

The Judgment of Nineveh
Jonah 3:1–10
April 30, 2023

Asking “why” is not *always*, but it is *often*, a good and helpful question. Why? Because the answer to that question often gets us to the essence of the matter. Rather than skimming along the surface of an issue, we might ask, “*Why* do I feel this way? *Why* do I think this way? *Why* did I do that?”

“Why” is a good question for self-examination. In fact, it’s a good question for all manner of things, including interpreting an author. Why did they choose this particular word? Why does this chapter follow that one? Or, maybe the most significant *why*, “Why did you write this book?”

That’s a good question to ask the author of Jonah. We know the broad strokes of the story. After the first week, none of you were on pins and needles wondering what would happen after Jonah was thrown in. Today’s text in particular is so straight-forward that I doubt I’ll say much of anything you don’t already know.

So, with that in mind, maybe it’s worth reading the story with that question hovering over the narrative. Why is this here? Why did God inspire this narrative?

1. Jonah Repents (vv. 1–3a)

Verse 1: **Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.”**

Sound familiar? Verse 1 of chapter 1 read like this: **The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it.”** It’s nearly word-for-word.¹ While there’s a slight distinction we’ll soon see, the essence of the charge is the same: Jonah is to arise and go to Nineveh.

This is not, “Go across the street and share God’s truth with your mild-mannered neighbor.” Nineveh had a reputation. They were known for viciously opposing all that God’s people stood for. By “viciously,” we mean the palaces of their rulers were decorated with their stomach-turning conquests.² So, to get *some* of Jonah’s flight to Spain in chapter 1, we might think of Nineveh as the kind of place where foreigners “disappear.” Further, the Ninevites attached a religious element to their imperial quest. Radicalized, the red carpet would not be rolled out for Israel’s prophet. Jonah knew that. That’s part of the reason he’d fled.

Nonetheless, the charge—the **word of the Lord**—comes to him a second time. Though the charge is quite similar, there are slight differences. For example, back in chapter 1 the Lord told Jonah to **Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it (1:2)**. Here in chapter 3 the Lord told Jonah to **Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it**.

What was Jonah to proclaim? Verse 2 continues: **the proclamation which I am going to tell you**. As prophets did, Jonah was to go-between God and humanity. What Jonah heard—whatever proclamation the Lord told Jonah—he was to then proclaim to *Nineveh*.

Remember the command and response from chapter 1? **“Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.” But Jonah rose up to flee**. Now hear the command in chapter 3:2 and what follows it: **Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.** So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. This book highlights the contrast. And it’s stark. Jonah heard God and ran the other direction. Then, he heard God and turned toward Him.

¹ Desmond Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, TOTC, 130.

² See Daniel Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God*, 64–66.

He did this even though Nineveh would've been more terrifying than we can probably imagine. The Lord's command challenged Jonah. The Scriptures do this. We read and receive what we might call "hard" words. If we don't find the Old and New Testament challenging us in that way, it's likely we're not reading it carefully, or humbly. For example, one of the hardest words in the New Testament is "forgive." If only Jesus had said we only had to do that a certain number of times, say up to seven? But He didn't (Matthew 18:22). Further, the New Testament talks about our forgiveness being a reflection *of* and motivated *by* His (Ephesians 4:32). That's a challenging command. There are *other* hard words—words that cut against our proclivity—concerning our relationships within the family, for another example. There are hard words concerning our responsibility as God's people toward a broken world.

To compound the problem, when confronted with the word "forgive," the world's going to say, and your heart might echo, instead, "Vengeance is mine." Or when confronted with what the Word says about how a husband ought to treat his wife, or how a wife ought to relate to her husband, or a child to mom or dad, the world's going to say, and our heart very well might echo, "You don't have to place their needs above your own." Sometimes the hard word is "forgive." Sometimes it's "lead sacrificially." Sometimes it's "honor." Sometimes it's "die to self." Sometimes it's "go to the nations." Sometimes it's "go to your neighbor."

And we often want to run to Tarshish instead. Jonah had received a *hard* word, a command that he did not immediately *want* to do. Yet, he lived—at least in *this* moment—**according to the word of the Lord**. Jonah repents.

As God spoke to Jonah—in fact, in *more* clarity— He's spoken to us.³ The revelation of God put on flesh. Of course, repentance isn't merely turning *from* sin, it's turning *to* Him. So, will we live **according to the word of the Lord**?⁴

2. Nineveh Repents (vv. 3b–9)

Verse 3 continues: **Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk.** I mentioned earlier that this passage is fairly straightforward. There might not be much you don't already know. However, verse 3 includes something worth pointing out. In both the ESV and the CSB translations, there is a marginal reading, "In Hebrew *a great city to God*." The reason that footnote is there is because the word *Elohim* is in the original.⁵ Though some have decided to translate that as a superlative—as in **an exceedingly great city**—many believe it also conveys something of the Lord's heart toward Nineveh.⁶

The "why" question might be raised here. Of all the places Lord, why *Nineveh*? Why are you sending Jonah *there*? Had they shown love or faithfulness to You? Is that why You pursued them? Did they love You first? Has anyone? As we know, that's never stopped Him. His message via His messenger arrives in their streets.

Consider all the buildup thus far—the boat, the sailors, the sea monster. Finally, in verse 4, Jonah's in Nineveh. And what do we get once he's there? We get one verse: **Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk.** If Nineveh was three days' walk, one day's walk likely means Jonah did not hesitate once he was within the city limits.⁷ He didn't wait. He didn't cower in fear.

³ Via the New Testament and its revelation of His Son.

⁴ As I've quoted before, "The joy of sin is brief, but the sorrow it produces lasts. The sorrow of repentance is brief, but the joy it produces lasts."

⁵ See Daily Dose of Hebrew here: <https://dailydoseofhebrew.com/jonah-3/>

⁶ Alexander, 131; Timmer, 95. That doesn't mean it wasn't *also* large. The three days' walk comment indicates that.

⁷ Alexander, 133.

Verse 4: **Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."**

Is that *all* he said? Maybe. Maybe it was a summary of his main theme, not unlike the baptistic prophet John who would soon say, **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand** (Matthew 3:2).⁸ Nonetheless—vital to understanding the book of Jonah—the author downplays the sermon.⁹ Rhetorically, it's a far cry from Peter at Pentecost, Stephen in Acts 7, or the Sermon the Mount. And yet, Jonah spoke the message he'd been told to proclaim. Recall verse 2: **Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.** The word of the Lord came to Jonah. He proclaimed it.

Verse 4b: **He cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."** He gives 40 days, which is a significant number throughout the Scriptures (Noah, Moses, Elijah, Jesus's temptation, the days between Christ's resurrection and ascension). 40 days is a significant number.

What's the significance *here*? Would God have been just to *Sodom and Gomorrah* Nineveh *immediately*? He could've wiped it off the face of the earth that very day, with unimpeachable justice. He knew their wickedness. It had come up before Him (1:3). And yet, God shows Nineveh His patience,¹⁰ the same patience God revealed in Romans 2:4: **Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?**

Though He's patient, the Ninevites aren't given *forever* to respond.¹¹ After 40 days, Nineveh would be **overthrown**. That's a decidedly frightening term, having been used to describe Sodom and Gomorrah more than once.¹² But, importantly, to be overthrown can also mean to be "turned around" or "transformed."¹³ The context helps us sort through the meaning.¹⁴ Nonetheless, 40 days after Jonah spoke, the Lord would act upon their city.

The prophet delivered the message He'd been given. His message isn't portrayed with flowery terms. It's flourish is downplayed. He simply announces upcoming judgment.

And yet, verse 5: **Then the people of Nineveh believed in God.** It's the same word used in Genesis 15:6, concerning Abraham's faith: **Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.** It typically means more than merely believing what someone has said; it conveys the idea of trusting the person that said it.¹⁵ The Ninevites—those calloused, vicious, pagans Jonah didn't even want to preach to—believed.

And as we saw in James, saving faith isn't invisible; it's seen. Here it's visible in what we might call Godly sorrow. Note verse 5: **Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.** In the ancient world, fasting and sackcloth would be a common way to express grief and penitence.¹⁶ The Ninevites didn't separate saving faith and true repentance. Because they're two sides of the same coin. John Murray wrote, "The faith that is unto salvation is a penitent faith, and the repentance that is unto life is a believing repentance."¹⁷

⁸ Timmer, 96.

⁹ Alexander, 133.

¹⁰ Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah*, ZECOT, 133, writes that 40 days is, "the amount of time Nineveh has to respond."

¹¹ Some have indicated that the phrase could be translated, "Forty days until Nineveh is reformed," Youngblood, 134.

¹² Timmer, 98.

¹³ Alexander, 133.

¹⁴ In particular verse 10.

¹⁵ Alexander, 134.

¹⁶ Alexander, 134.

¹⁷ John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied*, 113, quoted in Philip Ryken, *Luke*, REC, 304.

The balance of this sections confirms these former pagans' repentance, from the **greatest to the least of them**. Of those considered "great," note the vivid language of Verse 6: **When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.** This is worth picturing. From a throne, he arose. He laid aside. He covered himself with a symbol of contrition. And then, he sat down on ashes. From a king's seat, he sat in the lowest place, symbolizing his human frailty.¹⁸ The most powerful man in that region became acutely aware of his weakness.

With that posture, he speaks. Verse 7: **He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.**

Again, all the marks of *true* repentance are here. First, we know that repentance is more than *merely* acknowledging sin. Because the act of confession can often be cathartic, even the secular world knows how to "get things off their chest." Scores of religious people have walked out of a booth without walking away from their sin. Repentance is *more than* acknowledging our sin. Secondly, repentance is not *merely* feeling sorry for sin. 2 Corinthians 7 makes a clear distinction between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow.¹⁹ We can feel embarrassment or shame without truly repenting. Repentance is not *mere* confession or *mere* contrition. Third, repentance is not *merely* a change in conduct. It is that, but not *only* that. Repentance is *not* merely confession, *merely* contrition, or *merely* new conduct. Instead, it's all three. It's a *godly* sorrow that leads you to hate your sin and turn away from it.

What marks of repentance do we see in Jonah 3? *Confession, contrition* throughout—accompanied by sackcloth, fasting, and ashes—and new conduct described in verse 8, **that each may turn from his wicked way.** Of course, turning *away* from self and sin also means turning another direction. The king admonished Nineveh in verse 8, **to call on God earnestly.**²⁰ True repentance is a change of mind and heart because we've found and see something—or better, Someone—more valuable. We turn *from* something *to* Someone better.

Have we? Do we need to repent of our supposed "repentance"? Have we turned from self, believing Christ and His Word as better?

Nineveh repented and believed. And they didn't seem to do it to merely escape the consequences for their sin. Hear the submission in verse 9: **Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw his burning anger so that we will not perish.** The king doesn't seem to be presuming. Like the sailors did in chapter 1, the king acknowledges and submits to the God who does as He pleases.²¹ Jonah repents. Nineveh repents.

What does God do?

¹⁸ Alexander, 135.

¹⁹ "Repentance looks ahead in hope and anticipation, whereas regret or remorse only looks backward in shame." Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 125.

²⁰ Our doctrinal statement (Abstract of Principles) defines repentance this way: "Repentance is an evangelical grace, wherein a person being by the Holy Spirit, made sensible of the manifold evil of his (or her) sin, humbles himself (or herself) for it, with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and *self*-abhorrence, with a purpose and endeavor to walk before God so as to please Him in all things."

²¹ Alexander, 136.

3. God Shows Mercy (v. 10)

Verse 10: **When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way.** In case we were wondering whether Nineveh *actually* repented, this verse makes it quite clear. God saw that they turned. So, what did He do? Verse 10 goes on: **then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.** God showed the Ninevites not only His patience, but His mercy.

On the day we conclude Romans in our Bible Study Groups, I couldn't help but think of Romans 10: **How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed?** The Ninevites hadn't called prior. Paul goes on, **How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard?** They hadn't called because, in part, they hadn't heard. Paul goes on, **And how will they hear without a preacher?** They hadn't called because, in part, they hadn't heard. But Jonah went. He went because of the next clause, **How will they preach unless they are sent?** God didn't only show mercy in verse 10 of chapter 3. He was showing mercy long before, sending Jonah to a people He loved.

Conclusion

So, as I said, there's probably nothing groundbreaking about the details of this text. So, we might do well to ask, "*Why* did God want Israel *first*, and us *now*, to read this story?" What is God trying to show us about Himself? What is He trying to show us about ourselves?

For Israel, first, it'd be hard to imagine a story better constructed to overthrow their assumptions that the Gentiles couldn't respond to God's Word.²² Many of the details would've irked those that woke up and thanked God they weren't born Gentiles. The Ninevites were as bad as they came. Jonah barely fulfilled the role of a prophet. Yet, that pagan city turned, **from the greatest to the least.**

That's some of the *why* behind God desiring Israel to hear this story. But that's not all. In Matthew 12, we hear Jesus uncover the essence of the story. On Easter we talked about Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish clearly pointing us to the resurrection of the Christ. That shouldn't be missed. That's central, especially in regard to Jonah 2. But in relation to Jonah 3, recall what *else* Jesus said: **The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it. Because they repented at the preaching of Jonah** (Matthew 12:41).

Again, as we said a few weeks back, Jesus is arguing here from the lesser to the greater. Having reviewed the story in more detail now, we're reminded *just how* pagan the Ninevites were. In Jesus's words, there's some emphasis upon the *they*. *They*, believe it or not—the Ninevites—repented. They repented and believed in Yahweh. It couldn't be stated more clearly than what we studied today.

There's an emphasis—maybe we'd say an incredulity—upon the *they*. And there *also* seems to be something of an emphasis on the preacher. *They* repented at the preaching of *Jonah*—the reluctant prophet—the man who barely eked out a message. *They* repented at the preaching of *Jonah*.

Again, it's an argument from the lesser to the greater. **The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it. Because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And behold, something greater than Jonah is here.**

When we consider what that *Someone* greater said in Matthew 12, we quickly see that much of the *why* behind Jonah 3 is this: if *they* repented, why haven't we?

²² Timmer, 111.