

Jonah 3:1-10

The book of Jonah is often described as depicting “a God of second chances.” Jonah declares that God is just and never winks at sin but makes clear that He is also overwhelmingly gracious and offers second chances. Chapters one and two are the most familiar because they tell the story of the prophet swallowed by a fish and then vomited onto land, but it is chapter three that gives rise to the appropriate label “a God of second chances.” In chapter three, we see God offer a second chance both to Jonah and to the people of Nineveh.

Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture do we see so clearly how God simultaneously deals with the individual and with the nations. God cares immensely for the heart of the individual and yet never forgets about the holiness of the nation. Accordingly, when we read Jonah as the story of a man swallowed by a fish, we sometimes neglect the marvelous work God is doing in the city of Nineveh. May we marvel at that piece of the story again.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.”

Much has been written about these words, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.” Jonah had run from God and refused to do His bidding. God saved him but was certainly not obligated to give him a second chance. Yet He did. Just as He gives second chances throughout Scripture—to Abraham, Jacob, David, Peter, Mark, and many, many more.

This second chance is a grace meant to push Jonah to action. Just as Jesus told the woman caught in adultery, “Go and sin no more or something worse will happen to you,” it is as if God says to Jonah here, “Let the fact that your sin was revealed be good for you. Obey or something worse than 3 days in a fish will happen to you.”

The Apostle Paul wrote centuries later that he did not want to receive the grace of God in vain (1 Corinthians 15:2). Likewise, Jonah’s salvation in the fish was an incredible grace. Would he receive God’s grace in vain or would he offer up his life in response?

Nineveh, of course, was not an easy place to visit. It was Israel’s enemy and had the reputation of impaling enemies or even skinning them alive. No matter; God was still determined to reach His “enemies.” Jonah’s disobedience would not stop His purposes, and He would give them a second chance just as He was giving Jonah a second chance.

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk. Then Jonah began to go through the city on day’s walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

The test of Jonah’s repentance is whether he will obey the call this time. If God had simply wanted Jonah to realize something, He could have ended the book at chapter two, but He wants Jonah to act. The true test of repentance is changed action, and as the following verses show, Jonah has, at least on some level, repented. As is often the case, affliction has benefited him, and he obeys.

Nineveh is described as “an exceedingly great city.” 4:11 tells us that the city had more than 120,000 citizens, which is several times the size of the largest city in Israel. Scholars are split on the exact meaning of the “three days’ walk” (options include the suggestion that

Jonah preached in the city proper and the surrounding villages or that he met with administrative officials for 1-2 days in addition to 1-2 days travelling the city streets), but in any event, Jonah is (as other prophets did at the time) wandering the streets declaring his message.

Notice that God did not command Jonah to be successful or to convert anyone. He was simply to proclaim the message. Like all the prophets (cf. Ezekiel 2:7) and all of us, Jonah was to proclaim God's message whether or not anyone responded.

Jonah's message (and what is recorded here is probably a summary of his words) is simple. Judgment is coming. Jesus' preaching, as recorded in Matthew 4:17 is similarly brief, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." It is a good reminder not to make the Gospel overly complex. Repent and believe.

Nineveh was a wicked, violent city that needed societal change. As the pastor J.V. Fesko notes, however, Jonah didn't start with changing the governmental system or the economic system. He started with a message of repentance. While we should do many things, the first thing a church must do if it wants to influence a society is simply to preach the Gospel. Repent and believe.

Jesus says in Luke 11:29-32 that Jonah, in proclaiming was a "sign" to the Ninevites. Jesus goes on, however, to say that he is greater than Jonah. Jesus' message is greater than Jonah's. Jonah proclaimed "You've broken the law," but Jesus announced, "I've fulfilled the law." Jonah inaugurated a staying of judgment. Jesus announced through his resurrection permanent justification.

If the Ninevites responded to Jonah's message, how much more should we respond to Christ's?

Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles:

Just as it was in the boat amidst the storm, the message of the Gospel is foreshadowed in this scene: punishment for sin is inevitable, and it is coming soon. There is impending doom for humanity. But if you would repent of your sin and believe in the God who offers free salvation, rescue is equally near. God will save the entire Kingdom.

The people of Nineveh take advantage of this second chance. They "believe" and that belief automatically plays out in actions. It is not just one or two people but the entire city. The least of them and the greatest of them. The king and the peasant; the young family and the elderly widow, the comfortable elite and the ambitious teenager.

As James M. Boice wrote, Jonah had seemingly disqualified himself from ministry, and yet God used him to bring about perhaps the greatest revival in history. You are never beyond God's forgiveness and God's use. Nineveh wasn't, Jonah wasn't, you aren't.

One pastor looks at this passage and lists these seven qualities of repentance: 1. Take God seriously; 2. Repent of specific sins you're aware of; 3. Sorrow over sin and a heartfelt

commitment to forsake it; 4. Renounce your own righteousness; 5. Beg God for pardon; 6. Understand the grace of God (that He doesn't have to forgive); 7. Change behavior.

While there's certainly some overlap in these qualities, it is helpful to begin to consider repentance more holistically than we usually do, for we pay too little attention to repentance in general. In Luke's writings (Luke and Acts), the word "repent" shows up 22 times. The call to repentance was Jesus' first public recorded message. It was a staple of the preaching of Peter and Paul. Just as the Ninevites believed and repented, all of us today are called to both of those actions—believe and repent.

In a scene indicative of ancient Near East repentance (cf. Job 42:5-6, Esther 4:1-4), they put on sackcloth (the clothes of the poor) and sat in the ashes, declaring their moral bankruptness before a holy God. They fast and also renounce the violence "in their hands." Perhaps recent events, like the flood of 765 BC, the total solar eclipse two years later, and the famine of 759 BC made them more cognizant of their powerlessness before God, but put simply, the Spirit was poured out on this people.

"Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."

Don't overthink the involving of the animals here. This is simply a pagan people doing whatever they can to display their repentance before the Lord. They "call on God earnestly," just as the sailors did in chapter one and Jonah did in chapter two (how often are you and I really earnest in our prayers?) and turn away from their wickedness, no longer using power as a way to mistreat others.

Think of the wonder of this scene. In one day, tens of thousands of people cry out to God, declaring their sin and asking for mercy. These are not pretty good folks who are trying to be better. These are hardened sinners repenting of their normal way of life, which includes "violence" (much as it did in Genesis 6 when God saved Noah and destroyed the rest of the earth).

This is the great miracle of Jonah—not that a man was saved from a storm and lived in a fish for three days but that within the span of three days, 120,000 people were awakened to their sin and earnestly cried out to the Lord in faith and repentance.

In a wonderful example of leadership, the king (probably a provincial governor and not the king of the nation of Assyria) leads the way in repenting personally and then in using his influence to call others to repentance. King Jehoshaphat of Judah had done the same a century earlier in a marvelous prayer recounted in 2 Chronicles 20, and Ezra would do the same three centuries later (Ezra 8:21).

Let's be clear here. Nineveh's response is not normal. In Genesis 19, Sodom and Gomorrah laugh at God's message to repent. Most clearly, however, Nineveh's response stands in contrast to Israel itself. 2 Kings 17:13-14 makes clear that Israel did not listen to the prophets and refused to repent. Jesus declared that Israel stoned the prophets and declared that Nineveh would condemn the non-repentant (Matthew 12:41). Israel may have thought it was entitled to God's grace, whereas Nineveh fell to the ground in humility. Jonah's

message and story, in this way, is a message to the nation of Israel. “Look, even Nineveh repents. And you won’t?”

And what about us? Psalm 95 (and Hebrews 3) tells us that we must not harden our hearts if we hear the Lord. We, too, must cease to live as if God does not exist and we must cease to trifle with God. We must take God seriously, renounce our own righteousness, announce our sin, and throw ourselves on the grace of God, ready to change our lives. Faith and repentance.

When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

God pours out his mercy and again displays that while we are alive, there is always a chance for repentance and grace. It reminds us of perhaps the two most wicked kings in the history of Israel—Ahab and Manasseh—both of which repented late in life and received God’s mercy (cf. 1 Kings 21:27-29; 2 Chronicles 33). God did not wait to see a lifetime of change or demand 1,000 sacrifices but saw the conversion of their hearts and immediately stayed judgment. The text in Jonah says that he “saw their deeds,” so we know that God noticed more than simply an emotional response to sin. More than a “worldly sorrow,” He saw a “godly sorrow that leads to repentance” (2 Corinthians 7:10)

Amazingly, God relents, even though the repentance is not perfect. God knows that it won’t be long before the Ninevites are back in sin, but He still forgives. Surely, not all 120,000 had true repentance, but He still stayed judgment because of the changed hearts of some. The people probably weren’t looking for spiritual salvation and weren’t converting to Judaism but were simply looking for physical deliverance. God still forgives, however, demanding not perfection but contrite hearts. They were repenting as best as they could, sinful as they were. It would take much discipleship to turn these people into mature followers of the Lord, but they are beginning at the right place.

We don’t know exactly what is going on in the spiritual realm here. It appears that Nineveh is humbling itself before the God of the universe but may not be aligning itself with the God of Israel. After all, Jonah does not tell them to change their gods. Likewise, God does not destroy the city (indeed, Nineveh is headed to its greatest prosperity over the next 150 years), but we do not know whether this was a moment of spiritual salvation for Nineveh.

Of course, this story raises the question as well of whether God changes His mind. Numbers 23:19 (and elsewhere) declares that God doesn’t change His mind, but here, God said He would destroy Nineveh and then He didn’t. What gives? This apparent contradiction is resolved when we realize that God declared He would destroy wicked, sinful Nineveh but that city, all of a sudden, no longer existed. (cf. Jeremiah 18:8) It was no longer wicked, sinful Nineveh. Were He to destroy Nineveh now, He would be unmerciful and thus be untrue to His character.

Instead, as Boice points out, God looks at Nineveh’s repentance and, to the extent that this is a moment of salvation and not simply a delay of judgment, He responds to their repentance by determining to put the punishment due Nineveh for their past sins on Jesus instead of on the people. In essence, God says “They trust in me. I’ll put their punishment on Jesus.” He does the same with each of our sins. What a loving God we have!

Nineveh's story of repentance is a marvelous one. They were, as Ephesians 2 described, without God and without hope in the world. As Mark Dever points out, however, God sent His word to them (salvation did not begin with them but with someone sent to them) and in so doing, made clear that being "tough on sin" is actually a great kindness because it pushes us to repentance.

May we repent like Nineveh did. May we experience the grace of God like Nineveh did. May we be like Jonah, who obeyed God's command and then fades into the background as God did His great work.

Suggested Study Outline¹

- I. Pray
- II. Backdrop—What's come before (recall last week)
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
 - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
 - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
 - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
 - d. Do you think the people were truly repentant or are you a bit cynical about their response?
 - e. What is the greatest miracle you have ever heard of? (can come from the Bible) How does this compare to what happens in Jonah 3?
 - f. What does 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 have to say about what was going on behind the scenes?
 - g. Does God change his mind? Compare this story with Numbers 23:19. Why does it matter if God changes His mind sometimes?
 - h. How is Nineveh's story similar to our story?
- V. Application Questions
 - a. Is God offering you a second chance to do something He has asked you to do? What is it? Will you do it?
 - b. What would repentance in my city look like? Do I hope for that? Pray for that? Preach for that?
 - c. How do you respond to sin in your life? Have you ever fasted? What is the modern-day equivalent of being so broken by sin we put on sackcloth and ashes?
 - d. Would you be described as desperate for God's forgiveness and grace? Have there been moments in your life where you were? What brought those about?
 - e. What does this story teach us about God's worldwide agenda? About our role in it?
 - f. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is that...
 - a. The greatest miracles are the ones God does in human hearts.
 - b. God offers second chances, both to individuals and to nations, and no one is too far gone for Him to extend His mercy to.
 - c. Repentance is a matter of taking God seriously and includes belief and action.
- VIII. Pray

¹ The questions here are suggestions. Pick the questions you want to use or create your own. The goal is to: 1) Get at the true meaning of the text; 2) Engage the student; 3) Push the student to apply the truth of the text. In addition, use sessions like this to ensure the student believes the Gospel and could study Scripture for himself/herself.