

Jonah: Do The Right Thing

Bible Background • Jonah 3

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Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will SURVEY Nineveh's response to Jonah's message, SENSE how the people of Nineveh felt after hearing Jonah's message, and ENGAGE in repentance and right behavior after hearing God's warning.

In Focus

Darrell had never managed to break loose from his neighborhood gang. They were known for thefts in the area and boosting anything from bikes to phones to cars. Darrell knew stealing was wrong. But, he reasoned, maybe the victim deserved what was coming to them, or he needed the goods more than they did. There was always an excuse. Then one day, he opened his door to see two police officers. "Mr. Parker," one officer said. "We have a search warrant; we have reason to believe your son, Miles, stole a bike." Darrell kept his hands still and visible as the cops searched his small apartment. "Do you know where your son is now?"

"Getting groceries, sir."

"Do you think he's mixed up with gangs?"

"No, sir." "We'll be back in a few days to speak with him."

"Yes, sir." Darrell finally breathed again when the officers left. He knew the cops didn't really have anything on Miles. They had come to scare him. The officers very well could have found the wallet he stole from a guy yesterday. He saw just how close he had come to destruction and how his actions could cost his son his freedom or even his life. Darrell and Miles had a serious talk that night. Darrell apologized for his reckless behavior. For the first time in years, Darrell prayed to God for freedom from his gang life.

What causes people to make sudden true, lasting repentance?

Keep in Mind

"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." (Jonah 3:10, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Overthrown (Jonah 3:4) hopak (Heb.) — To turn over, turn back, convert, change, overthrow, or destroy. The word is frequently used regarding acts of God.

B. Repent (v. 3) nakham (Heb.) — Having compassion, or easing oneself of anger; to be moved to pity

Say It Correctly

Nahum. NAY-hum

Assyria. ah-SEAR-ee-ah

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

Nineveh (NIN-eh-vuh). The site of the ancient city of Nineveh has now been excavated thoroughly. Occupational levels on the site go back to prehistoric times, before 3100 BC. The city was founded by Nimrod (Genesis 10:8-10) and served as the capital of the great Assyrian Empire for many years. Its fortunes rose and fell as Babylonia and Assyria struggled with each other for the dominant position in the ancient world. During some periods Babylonia was stronger, while the Assyrians gained the upper hand at other times.

At the time of Nineveh's greatest prosperity, the city was surrounded by a circuit wall almost eight miles long. This "great city" (Jonah 1:2) had an area sufficient to contain a population of 120,000, as indicated in Jonah 4:11 and 3:2. As a result, it would have required a "three days' journey" to go around the city, and a "day's

journey” would have been needed to reach the city’s center from the outlying suburbs, just as the Book of Jonah reports (Jonah 3:3).

Although God spares Nineveh when they ask for forgiveness after Jonah’s message, in 612 BC Nineveh was destroyed, as prophesied by other Hebrew prophets, especially Nahum. Nahum specifically cites Nineveh’s idolatry (1:4) as cause of its destruction, as well as Assyria’s habit of enticing other nations into idolatry (3:4).

Background

God called His prophet Jonah to cry out against a neighboring nation, the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. Jonah disobeyed God and attempted to run away from His service. 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 also restored Jonah to his position as a prophet. Jonah failed God, but God did not give up on Jonah. God had a job that He wanted Jonah to do, and Jonah’s failure did not disqualify him for the mission. God’s ultimate purpose was to rid Nineveh of evil. He sent Jonah to warn the Ninevites of their impending destruction. God would end the evil of Nineveh through divine judgment or, if they repented, through divine mercy.

Why do we often misunderstand God’s plan, especially for people we consider our enemies?

At-A-Glance

1. God’s Forgiveness (Jonah 3:1–5)
2. Prayers to God (vv. 6–9)
3. God Relents (v. 10)

In Depth

1. God’s Forgiveness (Jonah 3:1–5) After his experience on the boat and in the belly of the great fish, Jonah was finally ready to submit to God’s will. 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 from the sea to Nineveh. When the prophet arrived in the city, he immediately began to proclaim the message of God’s judgment to the inhabitants.

Nineveh and its surrounding suburbs had a circumference of about 60 miles. It would take about three days for a person to travel through the entire city and suburbs on foot. Jonah walked through the city shouting out God’s message, “In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed.” Before he had completed one day’s journey, an astonishing event occurred. The people of Nineveh heard Jonah’s words, believed his report, and repented of their sin.

When has God given you a second chance? How did you use it?

2. Prayers to God (vv. 6–9) People today believe that repentance is simply apologizing for sins, but the unbelievers in the lesson text knew that to please God, they had to demonstrate their faith by actions reflective of repentance. As an external sign of their repentance, all the people fasted (cf. 1 Samuel 7:6). They clothed themselves in sackcloth, a coarse material made from goat’s hair (cf. Genesis 37:34). Everyone from the king to the lowest beggar participated in the acts of repentance (Jonah 3:6). 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.

How do you show you are truly sorry when you mess up?

3. God Relents (v. 10) When the Ninevites humbled themselves and made their outward expressions congruent with their inward sorrow, God saw that they had turned from their evil ways. Then God turned aside from His anger and had compassion on them. The Lord extended His mercy to them by relented from the destruction they so richly deserved. He extended His grace by giving them what they could never deserve, forgiveness. The conversion of Nineveh is the high point in the book of Jonah. The Ninevites not only heard God’s word, but they also believed.

God forgave Nineveh just as He forgave Jonah. God is ready to forgive anyone and everyone willing to turn away from their sins and submit to His will. Are you ready?

Search the Scriptures

1. Jonah walked through Nineveh proclaiming that in 40 days the city would be destroyed. How did the people of Nineveh respond to the prophecy of Jonah? (v. 5)
2. When God saw the response of the Ninevites, how did He respond? (v. 6).

Discuss the Meaning

1. The Ninevites were 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?
2. What does it mean that a perfect God “changed His mind” and “repented of the evil”?

Liberating Lesson

Jonah’s sin was believing that these people were unredeemable and the Jewish people were the only true people of God. Many Black people have difficulty forgiving White people for their atrocities during the days of slavery.

Revelation 7:12 says that people of all races, cultures, and languages will one day stand together before the throne. Shouldn’t we be practicing now for that great day?

Application for Activation

Jonah described God as being merciful, compassionate, and patient with the faults of others. Christians are supposed to be physical expressions of our spiritual God to a physical world. This week, look for people to whom you can demonstrate mercy, compassion, and patience.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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 (1:10). 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 (qara', kaw-RAW, i.e., "to proclaim") unto it the preaching (qeri'ah, keh-ree-AH, literally, "the proclamation") that I bid thee."

Jonah is to go and preach or declare the Lord's message to the people of Nineveh. The phrase, "the preaching that I bid thee," emphasizes the fact that a preacher (a true preacher) speaks not of himself, but speaks the oracles of God. Jonah knows that he is to preach the message God gives him. However, he was disobedient at first. Now, having experienced the disciplinary hand of God, Jonah obeys the word of God without further argument. However, he does not go enthusiastically, but reluctantly.

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 the Lord commissioned him. The author now mentions that Nineveh is "an exceeding great city of three days' journey," referring to its size. The estimated size of the city of Nineveh proper measured three miles in length and less than a mile and a half in breadth, and that 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 indeed an "exceeding great [large] city." It is believed that to travel through Nineveh and its suburbs was about three days' journey and that the city was about 60 miles around, 18 miles long, and 14 miles wide. It was a wellfortified city with walls about 100 feet high and broad enough to allow 3 chariots abreast on top. The expression "exceedingly great" literally means "great to God" or "great before God" and describes the magnitude of the city in the normal way of expressing a superlative. "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 repeated mention of the size of the city 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 immensity of the task is soon reduced to a day's journey (or a day's work rather than three), for the inhabitants of the city fall on their knees in repentance as soon as Jonah declares the message from the Lord. The expression, "And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey" suggests that he entered Nineveh proper the first day, and started proclaiming the message of the 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, "Within forty days Nineveh will be destroyed." The prophecy here was conditional, but the condition is implicit, as is the agent of Nineveh's destruction. The prophecy is to be fulfilled if the people do not repent before Yahweh. Had the prophecy been unconditional, no mercy would have been shown to them. 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.

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.

Although Jonah did not mention any provision or condition to avert the impending doom awaiting them in forty days, the people understood very well the purpose of the preaching—that is, repentance. As they heard Jonah's announcement of doom, they repented and believed God, and declared a national time of fasting and prayer asking for forgiveness. Note the things Nineveh did to obtain mercy. First, they believed God (v. 5). That means that they accepted God's verdict against them, knew He was their Judge and was also their only hope for salvation. This, of course, was what Jonah feared (4:1-3). Second, they declare a fast and "put on sackcloth,"

which shows an attitude of sorrow, remorse, and mourning. No one would wear the cheap, coarse cloth used for sacks if they could afford any better. To wear sackcloth was to willingly debase yourself to show humility and dejection. The king, all the nobles, and all the people, including all domestic animals, join in the national mourning and call on the Lord for forgiveness (vv. 6–9). The king stands up from his throne and instead sits in ashes. He takes off his royal robes and instead wears sackcloth. Even the king repents and shows deference to Yahweh.

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?

The king uses his position of power to get others to repent also. Working together, they show in every way they can that they are sorry and recognize themselves as under God’s power. They make an outward show of humility to show they understand where they would be without God’s help: they would have no food, no water, and barely any covering. After positioning themselves this way, they must cry “mightily” to God, with strength and force. This one-time show of humility is not all the king proclaims for the Ninevites, though. They must also change their behavior in the future, turning from their evil ways and violence. The call to “turn” (Heb. shub, SHOOV) is the word usually used in the context of what we recognize as repenting from sin. Even though these Gentile people have not directly heard all the laws of God, they know they have committed evil. They have broken the laws of their own people. They have heard of the just laws of the Israelites and not tried to improve their community with those guidelines. They recognize the destructive nature of violence (Heb. khamas, khaw-MOSS), which refers both to physical aggression and to being wrong or false.

At the end of the day, however, these people do not know God. They do not have the cultural history that the Jews do, where God revealed Himself more and more fully over many generations. They only have Jonah’s word that Yahweh is ready to destroy them. They can only hope that their efforts will change His mind. These wicked, evil people turned from their sinful ways and turned to a sovereign God who has all power in His hands—power to deliver, power to heal, and power to destroy or not destroy.

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.

Here we see what we have assumed throughout the book of Jonah: that God is merciful. God relents from carrying out His judgments against people who turn to Him with their whole heart in repentance. Recognizing the genuineness of their repentance from their evil ways, the Lord changes His mind and forgives them. They “turned (shub) 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 (either positive or negative) to a new way of life. In this case, the Ninevites’ change was positive and pleasing to God.

Thus, God “repented” (nakham, naw- KHAM), i.e., changed His mind about destroying the city. One should not imply from this verb that God had sinned in planning to destroy the city. God does not sin and does not need to “repent” of sin. Rather, nacham carries the idea of “having compassion,” or “to ease oneself of anger,” or “to be moved to pity.” Moved by compassion and by the evidence of sorrow and repentance from the city, the Lord’s anger is abated and He spares them the punishment He had pronounced on them.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Jonah's Experience Foreshadows Christ's
(Matthew 12:38-42)

TUESDAY

Nineveh's Repentance: A Lasting Message
(Luke 11:29-32)

WEDNESDAY

Jonah Turns Away from God's Call
(Jonah 1:1-12)

THURSDAY

Sailors Make Vows to the Lord
(Jonah 1:13-16)

FRIDAY

Jonah Resents God's Grace Toward Others
(Jonah 4:1-5)

SATURDAY

God's Compassion Overrides Jonah's Personal Comfort
(Jonah 4:6-11)

SUNDAY

God's Mercy Prevails
(Jonah 3)