

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Twenty-Fifth Week - Seventh Day

JONAH IN NINEVEH

"Now the word of Yahweh came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of Yahweh. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from this throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes" (Jonah 3:1-6).

"It is now with the firm step and steady aspect of one who knows that the burden of the Lord is upon him that Jonah enters the gates of Nineveh the Great. He may still have doubts and fears as to the result, but he now fears God more and wavers not in his purpose to discharge faithfully the mission committed to him. He believed that the Lord who sent him could give strength and power to His own words; and he had cause to know that His arm was strong to deliver him from all evil that might befall.

"Still he must have been the subject of strange and conflicting emotions when he entered the gates of that proud capital. The stern soldiers upon the battlements, armed with swords and shields, helmets and spears; the colossal images of winged compound animals that guarded the gates; the gorgeous chariots and horsemen that rattled and bounded through the streets; the pomp and state of the royal palaces; the signs of trade and commerce, of wealth and luxury, of pleasure and wickedness on every hand--[all] must have amazed and perplexed the prophet, conscious of his utter loneliness amidst a might population, of his despicable poverty amidst abounding riches, of his rough and foreign aspect amidst a proud and polished community. There was enough to shake his faith and dismay his bold, haughty, and scornful spirit. Yet he dared not a second time abandon his mission. He, therefore, passed along the broad ways and great places of concourse crying in solemn tones, 'Yet forth days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.'"¹

"Who and what is he? the people ask. Is it a madman who thus speaks, or a mocker, who delights to scatter firebrands, arrows, and death? His intelligent and sober aspect forbids the

¹ Rev. J. Blackburn, *Nineveh, its Rise and Fall*, London, 1850.

supposition. He bears himself as a man deeply in earnest and alive to the awful importance of the work he has in hand, and the very oneness of the message he delivers. That he has just this solitary message to proclaim seems to betoken all the more an assured conviction of the truth and certainty of it. The busy crowd is by-and-by arrested. A solemn awe steals over the minds of the people. They press around the preacher to know who and from where he came, and why he utters such an ominous cry in their streets. And hearing, as they now do, that so far from lightly denouncing this doom against them he had already at the hazard of his life shrunk from executing the charge committed to him, and that he had been cast out for his willful reluctance in the the mighty deep and miraculously restored only that he might be sent forth anew to utter the cry they now heard of approaching destruction--learning all this concerning Jonah and his burden, how solemn and perilous must their situation have appeared in their eyes! Though personally a stranger to them, this man's fortunes, it seems, had yet been most intimately bound up with theirs. He had undergone wonderful and unheard of things on their account."²

Whether other concurrent circumstances impressed their minds with the conviction that they stood on the verge of ruin, or that the word of God simply in its own divine energy as delivered by the prophet worked upon their souls, it is certain that they evinced no disposition to treat the message with scorn or the messenger with insult but were deeply moved to alarm and grief.

This commotion in the city speedily reached the ears of the king; and it cannot be doubted that he soon sent to have the strange prophet brought before him. From the sculptures it is plain that the king of Assyria, like all oriental princes, was approached with such tokens of profound reverence as, in fact, amounted to something like religious adoration.

"Seated on this throne of state, his eunuchs, ministers, and other great officers stood around him, while those who were brought before him, forgetting the erect dignity of human nature, prostrated themselves in the most abject manner at his feet. Imagine Jonah introduced into the royal palace and you will see that the scene and circumstances must have sorely tried his faith and steadfastness. As he passed along the lengthened corridors towards the hall of audience, he must have been struck with the air of uncommon splendor that surrounded him. On the walls he beheld the sculptured figures of priests and eunuchs, of kings, heroes, and ministers of state, of genii and idol gods, of battles and hunting scenes--all elaborately and gorgeously colored; while there stood at the angles of the passages colossal statues of strange winged, compound creatures, like the guardian spirits of the place."³

Here was a sight strange to Jonah, the wealth, power, and idolatry of the monarch into whose presence he was about to enter. It might very well have moved even the stern spirit of the prophet. But he now stood there invested with a greatness not his own and far exceeding all the grandeur around him. He did not flinch to declare to the great king the whole counsel of God against this proud Nineveh.

2 Rev. Patrick Fairbairn, *Jonah*, Edinburgh, 1849.

3 Blackburn, *Nineveh*.

As the monarch heard the word of doom, God smote his heart with alarm and repentance. The common feeling of the people became his, and he sanctioned and ordained its solemn public expression by acts of general mourning and humiliation. He came down from the throne and not only laid aside his glorious imperial robe but put on sackcloth and sat down among the ashes. The king then sent forth a decree ordaining fasting and sackcloth for man and beast, and urging everyone to turn from his evil way and the violence of his hands. Now Jonah had not called them to repentance but had warned them only of impending doom. But the king nevertheless trusted that this doom might not be irrevocable and dared to seize hold of hope: *"Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?"* (v. 9).

Blessed was that thought of theirs. The Lord, abundant in mercy, had inspired them at that time with a conception of Him which Jonah had not taught. It was not yet too late. All was not yet lost. *"Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it"* (v. 10).

It seems surprising that the Ninevites extended the acts of fasting and humiliation to their cattle. We find nothing like this among the Hebrews. It was, however, a custom among the ancient heathen nations to withhold food from their cattle as well as from themselves in times of mourning and humiliation, and in some instances they cut the hair of their beasts as well as their own. In the instance before us, the animals that were covered with sackcloth were doubtless horses, mules, asses, and camels. They were divested of their usual caparisons and ornaments [royal harnesses and finery] and covered with sackcloth for the occasion--a custom having some analogy to that of our clothing with black the horses employed in funeral solemnities.