

God's Love for Nineveh

Bible Background • [JONAH 3](#); [NAHUM 1-3](#)

Printed Text • [JONAH 3](#)

Devotional Reading • [ACTS 11:11-18](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLORE how repentance is related to God's love; SENSE the joy that comes when we are forgiven a wrong; and SHARE examples of times when wholeness and peace are the result of God's intervening love.



Reverend Johnson was walking through the city slums with his friend Mike, a barber who didn't believe in God. As they took in their depressing surroundings, Mike said to the preacher, "This is why I cannot believe in a God of love. If God were as kind as you say, He would not allow these poor bums to be addicted to dope, alcohol, and other life-destroying habits. No, I cannot believe in a God who permits these things."

The reverend was silent until they met a man who was especially unkempt and filthy. Reverend Johnson said to Mike, "You can't be a very good barber, or you wouldn't permit a man like that to continue living in this neighborhood without a haircut and shave."

Indignantly, Mike answered, "Why blame me for that man's condition? I can't help it that he is like that. He has never come into my shop; there I could fix him up and make him look like a gentleman!"

Giving Mike a penetrating look, the reverend said, "Then don't blame God for allowing the people to continue in their evil ways, when He is constantly inviting them to come into a relationship with Him and be saved. If they did, He would clean up their lives."

In today's lesson, Jonah finally makes his appearance in Nineveh. We will explore God's righteous demand for justice and His desire to show compassion and mercy to all who repent.

What types of people is it especially hard to show compassion towards?

Keep in Mind

"And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not" ([Jonah 3:10](#)).

KJV

Jonah 3:1 And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying,

2 Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.

3 So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.

4 And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

6 For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:

8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

9 Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

10 And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

NLT

Jonah 3:1 Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time:

2 "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you."

3 This time Jonah obeyed the Lord's command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all.

4 On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!"

5 The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow.

6 When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes.

7 Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: “No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all.

8 People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence.

9 Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.”

10 When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.

The People, Places, and Times

Fasting. Very little is dictated about fasting in Old Testament law, with only the fast of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, explicitly ordained ([Leviticus 16:29–34](#), [23:27–32](#)). In fact, the Old Testament includes instances of fasting in ancient Israel for purposes such as repentance ([Jonah 3:5](#)), petition ([2 Samuel 12:16](#)), and mourning ([1 Samuel 31:13](#)). Fasting served numerous purposes, but in each case, the individual or community humbled themselves before God by refraining from food and drink.

Sackcloth and ashes. Sackcloth was a coarse garment of poor quality, usually made of goat hair. These garments were worn by those in mourning or by prophets as a sign of their earnestness. Ashes were worn on the head as a sign of mourning as well. They served as a reminder of the fragility of life and that humanity will all go to dust, or the earth.

Background

In last week’s lesson, we saw examples of God’s grace. Jonah disobeyed God, attempted to run away from His service, and finally was ready to die rather than submit to God’s will. In spite of all this, when Jonah’s situation appeared hopeless, God prepared a great fish to rescue him.

Jonah was saved from death by grace. God not only saved his life, but He also restored him to his position as prophet. Jonah failed God, but God did not give up on Jonah. God had a job that He wanted Jonah to do, and his failure did not disqualify him for the mission.

God’s ultimate purpose was to rid Nineveh of evil. Jonah was sent to warn the people of Nineveh of their impending destruction. God would end the evil of Nineveh through an act of divine judgment or, if they repented, through divine mercy.

In Depth

1. Jonah’s Repentance ([Jonah 3:1–4](#))

After his experience on the boat and in the belly of the great fish, Jonah was finally ready to submit to God’s will. And God gave the reluctant prophet a second chance. Once again God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and announce His judgment against the city. This time

Jonah readily obeyed God and made the 500-mile journey to Nineveh. When the prophet arrived in the city, he immediately began to proclaim the message of God's judgment to the inhabitants.

The city of Nineveh itself was about eight miles in circumference. A pace straight through the city would not have taken three days, even starting outside the city itself, but Jonah was expected to spend three days in the city. Jonah walked through the city shouting out God's message, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed." The people of Nineveh heard Jonah's words, believed his report, and repented of their sin.

2. Nineveh's Repentance (vv. 5–9)

As an external sign of their repentance, all the people fasted (cf. [1 Samuel 7:6](#)). They clothed themselves in sackcloth (cf. [Genesis 37:34](#)). Everyone from the king to the lowest beggar participated in these acts of repentance ([Jonah 3:5–6](#)). The people hoped that God would show compassion and turn away from His fierce anger (v. 9). Even the animals were not allowed to eat or drink.

Some have wondered why these pagan people would have responded to an Israelite prophet. Jewish rabbis explain it this way: the Ninevites had heard of Jonah's miraculous deliverance from the fish's belly, and believed that God must be very powerful for His reach to extend so far. This argument is very likely since Jesus said, "For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of man be to this generation" ([Luke 11:30](#)). In the ancient Near Eastern mind, gods ruled over different regions. In the minds of the Ninevites, the God who was worshiped in Israel and still threatened Nineveh was powerful indeed.

3. God's Repentance (v. 10)

When God saw that the people of Nineveh had turned from their evil ways, He turned from destroying the city. The Lord extended His mercy to them by not executing the destruction they so richly deserved. He extended His grace by giving them what they could never deserve: forgiveness. He changed His mind about the judgment they were to receive.

The conversion of Nineveh is the high point of the book of Jonah. The Ninevites not only heard the Word of God, but they also believed. God forgave Nineveh just as He forgave Jonah. He is ready to forgive anyone and everyone who is willing to turn away from their sins and submit to His will.

Search the Scriptures

1. The city of Nineveh is described as a great city, because of the immense size of the city and its surrounding suburbs. What is significant about the size of the city in relation to their need for repentance (v. 3)?
2. Jonah walked through Nineveh proclaiming that in forty days, the city would be destroyed. How do you think Jonah felt while doing this (v. 5)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why do you believe that God gave both Jonah and Nineveh a second chance? What does this mean for you personally? What does God's interest in Nineveh convey about God's interest in cities today?
2. The Ninevites were a cruel and very wicked people. What did they do to deserve God's mercy and kindness? What can we do to earn His mercy and kindness?

Lesson in Our Society

Many people find it hard to stop doing something they know is wrong. Whether they are addicted or just stubborn, some people continue to persist in heading in the wrong direction. God's call to repentance is a call to head in the right direction. It is not intended to stop all enjoyment and fun, but to help people experience God's love. This can only happen when we turn from our evil ways.

Make It Happen

God's love is available to all, but not everyone experiences it. Write in your journal the reason you decided to repent and experience God's love. Next, discuss this with another believer. Finally, share with another person how you experienced God's love as a result of turning toward Him.

More Light on the Text

Jonah 3

1 And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, 2 Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.

Jonah is returned to dry land by Yahweh's orders to the great fish ([Jonah 2:10](#)). The Lord commissions him again to complete the same mission that he had run away from. With the same words, the Lord orders Jonah again as before (1:2), "Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee." Jonah is to go and preach (Heb. *qara'*, **kah-RAH**), which is to proclaim or declare, the Lord's message to the people of Nineveh. The phrase "the preaching that I bid thee" emphasizes the fact that a true preacher speaks not of himself, but the "oracles of God" (cf. [1 Peter 4:11, KJV](#)). That is also true of Christ Jesus ([John 3:34](#)), Moses ([Exodus 4:10-16](#)), and Jeremiah ([Jeremiah 1:6-9](#)). Jonah knows that he must preach the message God gives him. He was disobedient at first. Now, having experienced God's disciplinary hand, Jonah obeys His Word without further argument. However, he goes reluctantly, not enthusiastically.

3 So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.

Jonah obeys the Lord and goes to Nineveh as God commissioned him. The author now mentions again that Nineveh was “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey,” referring to its size. The estimated size of the city of Nineveh measured three miles in length and less than a mile and a half in breadth, and the city wall was about eight miles in length. This does not seem very big; however, when the other surrounding cities that make up the metropolitan area are included, we find that it was an “exceeding great (large) city.” The expression “exceedingly great” literally means “great to God” or “great before God” and describes the magnitude of the city in the unique way of expressing a superlative. Nineveh is referred to as “that great city” three other times in the book (1:2, 3:2, 4:11), but only here is Nineveh also described as “great to God”

“Three days’ journey” does not mean how long it would take to reach there, but how long it would take to cover the city because of its magnitude. The meaning is probably more figurative than literal, given that Jonah was also in the belly of the great fish for three days and nights (1:17). A normal pace may have taken less time since the city proper was not so large as to require three full days of walking. Perhaps the point is that Jonah was expected to be preaching in Nineveh for as long as he was in the belly of the fish. The repeated mention of the city’s size also seems to indicate the enormity of the task before Jonah.

4 And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

The immense task is soon reduced to a day’s journey (or a day’s work rather than three), as the inhabitants of the city fall on their knees in repentance as soon as Jonah declares the Lord’s message.

The expression “And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey” tends to suggest that he entered the city, probably Nineveh proper the first day, and started proclaiming the message of doom awaiting them. The message is simple: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” This is the only prophecy in the book and means, “In forty more days, Nineveh will be completely changed” The prophecy here was conditional, and is implicit; the prophecy will be fulfilled if the people do not repent. Had the prophecy been unconditional, they would have received no mercy. God would have overthrown or destroyed the city without warning or notice. It would have been unnecessary to send Jonah or any other messenger to the city to preach to them.

However, it also would have been impossible for the people to repent without the Word of God being preached to them. Paul succinctly put it thus: “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” ([Romans 10:17](#)).

Declaring the importance of preaching and the efficacy of the Word of God earlier, Paul also wrote: “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?”([Romans 10:13–14](#)).

5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. 6 When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes. 7 Then

the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: “No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all. 8 People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. 9 Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.”

Although Jonah did not mention any provision or condition to avert the impending doom awaiting them in 40 days, the people understood very well the purpose of the preaching—repentance. As they heard Jonah’s preaching (announcement of doom), they repented and believed God, and declared a national day of fasting and prayer, asking for forgiveness.

Note the things Nineveh did to obtain mercy. First, they believed God (v. 5), meaning they accepted His verdict against them and trusted Him for salvation. Simply put, they repented of their evil ways and put their trust in God. Second, they declared a fast and “put on sackcloth, from the greatest . . . to the least of them,” which showed an attitude of sorrow, remorse, and mourning—the marks of genuine repentance for their sin. The king, the nobles, and all the people, including all domestic animals, joined in the national mourning and called on the Lord for forgiveness (vv. 6–9). The people were to turn from their evil ways and from “violence.” The Hebrew word for “violence” (*hamas* **ha-MAHS**) actually includes more than physical violence but also any insulting language or negative treatment. The king was saying that the people’s repentance had to be complete and involve their disposition as well as their overt actions.

10 And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

Recognizing the genuineness of their repentance from their evil ways, the Lord changes His mind and forgives them. They “turned (Heb. *shub*, **SHOOV**) from their evil,” which means that they turned back from what they were doing before, or turned from their evil ways. It carries the idea of changing course and turning back, or changing from one way of life to a new way of life, usually either positive or negative. In this case, the Ninevites’ change was positive and pleasing to God. Thus, God “repented” (Heb. *nakham*, **nah-KHAM**), i.e., changed His mind about destroying the city. This has nothing to do with God turning from a wrong. Instead, the word used for repent, *nakham*, carries the idea of having compassion, easing oneself of anger, or being moved to pity. Moved by compassion and by the evidence of sorrow and repentance from the city, the Lord is no longer angry and He spares them the punishment, which He had pronounced on them. Here, we see what we have assumed throughout the book of Jonah: God is merciful. God relents from carrying out His judgments against people who turn to Him with their whole heart in repentance.

The Prophet Joel declares, “Rend 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. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing. . .” ([Joel 2:13–14, NIV](#); see also [Jeremiah 18:6–10](#)). However, God does not arbitrarily avert the punishment He has planned to execute against a sinful nation or people without evidence of genuine repentance. The question that faces us is: “Should the Lord have compassion on

Nineveh?” Jonah does not think so. This is the core of Jonah’s problem.

Say It Correctly

Exceeding. ek-**SEE**-deeng.

Overthrown. oh-vur-**THRONE**

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Destined to Prophecy to the Nations
([Jeremiah 1:4–10](#))

TUESDAY

“Return to Me,” Says the Lord
([Zechariah 1:1–6](#))

WEDNESDAY

With Repentance Comes Joy
([Luke 15:8–10](#))

THURSDAY

Woes to the Unrepentant Communities
([Matthew 11:20–24](#))

FRIDAY

Proclaiming Repentance, Faith Lives
([Acts 20:18b–24](#))

SATURDAY

Gentiles Repent and Experience New Life
([Acts 11:11–18](#))

SUNDAY

Turn from Evil Ways
([Jonah 3](#))