

Take A Chance On Elohim

Jonah 3 February 21, 2024

"One answer, right now: Yes or no?" We've watched those scenes many times where a character is offered a sudden, life-changing opportunity. Their decision usually leads either to the saving of the world or their untimely death.

800 years before Christ's birth, Nineveh found itself in a do-or-die situation. God sent them an urgent message. The people certainly didn't deserve it. The courier didn't want to deliver it. But the result was the greatest revival of all time.¹ The *entire* city turned to God. Here's how it happened.

Jonah 3:1-2 - The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ²"Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you."

Most of you are familiar with Jonah's story. Our focus tends to be drawn to him and the great fish, the storm on the sea - it's a thrilling drama. But the *Lord's* focus was on the people of Nineveh. And so, after the misadventure, chapter 3 opens with God saying, "Ok, let's start over."²

This wasn't just a second chance for Nineveh, it was also a second chance for Jonah. Jonah was a believer and a prophet, but, just like us, he had his shortcomings. He did not like Assyrians and he did not like the idea of God helping them. But, even though he had *refused* to obey God in chapter 1 - preferring to drown in the sea than preach to Ninevites - the Lord was still willing to commune with Jonah and even use him for heavenly purposes.

This was the second time God sent Jonah, but He didn't say, "You know what a bad job you've been doing, right?" Or, "You've really been a disappointment, so you better make it up to Me."

God is gracious. Even though Jonah *had* failed, even though we know he *still* has some serious heart issues to work out, there's no condemnation only *commission*. "Get up, go, and preach."

That's essentially our same commission today as God's messengers on planet earth. And God told Jonah to proclaim a *specific* proclamation. It was "the message that I tell you."

Douglas Stuart writes, "Jonah, in other words, is here commanded to say *exactly* and *only* what Yahweh will tell him to say. He is held to a tight leash in terms of his verbal freedom."³ Why? Because God's message, His Gospel, is the power of God salvation.

The content of our preaching matters. Our job is to deliver *God's Word*, *God's truth* to a lost and dying world, not our own philosophies of life or goodness. *His Word* has power, not our ideas.

¹ James Montgomery Boice *The Minor Prophets*

² Douglas Stuart *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 31: Hosea-Jonah*

³ *ibid.*

Jonah 3:3 - ³Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the Lord's command. Now Nineveh was an extremely great city, a three-day walk.

Jonah obeyed and his obedience led to great spiritual fruit. It *matters* when we obey God. It *matters* when we disobey Him. Lives and futures hang in the balance.

What is meant by Nineveh being a "three-day walk." Ancient history tells us that the circumference of the greater-Nineveh area, including outlying villages and territories was 60 miles.⁴ To give us some perspective, that whole area would be from here to Corcoran in the south, past LNAS in the west, up to Fowler/Kingsburg in the north, and Visalia to the east.

So maybe it was that large of an area. Or maybe it means that it took Jonah 3 days to go from neighborhood to neighborhood, preaching as he went. A three-day circuit, rather than three days to cut a straight line through.⁵

Now, Nineveh was a large and powerful city. It had a population of 600,000 to 1,000,000 people.⁶ But this was a city at the end of God's long-suffering rope. They had one last chance. The fish had been "prepared" for Jonah and received him, gladly for three days.⁷ The question was: Would Nineveh be willing to receive Jonah during his three-day visit? One answer, right now: Yes or no?

There's a piece of language that's easy for us to miss in English. We read Nineveh was "an extremely great city." Linguists point out that, literally, the phrase is, "a city important to God."⁸

Around here, we don't think much of the "great" cities of the world. We're disgusted by the decay and lechery and lawlessness of places like San Francisco and New York City. I'd venture to say that, *on some level*, we feel toward those places much like Jonah felt toward Nineveh.

Meanwhile, God says, "Nineveh is an important city to Me." Why? Because He loved the *people* in those cities. He was not willing that they should perish, but perish they must if they stayed in their sin. But what an amazing revelation: God was *personally concerned* for Nineveh.⁹ Concerned enough to send them an ambassador. Concerned enough to unleash a storm on the Mediterranean sea so Jonah couldn't escape. Concerned enough to prepare a great fish to swallow him up before the waves did. Concerned enough to *suffer long* with unlovely people.

Nineveh *belonged* to God.¹⁰ They were wayward, lost, and about to be consumed, but He wanted them back. He wanted them in His embrace. He wanted them alive.

⁴ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 7: Daniel And The Minor Prophets*

⁵ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

⁶ Charles Lee Feinberg *Jonah, Micah And Nahum*

⁷ Jonah 1:17

⁸ Stuart

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

Jonah 3:4 - ⁴Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!"

Seven words (maybe eight in your Bible). In Hebrew it's just five words.¹¹ He probably said more than that as people came out and conversed with him, but it was a very straightforward message.

That word "demolished," which you may have as "overthrown," is interesting. Commentators point out that it's a word that means "turned," or, "overturned."¹² In this context it definitely speaks of destruction, but the word also carries an idea of *transformation*.

One way or another, in a few days, Nineveh would be changed. They'd either be turned to dust, or turned into disciples. One answer, right now: Yes or no.

That's the choice still today, by the way: Death or deliverance. Human life can only take one of two turns. Maybe you've heard the old preacher adage: Turn or burn! It's harsh, but it's true. Turn or be overturned. Death or discipleship.

Jonah 3:5 - ⁵Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least.

It took Jonah three days before he called out to God from the belly of the fish. The Ninevites responded on the very first day!

This book wants us to see the universal nature of God's salvation: Anyone can be saved. Anyone can be forgiven.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. This was not just an ancient San Francisco. As Jonah stepped through the city gates, it's very possible that he walked past prisoners who had been impaled alive on pikes. One of the kings of Assyria had a habit of putting his enemies on display at the city gate, chained to a wild bear "that would slowly devour [them]."¹³ That was *Monday Night Football* for the Ninevites.

Even these people could be saved. And *all* of them would be. The entire city believed. Not only that, we see they had a *living* faith, full of action. They call a fast. They put on sackcloth.

Sackcloth was the clothing worn by the poor, by prisoners and slaves and those in mourning.¹⁴ It showed that they understood they had done wrong and wanted to change.

Now, the book does something that we might not see. When we see God and *Jonah* interacting, the Lord is referred to by His name, Yahweh. But here, with the Ninevites, we see that they believed

¹¹ Feinberg

¹² *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

¹³ Eckart Frahm *Assyria: The Rise And Fall Of The World's First Empire*

¹⁴ EBC

“Elohim.” That’s a more general term, used of a variety of heavenly beings. The point is, these people didn’t *know* God’s name. They didn’t know everything Jonah knew. They didn’t know all the stories or the law of Moses or all the other important details - but they knew *enough* to be saved. The Lord doesn’t make people complete the SAT before allowing them into salvation. What did the tax collector pray? “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” That was the prayer of the Ninevites.

Jonah 3:6-8 - ⁶When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he issued a decree in Nineveh: By order of the king and his nobles: No person or animal, herd or flock, is to taste anything at all. They must not eat or drink water. ⁸Furthermore, both people and animals must be covered with sackcloth, and everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing.

The king here is probably *not* the king of Assyria, by the way, just the ruler of the city.¹⁵ He makes this decree, but everyone was already doing it. We see that he, too, was genuinely convicted of sin and turning to God. He made it official. And he even stepped further from his position. He didn’t just wear sackcloth, he sat in ashes. He didn’t just fast, he extended the fast to the *animals*!

I’ve heard of lipstick on a pig...I’ve never heard of *sackcloth* on a pig. Some of you dress up your dogs in little outfits. I’m not sure how you keep farm animals covered in sackcloth. But they were serious. Everything in life stopped. No commerce. No games. No training. The *entire* city shut down and turned their attention to repentance and to this God Whose name they did not yet know.

It was a corporate action, but we also see the king talking about *individual* responsibility. “Each must turn from *his* evil ways.” God works with nations, blessing them or judging them, but at the same time, salvation is always an individual transaction between God and each person. And, in Nineveh’s case, it does not seem like God was doing the Abraham agreement: If I can find just 10 righteous people, I’ll spare the city. Each and all had this moment of choice.

How long did this fast go on? It’s hard enough to fast from food and this was also a no-water fast.

There’s an interesting difference in the Septuagint version. There Jonah says *three* days instead of forty days. If that *is* what Jonah said, it would make sense that their fast would last three days because that’s about as long as you can go without water before dying. It would illustrate the sincerity of their repentance. “In three days you’re going to be judged.” “Ok, well, we’re so willing to show our sorrow, we’re so dependent on God’s mercy, we will forfeit our lives at His feet.”

Either way, this is a very dramatic scene. Imagine the noise of the animals who are hungry and thirsty in their pens. Braying and lowing and pawing against the boards.

Jonah 6:9 - ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent; he may turn from his burning anger so that we will not perish.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

They were sincere but didn't know what was going to happen. "Who knows? Let's take a *chance* on this Elohim and see if maybe He'll show us mercy."

Why would they think God is merciful? *Their* gods certainly weren't. Why stay and wait to see rather than flee for their lives? The answer comes to us in the Gospel of Luke. We're told that Jonah became a *sign* to the people of Nineveh.¹⁶ He told them his story. How *he* had disobeyed God, but God, in His mercy and compassion and grace gave him a second chance.

We Christians are called to be living witnesses of God's *grace* and *mercy* so that others can understand there's grace for *them*, too. That Christ offers real hope - real restoration and refuge.

Who knows? Well, Jonah knew. *That's* why he didn't want to go to Nineveh. He *knew* God would be merciful. And, to his credit, it seems he communicated that idea to these pagans who then were willing to take a chance on it being true.

Jonah 6:10 - ¹⁰ God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it.

God can forgive *anyone*. He *wants* to forgive *everyone*. He can't pretend we haven't done evil - He's not a God of compromise. But He *is* a God of compassion.

This is what God wanted all along: For Nineveh to realize they were far from Him and to turn back to Him so that He did not have to judge them for their wickedness. As Jonah will angrily say in chapter 4, "I know You're a God Who is slow to anger and abounding in love!" The Lord *wants* to deliver people and cities and nations because they are *precious* in His sight.

The Ninevites did not *convince* God not to destroy them. They did not *purchase* their salvation with acts of piety. They *received* the mercy that God extended as a free gift.

Here is how they received it: First, they *believed* God. You are saved by grace *through faith*. Abraham *believed God* and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Then we see in the kings words that, after they *believed*, they called out to God and turned from their sin. If a person actually believes the Gospel, that will be the result.

Psalm 91 tells us those who call on the Lord will be saved. And to turn *to* God means to turn *away* from sin, turn away from idols. It means we trust Him and *receive* His offer of rescue and transformation.

¹⁶ Luke 11:30

This chapter is an example of what is still true today. Jeremiah tells us that God still announces judgments on wicked nations, but that if that nation turns from evil, He will relent from bringing disaster.¹⁷ If they won't, He won't.

The individual situation is also the same. Maybe the modern Ninevite has more than three days or more than forty days, but there *is* a number. Maybe it's 1,000 or 10,000. *One* day the offer of salvation will expire and judgment will fall. One answer, right now: Yes or no?

For all of us, Jonah 3 is a reminder that God has called to us. We must respond to Him. And as we respond to Him, He responds back again to us. As we draw near to Him, He comes near to us.

This moment of faith brought the people of Nineveh 100 years of grace. A hundred years! What might *my* faith and repentance and trust in God bring for my family, my community, my nation?

¹⁷Jeremiah 18:8-10