

Where was Nineveh in Bible times and what city/country is it today?

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire (911 BC-609 BC) located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River in what is modern day Iraq.

Nineveh is described as having been: a great city (Jon 3:2, 3), wealthy (Nah 2:9), fortified (Nah 3:8, 12), wicked (Jon 1:2), idolatrous (Nah 1:14), careless (Zeph 2:15) and full of lies (Nah 3:1).¹

God sent Jonah to preach to the Ninevites warning them that they would be destroyed (Jon 1:1, 2). Jonah was not interested in sharing God's message with these wicked men (Jon 1:3).² He knew that God was good and that should he warn them and if they repented, God might spare the city (Jon 3:2). That is exactly what happened (Jon 3:5-10).

Nineveh repented (Jon 3:5-9) and God relented of the destruction that he had planned for them (Jon 3:10). God did not destroy Nineveh because they had humbled themselves before him (Jon 3:10).

Jonah was upset (Jon 4:1). He did not want them saved. Jonah clung to the only living thing nearby—a plant (Jon 4:6). God spared the people of Nineveh but Jonah was concerned with the loss of his beloved plant. He wanted to die.

God asked Jonah if it was right for him to show more concern for a plant than the men of Nineveh. Jonah said it was: "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" Jon 4:9.

Jonah was a legalist not wanting the wicked saved. He was grumpy not wanting to warn the Ninevites—even heading in the opposite direction God told him to go. He was pouty after they'd been spared.

Jonah's plant did what all plants do—they grow, they glorify God as intended and die. Plants and animals have no quarrel with their maker. The men of Nineveh to Jonah's mind had so perverted what it means to be made in God's image—they were not worthy of his mercy (Mt 3:8). The Ninevites had been enemies of God and Jonah wanted to ensure their doom by not sharing God's message for them.

God is free to change his mind. He had told Moses: I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion (Ex 33:19). The Ninevites were men "who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand" (Jon 4:11). God gave them another chance to live. We see in the story of Nineveh that mercy is greater than prophecy.

The prophet Isaiah wrote:

¹ Thomas Nelson Publishers. (1996). Nelson's quick reference topical Bible index (p. 450). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² J. Vernon McGee describes the men of Nineveh: "Assyria had been a very brutal nation, one of the most brutal nations the world has ever seen. For example, one of the things which the Assyrians did to an enemy was to bury him out in the desert sand right up to his chin. Then they would put a thong through his tongue and leave him out in the hot blazing sun, first to go mad, and then to die. That was one of the "nice little things" the Assyrians came up with. They also had several other little surprises for their enemies. It is said that when the Assyrians were on the march, in many places an entire community which lay in the line of their march would commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of brutal Assyrians. They were dreaded and feared in the ancient world." McGee, J. V. (1991). Thru the Bible commentary: The Prophets (Nahum/Habakkuk) (electronic ed., Vol. 30, p. 38). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
Let him return to the Lord,
And He will have mercy on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.
“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.” Is 55:7–9