

## Prayer

We wonder at Your power, Holy Spirit. You, who made the Universe; build us up as we work for the Kingdom, give time to comfort and heal our souls in the midst of distress, and reveal our sins so that we can repent of them. Come, Holy Spirit, according to Your knowledge of us, do that work in us which no mortal power can do. We yield ourselves to You, Holy Spirit; AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*What does 'creation' mean to you? Think about this, and give thanks to God for being alive*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about political parties. Pray for your political leaders, that they will honour the responsibilities God has given them
- Give thanks to God for the children you know, in church and family
- Pray about the threat from nuclear armaments and work to reduce it

## Meditation

Be honest with God; you cannot keep your faith to yourself;  
And if you do, you play with fire; share it with all God's people.

Your faith is yours because you alone can say 'Yes' to Christ;  
Beyond that, it is shared with all who make the same confession.

Your faith is yours so that you will worship the God who made you;  
And join with all the saints of God in praise of His Holy Name!

Your faith is yours in order to do the work of God's Kingdom;  
Which is impossible for one person to do; it must be shared!

Your faith is yours, to receive the spiritual blessings of God;  
But pass them on in joy and love to all who need their strength!

Your faith is yours so that you can learn discernment;  
And work to bring about God's justice in this impoverished world.

Your faith is yours, to read God's Word and pray yourself  
So that you will come to know the truth the God would have you share.

Be honest with God; you cannot keep your faith to yourself;  
It is yours to be shared. Give thanks to God, for He loves You.

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## Bible Study - Jonah 3:6-10

<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. <sup>7</sup>He then issued a declaration within Nineveh: 'By order of the king and his nobles: No person or animal, no cattle or flock, may eat anything. They must not feed or drink water. <sup>8</sup>People and animals will be covered with sackcloth, and they must cry out immediately to God. Everyone must turn away from their evil and violent behaviour. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? It may be that God will turn away and change His mind; He may hold back His divine offence, and we will not perish.'

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, and how they renounced their evil ways, God changed his mind, and did not bring about the disaster he had threatened.

## Review

The fact that Nineveh repented is amazing! Jonah had announced with conviction that the city would be destroyed, and that is all he had done. At this news, everyone responded by repenting in 'sackcloth and

ashes' (3:6). Even the king accepted that his city was rife with evil and demanded a public repentance of fasting and wearing sackcloth. He even included domestic and farmed animals in his proclamation (3:7). No fuller picture of the repentance of a whole people could be given! Without anticipating Jonah's response to this turn of events, something that dominates the final chapter of this prophetic book, we will now dwell on the meaning of this repentance by all Nineveh caused by the prophetic preaching of Jonah.

As we have already noted, the city of Nineveh was not Israelite. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria and a sworn enemy of the people of Israel, and yet its people had a sufficient understanding of right and wrong to respond when a prophet, Jonah, made a call to repentance. Moreover in this way, they recognised the authority of the God for whom he spoke. It is not clear how they knew that repentance was an appropriate response, but we can assume that people of that day were more familiar with 'gods' in general, and this was how they responded to the threat of retribution. Jonah spoke out boldly, as a prophet of the day would have done, and the people of the day, without our modern distractions of television and highly private living styles, they would have quickly gathered around an eccentric preacher.

We can only guess at what could have happened, but something in Jonah's words and manner, the body language and other non-verbal means of communication that often speak to people more than words, indicated to them that what he said was true. Perhaps it was the fear in Jonah's voice and countenance; or did he tell the tale of being taken to sea and swallowed by a fish? The story does not allow us to believe anything other than by whatever means, God was indeed bringing punishment on everyone 'in forty days' (3:4).

Even if we think it odd that people who did not fear God and were not part of His chosen people responded in this way, the example is challenging. Who are we to presume that people of other faiths and of no faith at all will not understand a plain message about the consequences of sin? As Paul has explained very clearly in the New Testament (Romans 1:19f.), God has placed within the very fabric of the Universe the evidence of His own nature and authority, and this may partly be seen by observing what is commonly understood as 'right and wrong'. People will respond differently to this, but when they discern the truth, they respond to God. Jonah struggled with the call to preach this message, probably in the same way we might struggle to accept a call to go and preach the Gospel, for example, to some Muslim extremists or convinced communist atheists. God, however, had his reasons for directing Jonah to do this.

All the other prophets of the Old Testament gave prophecies mostly for or about the people of Israel. They spent their energies berating the Israelites for their failure to live up to their calling, and explaining God's Word to a recalcitrant people so that everyone might know the salvation of God (Isaiah 55:1ff, Jer 31:31ff, Dan 9:4 etc). Jonah, however, was a prophet in a special sense, for although he probably could not see it himself, his message to the Gentile world was ahead of its time. What happened to the people of Nineveh in the fullness of time is uncertain, and there is every indication from the Bible that in the course of time, they changed their minds and reverted to sinfulness once again. Certainly, the prophet Nahum rejoices at the destruction of Nineveh as punishment from God, many years later (see the book of Nahum).

Through what happened to Nineveh, the people of Israel were reminded by Jonah that God's task for them was to convey God's messages to the rest of the world; it is a message they tragically forgot until after the time of Christ. Because of this, many see Jonah as an important prophet whose message has much to tell us about the task of mission in the world today. However, because of the extraordinary circumstances of in which Jonah found himself, we must ask about how Jonah himself coped with this unexpected turn of events, and we will find that out in the last chapter of the book.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss what call of God might be as fearsome for a Christian today as the call to preach in Nineveh was to Jonah.
2. Is it possible that people today who know nothing of the Gospel might respond to a call to repent?
3. What does this passage teach us about Christian mission today, and how may this be put into action?

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue in this text

- *The mission of God to the whole world*
- *The significance of visible repentance*

### **Personal comment:**

*I find it amazing to read about the acts of repentance in Nineveh. As I read, I am reminded that in church on Sundays, I am often invited to repent of my sins. I sit quietly and recall one or two things, before hearing some prayers from the worship leader to conclude the prayers, perhaps a word of forgiveness or healing. Wearing sackcloth and ashes in public might sharpen up things somewhat! I am not sure this would work today, but I am tempted to think that sometimes, public confession and repentance is a great deal more effective than hoping to have 'covered all one's sins' in a private word of prayer.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *In what ways do you 'repent'? Think about this and write down a list of the occasions when you have repented and why. This may remind you of some important spiritual lessons that are worth re-assessing.*
- *Pray that God's people will be willing to consider the call of God to the whole world, and their responsibilities both to preach the Good News and also to demonstrate repentance.*

## **Final Prayer**

God of mercy and of grace, do something new in us we pray. Take us from where we are and use us in Your great plan for the salvation of the world. If there is something we must do, challenge us; and if there are things we should refrain from doing, stop us in our tracks. May we come to know Your touch and grow in obedience to Your Word. AMEN

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