

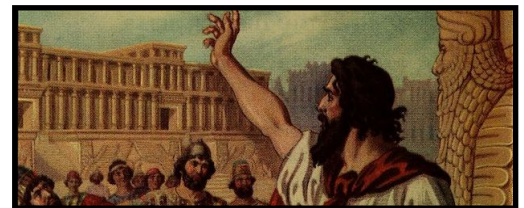
The Book of Jonah: God's Sovereign Recommission of Jonah and Salvation of Nineveh (3:1-10)

God Sends Jonah to Nineveh (3:1-2) – Someone somewhere has called Jonah's recommissioning "The gospel of a second chance". This second chance is not a reference to the possibility of salvation after death, the good news that Jonah received was that he was given a second chance to be an obedient servant of God and participate in taking God's merciful message to Nineveh (Charles L. Feinberg). Jonah had been saved by God, forgiven by God, and recommissioned by God, demonstrating that God's sovereign plan to include Jonah in the salvation could not be thwarted. While God was accomplishing His will and plan through His sovereign and providential actions to confront and save Jonah, Jonah had received the mercy of God that was now on its way to the people of Nineveh.

The first commission to Jonah ("Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me") is similar to the second commission ("Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you") but there are some slight differences. In the first commission, God reveals to Jonah a bit of context for the purpose behind his commission ("their wickedness has come up before me"). In the second commission God tells Jonah that he will be given a very specific message that is from God ("the proclamation which I am going to tell you").

In this statement it is implied that Jonah does not have the authority to preach any message other than what God has given to him. Likewise, no pastor, preacher, evangelist, or any Christian for that matter, has the authority or liberty to preach any message that has not come from God. As God prophetically revealed to Jonah the message he was to deliver, anyone who speaks for God must look to the source of God's message, the written Word of God. Any message that is proclaimed other than what God has revealed in His Word will result in misrepresenting God and misleading people (and perhaps temporal and eternal judgment).

Jonah Preaches to Nineveh (3:3-4) – Jonah's actions in chapter three are polar opposites to his first response. In response to his first commission, Jonah "rose up to flee" from God (cf. 1:3) but when he was recommissioned, Jonah "went" to Nineveh (3:3). In 1:3 "but" is a small but powerful word that shows a contrast between God's command and Jonah's action. Not so in 3:3 as Jonah went "according to the word of the LORD".



Scripture states that Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. History and archaeology demonstrate that the city itself was impressive in size. The inner wall of the city was 7.75 miles in circumference and the inner and outer suburbs (administrative district of Nineveh) was 30-60 miles across (Felix Jones, Gleason L. Archer, Feinberg). The walls of the city were "one hundred feet high; they were broad enough to allow three chariots to ride abreast. It had 1,500 lofty towers" (Feinberg). Excavations of the Hatra-Khorsabad-Nimrud ruins suggest that Nineveh and its surrounding cities were included in the size of the Nineveh. Modern-day comparisons would be Los Angeles or New York which include the main cities as well as the the surrounding cities and boroughs. This would offer one explanation why it was a "three days' walk".

It is interesting to note that in English translations Nineveh is called "an exceedingly great city" but the literal Hebrew translation is "a great city to God". In what way was Nineveh a "great city to God"? Nineveh was great in size but also great in sin and great in its need for salvation. As large and impressive as the city was, the souls that inhabited the city were far more great to God. This is precisely why God sent Jonah on this mission of mercy. One repentant soul is of great importance to God, the importance of the souls of as many as 600,000 to 1,000,000 people is staggering (if 4:11 is referencing children only - Archer).

"Nineveh was really great to God for the human souls concentrated there. In God's sight territorial extent and architectural mass or magnificence are nothing compared to a human soul"

Stuart Mitchell

The message that Jonah preached was simple and the meaning was clear, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown”. Having only eight words in English and five words in Hebrew, Jonah preached an incredibly short but powerful prophetic gospel message. As Jonah moved through Nineveh, from section to section, he preached exactly what God desired and the result was evidence of another miracle. The fact that Jonah spoke Hebrew and the Ninevites spoke Assyrian / Akkadian was not a barrier for God could have supernaturally translated the message of Jonah to the Ninevites in their native tongue (as seen on the Day of Pentecost, cf. Acts 2:6-12). Even if there was no supernatural translation, the words “forty” and “days” in both Assyrian and Hebrew are very similar (*Arba / Arbaim* = Forty, *Ume / Yom* = Days) and the word “overthrown” might also have been known to the Ninevites” (R.A. Redford). Additionally, the word translated “overthrown” is the same word used to describe the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Feinberg).

On a side note, Jonah, some speculate, might have been a bit of an odd and eerie spectacle as he made his way through Nineveh. What did Jonah look like after three days and nights in the stomach of the great sea creature? Some say he had bleached skin, loss of hair, and perhaps peeling skin from the digestive acids. Some believe there is a connection between the Hebrew word for fish, “dag”, and the Assyrian worship of a deity whose name was “Dagon”. Dagon is spoken of a number of times in the Old Testament (Joshua 15:41; 19:27; Judges 16:23; 1 Samuel 5:2-5,7; 1 Chronicles 10:10) and was known as a deity of fertility, grain, the ocean, and fish. Dagon “personifies the idea that the ocean, with its wealth of fish, was worshiped as the chief source not only of human nourishment, but also of human culture (JewishEncyclopedia.com). Since Jonah was swallowed and delivered by a great fish, some see a bit of humor and irony on God’s part as some would make the connection between Dagon and a man who came with a word of judgment delivered by a *dag gadol* (great fish).

Nineveh Calls Out to God (3:5-9) – The repentance of the city of Nineveh was truly a miracle. After hearing the message of impending destruction, the people immediately demonstrated their understanding and acceptance of the message by fasting and dressing in sackcloth. Fasting, sackcloth, and ashes were symbolic of mourning, humility, and repentance both individually and corporately (cf. Genesis 37:34; 2 Samuel 3:31; Esther 4:1-3). The actions of fasting and wearing sackcloth and ashes were external signs of an internal condition. What resulted in blessing from God was the internal heart change not the external practice fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. For those who were genuinely broken and humble, who repented and were seeking mercy from God, would find the same blessing and joy spoken of by King David (“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness” - Psalm 30:11).

Nineveh was not just a large city, Nineveh was a metropolis and arguably the most wealthy, powerful, and influential city of its day (see introductory notes). Everyone in that city was broken and humbled by the message Jonah preached. It is also important to remember that it was not Jonah’s charismatic personality, excellent showmanship, or props and effects that convinced them to believe. Neither was the message politically correct or carefully crafted to avoid offending people. It was God’s desired message to Nineveh through Jonah; nothing more and nothing less. Jonah was the voice but God was the transforming power. Jonah presented the message but the people of Nineveh believed in God; in God’s message of judgment and hope in God’s mercy. The conversion of Nineveh was truly a miracle (cf. Matthew 19:23-26).

The message of Jonah quickly reached the ears of the king who, like his subjects, was immediately convicted and repented. The question of the king’s identity is one that has three possible answers. Assuming Jonah served before or during the reign of Jeroboam II (early to mid 700’s B.C.) the kings who reigned during some portion of that time period were Adad-nirari III (810-782 B.C.), Shalmaneser IV (781-772 B.C.), and Ashur-dan III (772-755 B.C.). The exact identity of the monarch is not as important as his response to the divine message. How did the king, who was most likely not in touch with the every day lives of his subjects, aware of what was happening on the city streets? Good and bad news travels fast. The king has eyes and ears everywhere and this important news made its way to the throne room.

The king became aware of Jonah and his message of impending doom and his actions demonstrate his understanding and acceptance of the message. He arose from his throne, the great seat of royalty and rule, and by doing so he gave up his sovereign seat to call upon the Sovereign of sovereigns. He also laid aside his robe, a royal garment of great expense, quality, prestige, and honor, for the purpose of calling upon God for mercy. Like his subjects, the king covered himself with sackcloth and sat on ashes.

“There is something affecting in the picture of this Oriental monarch so swiftly casting aside such gorgeous robes and taking the place of the penitent. He had the virtue of not holding back in his approach to God”

Frank Gaebelien

Upon rising from his throne, the king leads his people in an act of national repentance demonstrating signs of humility, contrition and repentance. A royal proclamation to all his kingdom is made calling for a total fast of food and water. This royal proclamation was not only directed to all his human subjects but also included domesticated animals. Various cultures throughout history have included animals in ceremonies or displays of celebration or mourning. The ancient Persians clipped the hair of their horses and mules after the death of their commander Massistius (Gaebelien, Andrew Lim). In the United States, a riderless horse, Black Jack, was part of JFK’s funeral ceremony. This riderless horse was symbolic of a fallen warrior (JFKlibrary.org). The animals of Nineveh participated (covered with sackcloth) as they had a close connection to the people. Additionally there is a biblical basis for including animals in such practices since both man and animal were cursed by sin (cf. Psalm 36:6; Romans 8:22).

The king, calling for both external and internal signs of repentance, called upon God earnestly showing seriousness, conviction and intensity. This was not a shallow, emotion-driven act, these were actions and words from broken hearts and minds that were convicted of their sins. This was not just a verbal statement of sorrow but a mental and physical conviction to forsake all that was responsible for the judgment of God upon the city. A call to abandon their wicked way and the violence in their hands which was representative of lifestyles of sin and physical acts of violence.

The message preached and the response of the Ninevites is very much unlike calls to Christ today. People preach and believe in a Jesus who is not concerned about a sinful lifestyle, a Jesus who is not asking sinners to change that sinful lifestyle, and a Jesus who approves of the sinner’s lifestyle. However, this is not the case with genuine repentance and godly sorrow, “For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). All that was left was to wait upon the LORD. The people and the king had repented and confessed their sin. The people and the king were calling upon the LORD for mercy. The answer was in the hands of the LORD – “Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish” (3:9).

God Preserves Nineveh (3:10) – Chapter three ends with a statement that, for some, has been an issue of question and contention – “then *God relented* concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it”. How can a God who does not change change His mind? Did (and does) God truly “relent” (or “repent” as in KJV, ASV)? In order to address these questions it is important to consider them from both human and divine perspectives.

The Human Perspective – From the perspective of the Ninevites “God relented” or changed His mind based on the actions of the people of Nineveh (cf. “... the Lord will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you” – Jeremiah 26:13). From a human perspective it seems as though God changes His mind in response to human actions and decisions. The Ninevites were “unaware” of their standing before God (wicked and condemned). Jonah, through his preaching, makes them aware of their condition and the coming judgment. The Ninevites believe in the preached message and call upon God for mercy and then wait to see how God “responds” to their repentance. When the fortieth day passes without any judgment, the Ninevites realize that God had “relented” and held back His divine wrath. From the perspective of the Ninevites, God had “relented” or “changed His mind” concerning His judgment upon them. This is the case with all humans when they are confronted with the gospel message and they repent and believe. Of course the promise in Scripture is that all who call upon the name of Christ will be saved so there is no waiting period to see if God has “relented”.

The Divine Perspective – In both the Old and New Testaments we find passages that present a much different picture of God (“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent” – Numbers 23:19; “...with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” – James 1:17). In both examples, it is stated that God does not change His mind or vary in His character (the doctrine of immutability). This understanding is also based on the doctrine of the omniscience of God. If God never changes and knew the Ninevites would repent and believe, then how could He “relent”? That question is answered when understanding the use of anthropomorphisms (speaking in human terms).

“Some people think God changed His mind. God can’t change His mind because God can’t change. It looks like God said and then He said another. Yet Scripture teaches we serve a God who is immutable. He cannot change”

Eric. C. Redmond

Anthropomorphism is a compound Greek term – *anthropos* – “man” and *morphe*, “form”. When God uses anthropomorphic terms He describes Himself by attributing human characteristics to Himself. Passages like those which describe His “face” (Leviticus 20:6; Numbers 6:25); His “hand” (Exodus 7:5; Isaiah 23:11); and His “arm” (Psalm 89:10) are not to be taken literally (as God is spirit and not physical). In addition to attributing physical traits to God, there are examples of attributing emotional traits such as grief (Genesis 6:6), pity (Judges 2:18), jealousy (Exodus 20:5), and relenting or repenting (Jonah 3:10; Exodus 32:14).

God communicates with humans by using terms that humans are able to understand. God uses examples (such as metaphors, similes, parables) that demonstrate a truth about His divine nature, actions, desires, attributes, salvation, judgment, etc. By proclaiming a message of impending judgment to Nineveh, God sent a message stating His displeasure with the people, His plan to bring judgment upon them, and moved them to a place of humility and repentance. He presented this in a way that the people in Nineveh would understand.

God does not exist in time as do humans but God does interact with people in time. During His interactions with mankind, in the frame of human time, God uses phrases and terminology understood by humans which specifically reference time as we know and perceive it even though He Himself exists outside of time and sees the totality of time as complete before His eyes. In this way, God speaks about the past, present, and future as He relates to mankind. Though He ultimately knew He would “relent”, the presentation of the message to Nineveh was one of speaking in the present (their present condition was condemned by God), future (judgment is coming in forty days), and past (God “relented” as written and retold in the account of Jonah).

In Application – Nineveh demonstrated some key elements of salvation: Hearing (listening), believing (faith), and acting (repentance) upon the Word of God which is the gospel. Without any one of these there is no salvation.

“But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!’” (Romans 10:8-15).

Jonah was chosen and called by God to be the beautiful feet who took the message of salvation to Nineveh. We have that same calling today. To take the gospel to those who are lost and await judgment.

“When the Scriptures speak of God repenting (in view of Num 23:19), it is the language of appearance; the language of accommodation; from the viewpoint of man. The Ninevites felt there was the possibility of God’s mercy without any specific assurance for encouragement, therefore the words *who knoweth*”

Charles L. Feinberg