

Jonah 3 “The God of Another Chance”

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God called Jonah to preach to the people of Ninevah, which was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. They were extremely cruel and vicious people and so Jonah ran in the opposite direction. He boarded a boat for Tarshish which was in Spain. God intervened and sent a terrible storm to rock the boat. The sailors onboard threw Jonah overboard, where he was swallowed by a whale. He spent 3 days and nights inside the whale, which brought him back to Israel and spit him out of dry land.

Jonah 3:1 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.

God is the “God of another chance.” The first time God spoke to Jonah he refused to accept the call. Now God gives Jonah another chance to do his mission.

Have seen the movie *Mission Impossible*? It’s really good. Lots of action. Half the time you don’t know what’s going on but that doesn’t matter, it’s just a fun movie. The movie is based on the TV series “Mission Impossible” where the tape recording says, “Your mission, Jim, should you decide to accept it...”

God gave Jonah a “Mission Impossible” assignment. He said, “Your mission Jonah, should you choose **not** to accept it, means you will be swallowed by a whale that will bring you back to Israel, and we’ll keep doing that until you finally DO accept your assignment!”

God tells him in **Jonah 3:2** “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.”

Apparently God didn’t tell him what he was going to say at this time, but He would give him further instructions after he got there. Now let’s do a quick review.

In Jonah 1 he’s the **prodigal** prophet—he’s running from God

In Jonah 2 he’s the **praying** prophet—he’s crying out to God

Not in Jonah 3 he’s the **preaching** prophet—he’s speaking for God.

Ninevah was the capital of the Evil Empire, Assyria, which was ruling the world at that time. They were enemies of Israel, about 500 miles away. Now remember, they didn’t have cars back then, so Jonah probably traveled there by camel or donkey. What if God asked you to do that? Coming to church on Sunday sounds pretty easy compared to that, don’t you think?

And so **Jonah becomes the first foreign missionary**. All the other prophets in the Old Testament preached to Israel or Judah—not the pagan Gentiles 500 miles away. Jonah is the only prophet that God sent to another country to preach to the pagans. He really doesn’t want to do it because he hates the Ninevites. As we’ve seen, they were brutal to their enemies and would torture and dismember them. They didn’t believe in the God of Israel. Jonah doesn’t want to see them saved or loved by God. He wants them to burn. He wants them to suffer painful deaths, just like they had done to others.

The city of Nineveh was founded by Nimrod centuries before this (Gen. 10:11) Ninevah is called the great city because it was even larger than the city of Babylon. The

Greek historian Diodorus (DEE-o dorus) of Sicily said that the walls around the city were 100 feet high. They had 1,500 towers surrounding the city and the towers were 200 feet high. The towers were watchtowers where soldiers would watch for invading armies.

Jonah 3:3 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.

Jonah finally arrives at Nineveh and he sees temples, shrines and statues. They worshipped a number of gods, but do you know the main god the Ninevites worshipped? They worshipped the fish god. When archeologists excavated Nineveh, they found **stone images of a fish with a man coming out of its mouth!** (Interp. of English Bible p. 28).

It's likely that the Ninevites had heard Jonah had been swallowed by a great fish, and the word quickly spread throughout the city that Jonah was in town. His skin was probably bleached white by the acids inside the whale. So when Jonah arrived at the city he not only looked very different from them, but God had also already prepared their hearts to listen to him.

Jonah went to Nineveh and **the thing he feared never happened**. He was afraid they would torture him, but they didn't. He was afraid they would kill him, but they didn't. So many times the things we fear never happen, but our fears always try to keep us from doing God's will.

You might be wondering how Jonah could preach to these people who spoke another language. It's really very simple. His message in **Jonah 3:4** was "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." In Hebrew, that's only five words: "**Forty--days--more--Nineveh--destroyed.**" He probably memorized those five words in their language. Anybody here could do that. He didn't have to learn the entire language, just one sentence.

He didn't tell them that if they would repent, God would spare them. He didn't want them to know that because he was enjoying preaching this message of judgment. Jonah tells them the city would be overthrown in 40 days.

"40" in the Bible is the number of testing. Noah's flood—rained 40 days. Israel was in the wilderness—40 years. Moses was on Mt. Sinai 40 days. Elijah was on Mt. Horeb 40 days. Jesus in the wilderness 40 days. And God gave Nineveh 40 days to repent—because He *wanted* them to repent. Otherwise, He would have wiped them out on day one. God loved the Assyrians even though they worshipped false gods.

We're not told *how* God was going to overthrow this city. It could be by war, but it's unlikely any army could penetrate those walls. It's more likely this was going to be a divine judgment. God would send an earthquake—or maybe fire and brimstone like what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. Jonah went up and down the streets preaching his message of judgment. Yep, if anyone deserved judgment, it was Nineveh.

How would you feel if a foreigner came to your city and walked up and down every street yelling, "Forty days from now, this city will be destroyed unless everyone repents of their wickedness." You'd be thinking, "Destroyed? What about my kids? What about my husband? What about my wife? We're all going to die!" It might make you think about changing your ways.

A few years ago there was a TV show called "Early Edition." The show was about a guy who would receive an early edition of the *Chicago Sun Times* the day before it was actually published. The newspaper told him what was going to happen the next day unless

this man did something to change the future. So he spent his day trying to prevent the tragedy from occurring that he had read about in the future newspaper. Then the headlines in the newspaper would change to reflect the outcome of his actions.

In the same way, you and I are like the guy who gets the newspaper announcing what will happen. The headline says there are many people out there who are lost and heading for an eternity cut off from God. But if we will go tell them that Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead, and if they will receive Him as Lord, it will change their eternal destiny.

Jonah got a newspaper saying Nineveh was going to be destroyed in 40 days and so he went through the streets preaching it. The people of Nineveh took his message seriously and repented of their sinful ways, which changed the headlines that God would destroy them.

Jonah 3:5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God, and called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

Jonah's message needs a place in the *Guinness Book of World's Records*. He preached a five-word sermon and everyone believed and repented! These extremely wicked people actually listened to Jonah and turned to the living God. This was an evangelist's dream come true. Ironically, the Assyrians were quicker to repent than Jonah was.

Jonah 3:6 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.

The king stepped down from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and then sat down in a pile of ashes! He exchanged his king's robe for sackcloth. Sackcloth was very rough. When it was worn next to skin it was very uncomfortable. Sitting in ashes was a sign of repentance. You'll remember Job repented in dust and ashes.

First, the king got off his throne. **Repentance begins by getting off your throne!** That means you stop running your own life and you let Jesus be the King and Lord of your heart. You follow what He says to do. Who is sitting on the throne of your life—you or Jesus?

In **Jonah 3:7-9**, the king says, "Who knows? God may relent and not judge us." **They didn't know for sure that God would stop the calamity but they repented anyway!** The entire city repented. **Repentance is a change in a person's heart that changes their behavior.** It's more than just acknowledging that you've done wrong. It's changing the direction of your life.

Suppose a husband and wife are riding in a car when the wife tells her husband to turn right at the next street. By mistake, he turns left. When he realizes what he's done, he says to his wife, "I'm sorry. I realize that I made a wrong turn and we're going the wrong way."

But if that's all he does, it isn't enough. Saying that he is sorry isn't getting them any closer to their destination. He needs to stop the car, turn it around, and go back to the correct road that his wife told him to take in the first place. That's what it means to repent. You do a turn-around.

This entire city did a turn around. This meant they changed their minds about how they treated their enemies. Their repentance meant they would no longer cut off heads, hands

or tongues. When you get your heart right with God it changes how you treat people. You will want to do whatever it takes to make things right.

During the Welsh Revival in the early 1900s, the Holy Spirit swept over Wales and 150,000 people were saved. People were convicted of their need to make things right.

But it created an unexpected problem for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years, workers had stolen items ranging from wheelbarrows to hammers. As people got right with God, they started returning what they had taken.

Soon the shipyards of Wales were overloaded with stolen property that had been returned. There were so many piles of returned tools that the shipyards put up signs telling them they were forgiven. This was similar to what happened in Nineveh. We need a revival like that here in the United States, where people's hearts change along with their behavior.

Jonah 3:10 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.

The King James Version says "God repented" but it is best translated "God relented." So it's not like God changed His mind. Someone said, "When man repents, he changes his will. When God repents, He wills a change."

Jonah said judgment was coming in 40 days, but it didn't happen. Does that make Jonah a false prophet? Deuteronomy 18:22 says if what a prophet says doesn't come to pass, he's a false prophet. For a long time I couldn't figure it out. Then I read a verse from Jeremiah that cleared up my confusion.

Jeremiah 18:7-8 (The Lord said) "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it."

God gave the warning of judgment but it was conditional. If the people would repent and change their ways, the Lord would call off the judgment. Notice the order of what happened. The prophet repented, and then the people repented, and God relented. Jesus talked about this in Matthew 12:41, "The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah."

God gave Jonah another chance, He gave the Ninevites another chance, and He will give you another chance. But with both of Jonah and Nineveh, they first had to repent and be willing to do God's will. And if you want another chance, you must do the same.

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