

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 יָשׁוּב וְנִחַם הָאֱלֹהִים וְשָׁב מִחֶרֶן אָפּוֹ וְלֹא נֹוֶיֵד) 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* (נָחַם, 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*, חֶרֶן אָף) 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

מִי	יֹדֵעַ	וְשָׁב	וְנָחַם	הָאֱלֹהִים	וְשָׁב
H4310	Who can tell	and turn away	and repent	if God	and turn away
	H3045	H7725	H5162	H430	H7725
מִמֶּנּוּ	אֶפְרָא	וְלֹא	נִאָּבֵד:		
from his fierce	anger		that we perish		
H2740	H639	H3808	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.