two others. The heads of these captured men of Lachish sag forward, suggesting that they are already dead. Lachish was among the 46 cities he conquered.

Their barbarities don't stop there. The inscriptions and the pictorial evidence both provide detailed information regarding the Assyrian treatment of conquered peoples, their armies and their rulers.

The treatment of captured enemies often depended on their readiness to submit themselves to the will of the Assyrian king. In one case when a city resisted as long as possible instead of immediately submitting, the king proudly records his punishment: In a relief from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, two scribes, standing side by side on the right, record the number of the enemy slain in a campaign in southern Mesopotamia. Heads lie in a heap at their feet. "I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile; some I erected on stakes upon the pile ... I flayed many right through my land [and] draped their skins over the walls."

"I felled 50 of their fighting men with the sword, burnt 200 captives from them, [and] defeated in a battle on the plain 332 troops. ... With their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool, [and] the rest of them the ravines [and] torrents of the mountain swallowed. I carried off captives [and] possessions from them. I cut off the heads of their fighters [and] built [therewith] a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys [and] girls."

"In strife and conflict, I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword ... I

captured many troops alive: I cut off of some, their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others, their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city."

In a detail relief, we see an Assyrian soldier grasping the hand and arm of a captured enemy whose other hand and both feet have already been cut off. Dismembered hands and feet fly through the scene. Severed enemy heads hang from the conquered city's walls. Another captive is impaled on a stake; his hands and feet already having been cut off. In another detail, we see three stakes, each driven through eight severed heads, set up outside the conquered city. A third detail shows a row of impaled captives lined up on stakes set up on a hill outside the captured city.

From this short list of the atrocities, we can see that the Assyrian war machine wanted to be known as fierce, unrelenting and something to be reckoned with. Their thirst for domination knew no bounds.

This is where Jonah was supposed to go and tell them to repent. Jonah "knew" that they would not repent and would no doubt kill him in some similar manner.

Jonah was not weak as some have commented. There were, in human terms, millions of reasons not to go to Nineveh.

God called Jonah to preach to them, to give them a chance to change their wicked ways. This time they did, even if only for a while. God's judgment is not to destroy but to redeem.

God sometimes sends us into situations that, from our human reasoning, look like He has made a mistake.

**Are we going to try to hide like Jonah, or is our trust in Him strong enough to "follow orders"?**

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