

Jonah 3:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

Analysis

Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? The king's decree concludes with humble uncertainty and desperate hope. The Hebrew mi-yodea yashuv venicham ha'Elohim veshav meḥaron appo velo noveid (מִי-יֹדֵעַ יִשְׁׁוּב וְנִכְמַד בְּאֱלֹהִים וַיָּשֶׁב מִקְרָן אֶפְרַיִם וְלֹא נָאַבְדָּ) expresses theology that balances God's justice with hope in His mercy.

"Who can tell" (mi-yodea) literally means "Who knows?"—acknowledging human inability to presume upon divine response. The king doesn't claim certainty that repentance guarantees deliverance, only hope that it might. This contrasts with presumptuous faith that treats God's grace as automatic or manipulable. True faith hopes in God's mercy while acknowledging His sovereign freedom.

"If God will turn and repent" (yashuv venicham ha'Elohim) uses the same verb shuv (turn) applied to Nineveh's repentance (3:8), plus nacham (נִכְמַד, relent/have compassion). The king hopes God will 'turn' from announced judgment as they 'turn' from evil—responsive rather than arbitrary change. God's 'repenting' doesn't indicate fickleness but consistent character responding to changing human conditions (Jeremiah 18:7-8).

"Turn away from his fierce anger" (veshav meḥaron appo) acknowledges the severity of deserved judgment. The phrase "fierce anger" (ḥaron aph, אַחֲרָן אַף) literally means "burning of nose/nostril"—vivid Hebrew idiom for intense wrath. The king rightly recognizes that Nineveh deserves destruction and that only divine

mercy can avert it. This theology parallels Joel 2:13-14: "rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God... who knoweth if he will return and repent?"

Historical Context

The phrase 'Who can tell?' or 'Who knows?' appears in other contexts where people hope for divine mercy without presuming upon it (2 Samuel 12:22, Joel 2:14, Zephaniah 2:3). This reflects proper fear of God—acknowledging His justice while hoping in His mercy. Ancient Near Eastern religion typically involved bargaining with gods through sacrifices and rituals, assuming divine favor could be purchased. The king's humble uncertainty contrasts with pagan manipulation of deity. He appeals to God's character, not human merit. This anticipates New Testament grace theology—we're saved by God's mercy, not human worthiness (Ephesians 2:8-9, Titus 3:5).

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does the king's uncertainty ('Who can tell?') model appropriate humility before God's sovereignty?
2. What does 'fierce anger' reveal about the seriousness of sin and the justice of divine wrath?
3. How should believers balance confidence in God's promises with humble recognition of unworthiness?

Interlinear Text

וְיִשְׁבֶּן
H4310 Who can tell
H3045

וְיִזְרַעַל
H7725

וְיִתְּמַלֵּא
H5162

וְיִתְּמַלֵּא
H430

וְיִשְׁבֶּן
H7725

נְאָבֶד
from his fierce
H2740

אָפָה
anger
H639

וְנִמְתַּר
that we perish
H3808

וְנִמְתַּר
H6

Additional Cross-References

2 Samuel 12:22 (References God): And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?

Psalms 106:45 (Repentance): And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies.

Jonah 1:6 (References God): So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org