

What is the significance of the city of Nineveh in the Bible?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Nineveh-in-the-Bible.htm>

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Nineveh is notable in the Bible as the capital city of Assyria, a longtime enemy of Israel. Located in what is now modern Iraq, Nineveh is mentioned in Scripture as a place that turned away from sin through a warning by God, but which was later destroyed.

The first mention of Nineveh is in the Table of Nations, which describes the many cities Nimrod built in Assyria including “Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city” (Genesis 10:11-12). Nineveh was known for its great wealth, power, and prestige. The Assyrians were notorious for their cruelty and idolatry (Nahum 3:19). Their capital, Nineveh, contained many temples, including one to Ishtar, the Assyrian goddess that some scholars believe was the namesake of Nineveh.

In 2 Kings 19:36 and Isaiah 37:37, Nineveh is depicted as the center of the Assyrian Empire and home to King Sennacherib. Sennacherib led a successful campaign against many nations, but he failed to take Jerusalem due to the Lord’s intervention. He returned to Nineveh and was later killed in the temple of the Assyrian god Nisrok (2 Kings 19:35-37).

Nineveh is well-known as the place where the prophet Jonah was sent by God to preach (Jonah 1:2). Jonah was reluctant to go, probably because of the Assyrians’ great wickedness, and he tried to run from the Lord’s command. God intercepted Jonah and sent him to the Ninevites by making a great fish swallow him (Jonah 1:3, 17). In Nineveh,

Jonah proclaimed the coming judgment on that city (Jonah 2:10; 3:1-4). Instead of rejecting the Lord's warning, the Ninevites humbled themselves and repented of their sin, from the king on down. The whole city fasted, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes—they even dressed their animals in sackcloth (Jonah 3:5-9). Seeing that the city of Nineveh repented of their wickedness, “God relented concerning the judgment he had threatened them with and he did not destroy them” (Jonah 3:10, NET).

Jesus mentioned the Ninevites and their repentance, contrasting that response to the unbelief of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matthew 12:39-41). Rejecting Christ has no excuse: “The people of Nineveh will also stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here—but you refuse to repent” (Luke 11:32, NLT). Being far greater than the prophet Jonah, Jesus had shown Himself to be the Messiah, but the Jewish people still refused to believe in Him or repent of their sin (Matthew 12:22-24). The Ninevites had responded to God’s message delivered by a lesser man (Jonah 3:5), and here was God’s message delivered by the Son of God Himself.

Although Nineveh escaped destruction during the time of Jonah, a later generation still had to face a reckoning. The prophet Nahum prophesied of the destruction of the city because of the people’s evilness. Nahum’s predictions for Nineveh’s destruction came to pass when the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians sacked the city in 612 BC. Nineveh’s walls had been breached by flood waters, allowing their attackers to enter the city. The city’s ruin was ultimately a product of God’s divine wrath (Nahum 1:8-10). The Lord declared judgment on the city because of Nineveh’s wickedness: “Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!” (Nahum 3:1).

God's judgment on Nineveh and the nation of Assyria as a whole was holy and just, given their cruelty, bloodshed, and idolatry (Nahum 1:2-3). The Ninevites during Jonah's time, who believed God's message and repented, will forever be remembered as a people who turned their hearts toward the Lord and believed despite their overall lack of knowledge about Him (Jonah 4:10-11). The Ninevites who were spared judgment should be a motivation for all people to seek God's mercy and choose the path of humility and repentance.