

### Jonah 3: Judgment pronounced

VOTC # 4 August 2021

Hello dear listeners,

When we come to Jonah 3, we might experience a kind of double vision. That's because, as former New York Yankee catcher, Yogi Berra, would have said, it's "déjà vu all over again." Chapters 3 and 4 parallel chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3 begins in exactly the same way as chapter 1, with the Lord calling Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to it. And we find in this chapter essentially the same characters as chapter 1: Jonah, the Lord, and some pagans. And both chapters have as their focus the prophet's interaction with the pagans, and repentance by the pagans.

So as we enter into the second half of the book, we're going to see that the prevailing theme is much the same as it was in the first half: God wants Jonah to go Nineveh to bring about their repentance; Jonah wants the worst for the Ninevites because he doesn't want them to become insiders to grace. But through it all, God remains sovereign, and therefore free to give his grace to whom he wants.

Jonah 3:1 says that "the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.'" This is astounding! Jonah didn't deserve a second chance, nor did he really want one. He had run away from God, refusing to fulfill his calling. He was so rebellious that God had to deal forcefully with him. But in his grace and mercy, God does not write off his runaway prophet; he doesn't seek out a more spiritual prophet to do his work. No, he graciously gives Jonah another chance to do what he was called to do in the first place.

For the truth is, the Lord is still pursuing Jonah's *heart*. And in that pursuit, the Lord brings Jonah back into precisely the same circumstances in which he previously failed. The Lord tells him to go to the same place, to the same people, and with the same urgency. He's telling Jonah, "There is no backdoor option. I am taking you back to the same situation where you failed before."

You ever experience that? You have an area of sin or struggle, and instead of the Lord safely steering you away from that area, he brings you right back into it. Why does God do that? Why does he send us right back into areas that expose our sin? Why is he persistent like that, instead of instantly making us better persons? Because God delights in working not just with *weak* people, but with broken and seriously deformed people. For *in that way* it becomes more clear that the work is entirely his, and

not ours. When God uses weak and broken instruments, such instruments are left with nothing else to say but, “Salvation belongs to the LORD.”

And to underline that the work of redemption and rescue is the Lord’s alone, the Lord says to Jonah at the end of verse 2, “Call out against [Nineveh] the message that *I tell you*.” There is no place for Jonah’s personal views and reactions. The message Jonah is to speak in Nineveh is to be the very message God gives him.

So what does Jonah do with this second chance? We come to see now that Jonah nevertheless fails again in his calling. Now, it can’t be denied that on this second occasion Jonah does obey the word of the LORD. Verse 3 says that he arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. That’s good. But it’s his actions shortly after entering the city that *confirm* for us that he’s still rather cold to the whole mission. Second half of verse 3, we read that “Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth.” That is not describing the length of time it would take to walk straight through the city. No, the phrase “three days’ journey” probably refers to the time it would take Jonah to walk throughout the city, preaching his message.

Well how did it go? Jonah goes in, and starts moving from one public square to another, one outlying region to another, down one street and up the next. But for how long? Verse 4, “Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey.” *One* day. And as we read, that’s basically as far as he went. He didn’t travel all the way through Nineveh; he didn’t even travel to the centre of the city. He didn’t engage with the leaders of the city in the way that the prophets so often interacted with kings of Israel and Judah. Instead, he goes just one day’s journey into the city. And he cries out the briefest message in all of salvation history, a mere five words in Hebrew.

What was Jonah’s message to the Ninevites? “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” This is an unqualified pronouncement of *judgment*. Notice that he doesn’t preface his words with the standard prophetic introduction, “Thus says the LORD.” In fact he doesn’t even mention the Lord as the God from whom this judgment is coming. He doesn’t say why this is going to happen. Instead he leaves the Ninevites entirely in the dark as to which god it is that is threatening them. This prophetic message proclaims, in as few words as possible, a fate that is inescapable.

What kind of a message is this?! There’s no mention of the gospel. Not a word about his own personal experience of the Lord’s grace toward him. It’s hard to conclude that Jonah indeed spoke “according to the word of the LORD.”

Now, does this message make Jonah a false prophet? It's tempting to go in that direction with this angry oracle from him. But there's another option. For there's something we should know about that word, "overthrown." It actually has a subtle ambiguity in its meaning. The word is used very often in the Old Testament to describe the idea of *destruction*. Yet it can *also* describe a reversal, a turning upside down, or a change of heart.

So as it stands, Jonah's threat leaves us with the question as to whether the city is doomed for destruction, or is to experience complete transformation.

We soon get our answer. *Through* this abrupt, obscure, judgment-laden sermon, the Lord sovereignly saved the Ninevites. Only the Lord could have brought about such an immediate, positive response to such a flawed presentation of the truth. Verse 5, "And the people of Nineveh believed God." They may not have known much about this God in whom they were believing. They didn't know whether he was a god who would just destroy them anyway, or pay attention to repentance (as indicated by the king's speculation in vs. 9, "Who knows?"). And yet it is *this* people, out of all the peoples in antiquity, who uniquely repented of their sins.

They "called for a fast and put on sackcloth" (vs. 5). Fasting was a common expression of remorse and sadness. And the Ninevites kept going. All of them, important and insignificant, put on sackcloth. Like fasting, sackcloth expressed grief, lament. These Ninevites couldn't just carry on with life as though nothing had happened. They acknowledge publicly the gravity of their evil.

This becomes even more striking when we see that the *king* of Nineveh does the same when he hears the report about Jonah. He sheds his rich and costly royal robes, puts on itchy sackcloth, and then sits down in ashes. He's humbled by Jonah's prophecy.

And then of course the *most* striking thing is that the Ninevites *even* involve their livestock! Verse 7, the king decreed, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth." This might sound way over the top! For animals cannot sin, so how can they repent? Maybe the king's intentions were to try to show to God the *sincerity* of the city's response. Withholding food from the animals would jeopardize the city's economy, especially if the fast lasted forty days. All of this was intended to ratchet up the seriousness of the city's repentance.

There's still more. The king goes on to say at the end of vs. 8, "Let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may

turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” He tells his people to no longer pray to their own gods, but to the true God.

It’s amazing, isn’t it? God overturns Jonah’s flawed sermon in order to accomplish the Ninevites’ repentance. It’s as if he wants to remind us that yes, salvation truly belongs to the LORD. And “when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”

Is there any response even *close* to this to any *other* prophet of Israel? No. The *true* gospel repeatedly came to God’s chosen people, with pleading and with tears that God’s children would turn from evil and return to the Lord. But not once did Israel respond with this **thoroughgoing** repentance.

So how do you respond to the Word of God? Have you come to understand the gospel? Have you come to see God in Christ Jesus who came in love and grace? The message of salvation is even clearer today than it was to the Ninevites. And it comes from someone who not merely entered the outskirts of the world for a day, but who came to live in our midst for more than a few decades. He came willingly, preached willingly, joyfully even, embracing the scourge of suffering that went with his calling, for the joy of redeeming a people for himself. This one had to pay the price for our sin, in our place, through his death and resurrection. That was necessary, because God is gracious and merciful, but doesn’t leave the guilty unpunished. Our guilt didn’t just disintegrate into nothing; someone had to pay dearly for our sin. At the cross, God judged sin, and saved believers graciously through faith in Christ.

So how have you responded to this incredible good news? You don’t need to put on sackcloth and ashes like the Ninevites did. But you do have to acknowledge your sin, bow to Christ, and honour him as Lord of your whole life and your only hope of salvation. So come with joy, bow your heart to Christ. And rest in the God of compassion, the God who has chosen you, and works in you, so that you would show to others the grace that has first been extended to you.