

Jonah

Chapter 3

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

3:1 *second time.* God made a new beginning with Jonah, giving him a second chance. (TLSB)

Peter would later experience a similar reinstatement into his office as an apostle (John 21:15-19). When Peter called the Lord “the God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10), he showed he fully understood how the Lord could re-commission him by grace, pure and undeserved grace. (PBC)

3:2 The repetition of Yahweh’s call to Jonah using the same verbs in 1:2 and 3:2 accents an ongoing theme in the book. What Yahweh commands, says, and does will eventually accomplish his will. Even if Yahweh’s Word is not heeded or fulfilled immediately, as it is not in chapters 1–2, it will be fulfilled in time, as it is in chapter 3. He will not be thwarted. After all, he is the God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land (1:9). (CC)

Nineveh that great city – Jonah 4:11 mentions there were “a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.” We understand this to refer to children who had not yet reached the age of discretion (Deut 1:39). Adding an older brother or sister and two parents to the family of each of the 120,000 gives a rough estimate of perhaps 500,000 inhabitants in Nineveh. (PBC)

the message I give you. A prophet was the bearer of a message from God, not primarily a foreteller of coming events. (CSB)

God would give Jonah the words to speak against Nineveh, reflecting God’s will rather than Jonah’s. (TLSB)

Literally, the proclamation I am about to say to you. The first time the Lord told Jonah to “preach against [Nineveh] because of its wickedness has come up before me” (1:2). The second time the Lord’s directive to Jonah was less specific, implying the Lord would brief Jonah on the way regarding what to preach. (PBC)

3:3 *arose and went.* But reluctantly, still wanting the Ninevites to be destroyed (4:1–5). (CSB)

Jonah had learned his lesson and now followed God’s directions. (TLSB)

Summary of Scene 4

Jonah 3:1–3a does not explicitly state that Jonah has repented, that the experience with the sea and the great fish have humbled him, that Yahweh’s salvation (2:9) prompts his obedience, or that he now plans to change his theology to accommodate God’s desire to save all people, even pagan Gentiles like the Ninevites (Jonah resents that in 4:1–2). (CC)

So why does Jonah go to Nineveh this time? After all, this was a demanding journey of about five hundred miles from the Mediterranean coast across desert routes. The approximate travel time in antiquity from Jerusalem to Nineveh is estimated to have been between a month and forty-five days, based on caravan speed. So why go? (CC)

One answer might be that Jonah realizes he cannot escape Yahweh. (CC)

Another answer as to why Jonah goes to Nineveh this time might be that he hopes or anticipates that the Ninevites will not respond, in which case they would be destroyed. (CC)

Or perhaps Jonah goes to the great city because of his renewed faith. After all, Yahweh had saved him from the death he surely knew he deserved. (CC)

But if this is true, it will become apparent in chapter 4 that Jonah is still *simul iustus et peccator*, “saint and sinner at the same time,” and this to the very end of the narrative. (CC)

very exceedingly great city. † See 4:11, which says the city had more than 120,000 inhabitants. Archaeological excavations indicate that the later imperial city of Nineveh was about eight miles around. The fact, however, that “a visit required three days” may suggest a larger area, such as the four-city complex of Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen mentioned in Ge 10:11–12. Greater Nineveh covered an area of some 60 miles in circumference. On the other hand, “three days” may have been a conventional way of describing a medium-length distance (see Ge 30:36; Ex 3:18; Jos 9:16–17). Or the term may refer to a “preaching circuit” through the city’s gates and plazas. (CSB)

Indicates not Nineveh’s size, but God’s concern for the city. (TLSB)

Here were stationed the fierce troops and the swift cavalry of the king. The citizens of Nineveh felt secure behind its massive walls – 100 feet high and broad enough for three chariots to be driven abreast on the roadway running along its top. (PBC)

three days journey – There are basically three interpretations.

1. The three days was the time required to walk the circumference of the city.
2. Another interpretation understands the three days’ journey as the time required to walk through Nineveh.
3. The three days’ walk is interpreted by many to be the time required to travel the main streets and neighborhoods.

This commentary prefers the third interpretation. (PBC)

3:4 a day’s journey. On the first day of Jonah’s anticipated three-day visit, the people of Nineveh already responded to his message. (TLSB)

FORTY MORE DAYS – The number forty is often associated with testing and judgment. (PBC)

be overthrown – Or, “overturned.” The message that God told Jonah to deliver may be understood in two ways: Jonah hoped that Nineveh would be overturned in destruction; instead, the city was overturned in repentance and faith. God then overturned His decision for judgment and granted them mercy (v 10). Nineveh changed and God changed His judgment, but Jonah did not. After Jonah delivered God’s message, nothing more is heard of him in ch 3. (TLSB)

We can learn a double lesson from Jonah's effective preaching. First, he was brief and to the point. He let the Word do the talking for him. Second, Jonah did not seek to draw attention to himself by his preaching. (PBC)

3:5–6 *fast ... sackcloth ... dust.* Customary signs of humbling oneself in repentance (see 1Ki 21:27; Ne 9:1). (CSB)

Here is the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah and one of the greatest in all of Scripture. An entire city brought to repentance. Think of it – perhaps a half-million people. What a miracle of mercy! (PBC)

Nineveh's repentance manifests itself in a form that rivals even the most pious Israelite times of repentance. Not only the king, but all the people and even the livestock put on sackcloth and fast (Jonah 3:5–8). Jonah 3:8 is worded to suggest that just like the people, the livestock too covered themselves with sackcloth! In that way, the Ninevites' penitence exceeds any recorded for Israel. (CC)

believed God. This may mean that the Ninevites genuinely turned to the Lord (cf. Mt 12:41). On the other hand, their belief in God may have gone no deeper than had the sailors' fear of God (see note on 1:16). At least they took the prophet's warning seriously and acted accordingly. (CSB)

The Holy Spirit working through the Word convinced the people of Nineveh that God would indeed overthrow their city if they did not repent. This miracle of faith was even greater than Jonah's rescue by a great fish. Clement of Rome (1st Epistle): "Jonah proclaimed destruction to the Ninevites; but they, repenting of their sins ... obtained salvation, although they were aliens [to the covenant] of God" (ANF 1:7). (TLSB)

The Hebrew word for "believed" is the word from which "Amen" is derived. In effect the Ninevites said "Amen, it is true." To Jonah's message. (PBC)

fast ... sackcloth. Traditional signs of repentance and mourning. (TLSB)

greatest ... least. Every level of Ninevite society responded to God's Word. Their quick response was in stark contrast to Israel's frequent hardness of heart (e.g., Nu 14:11; Dt 1:32; 2Ki 17:14). Luther: "Take note that the people of Nineveh do some things that God does not command them. Yet Jonah relates this. For instance, they fast and put on sackcloth. What does God care about fasting and sackcloth? He wants the heart; He wants to see a person's whole life transformed. Also, God did not demand these things from them through Jonah. All He asked was that they cease their villainy.... Jonah does not praise their fasting and their sackcloth later on, but he reports that 'they turned from their evil way' (v. 10)" (AE 19:86). (TLSB)

3:1–5 God is concerned for all people, even those we might write off. The people of Nineveh hardly seem like "good prospects." However, the message they hear is from God, and God makes sure that it bears the fruit of repentance. Do you assume some people are unable or unwilling to respond to the Gospel? Leave conversion in God's hands and faithfully fulfill your role as His witness. He has promised that His Word will bear fruit, and He is concerned that all people have the opportunity to be saved. Thank God, His Word bore the fruit of repentance in Nineveh and also in your life. • Savior of the nations, keep me from doubting the effectiveness of Your Word. Amen. (TLSB)

The People of Nineveh Repent

6 The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

3:6 *king of Nineveh.* King of Assyria. (CSB)

Messengers probably brought the king news of what the citizens of the city were doing. (TLSB)

sat in ashes. Even the king vacated the honor of his throne and joined his people in expressions of repentance. (TLSB)

The reaction of the Ninevite king is all the more remarkable in that elsewhere in the OT Assyrian kings are portrayed as an arrogant, boasting monarchs who not only defy Yahweh and threaten Jerusalem, but also argue that their power is greater than Yahweh’s because they have been able to defeat the God of Israel/Judah just as they defeated the gods of other nations. (CC)

3:7 *issued a proclamation.* King and nobles wanted to ensure that everyone in Nineveh got the message and responded to his decree. (TLSB)

The focus now shifts from the king’s personal reaction (3:6) back to the city’s communal response to the crisis via a royal edict that regularizes the spontaneous reaction of the populace (their faith, fasting, and sackcloth in 3:5). Officialdom the world over is accustomed to governing by means of such decrees. “The king and his nobles” issue a joint decree to both “people and animals” (3:7). These phrases encompass all life in the city, from the monarch and his court down to the common populace and even their livestock, making this the most comprehensive repentance recorded anywhere in the OT or NT. (CC)

nor beast, herd nor flock. Including animals underscores urgency of repentance. Greek historian Heroditus reported that in Persian times, animals were sometimes made part of the mourning process. Tertullian: “[They were] starving out even the cattle with which God was not angry” (ANF 4:106). (TLSB)

Let them not feed or drink water. Applied to humans as well as animals, this enforced the completeness of the fast but also suggests it was of short duration. (TLSB)

3:8 Inclusion of the domestic animals was unusual and expressed the urgency with which the Ninevites sought mercy. (CSB)

Animals were considered a part of the person who owned them. Therefore, whatever they suffered was suffered by their owner. The lowing of the cattle and the bleating of the sheep, hungry and thirsty during the fast, was symbolic of their owner’s cry for mercy and forgiveness. The Greek historian Herodotus (450 BC) describes how a Persian army mourned the loss of a cavalry leader by cutting of their horses’ hair as well as their own. (PBC)

Jonah 3:5–7 builds up the totality of Nineveh’s repentance by mentioning the greatest and least, king and commoner, man and beast. The preceding verse (3:7) prohibited eating or drinking in even the smallest amount. Now, by means of a series of jussive verbs in 3:8, the edict turns to commands that call for

positive acts. The first prescribes the wearing of “sackcloths,” which the people and king donned voluntarily in 3:5–6. (CC)

Romans 8:19-22, “¹⁹The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

call out mightily to God. In contrast to the sailors who “called out to the LORD” (1:14), the king used the general divine term “God” when ordering the people to pray. (TLSB)

evil way ... violence. Acknowledgment of Nineveh’s sin and truth of God’s judgment (1:2; 3:2). (TLSB)

Assyrian warfare was exceptionally violent. Perhaps within the very lifetime of Jonah himself (or a few decades later), the Northern Kingdom was devastated in 722/721 BC by the Assyrians, who exiled much of its surviving population (see 2 Kings 17). One particularly gruesome form of violence by the Assyrians is illustrated in their carved reliefs depicting their military conquests: the practice of impaling defeated foes on large poles planted in the ground. This form of execution, which they also inflicted in Judah, was one of the earliest precursors to the Roman practice of crucifixion—the form of violence suffered by God’s Son, the one man who embodied the nation of Israel (Mt 2:15). (CC)

The king’s decree is similar to the Lord’s call to repentance issued by His prophet Joel to Israel. (PBC)

Joel 2:12-14, “¹²‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ ¹³Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. ¹⁴Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.”

3:9 Assyrian king and citizens hoped God would change His mind, show mercy, and withhold judgment. Pagan sailors had also expressed this hope (1:6). (TLSB)

fierce anger. Ninevites understood that they deserved God’s punishment. Luther: “A truly contrite heart wrestles with fear and with doubt.... If there were no faith, it would never be able to stand its ground in this struggle and distress. Therefore these words are, rather, evidence of faith, but of a faith that trembles with fear and that still contends for mastery, but that all the while keeps God’s grace before its eyes, saying: ‘God may yet repent and turn from His fierce anger, etc.,’ that is, grace still hovers in the background, and all is not wrath” (AE 19:88). (TLSB)

God often responds in mercy to man’s repentance by canceling threatened punishment (v. 10). See note on Jer 18:7–10. (CSB)

3:10 *God relented.* God exercised His mercy. (TLSB)

Whether all the Ninevites of that generation continued in their new faith, we do not know. No doubt many grew careless and allowed their faith to be choked off like the plant in Jesus’ parable of the sower

(Matthew 13:20ff). At any rate, some 150 years later, in 612 BC, Nineveh was destroyed. Were there any believers left then? We do not know; we can only hope so. (PBC)

Luke 15:7 “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

disaster. Lit, “evil.” If the Ninevites had not repented, God would have destroyed them. “[The Ninevites] by their repentance (all of repentance) were reconciled to God and received the favor that their city was not destroyed” (Ap XIIIB 69). (TLSB)

3:6–10 Jesus declared that “the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment ... and condemn” His own generation of hearers who failed to repent (Mt 12:41). God continues to call us to repentance for our sins of thought, word, and deed. The men of Nineveh furnish us with an example to follow. May they not condemn us on the Day of Judgment! May the Holy Spirit rather lead us daily to repent of our sins and trust Christ for pardon and peace. • Father in heaven, have mercy on me, a sinner. Grant me full confidence in the truth and power of Your Word, and give me peace. Amen. (TLSB)

Summary of Scene 5

Little effort, poor skills, a short sermon—and total success! Even with crooked human writers, Yahweh writes straight. Jonah’s message in 3:4 is concise and blunt. Jonah apparently hoped that the outcome would be the destruction of his hearers (see 4:1). His sermon says nothing explicit about salvation and states no contingencies or qualifications depending on how the Ninevites respond. At face value, the prophecy seems to assume the people will ignore it. Yet in the next verse (3:5), the pagan Gentiles believe in ways that are simply amazing! The astonishing salvation of Gentiles through faith, by the power of the preached Word, will recur on a far larger scale in the NT and in subsequent world history, as countless Gentiles are grafted into the true Israel of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 10:10–17; Gal 6:16). (CC)

But *these* Ninevites are spared. The conflict between Yahweh and these former idolaters is resolved. But as soon as chapter 4 begins, we discover that this closure regarding the converted Gentiles is only masquerading as a resolution to the book. The festering problem is not Nineveh, but the Israelite Jonah. (CC)