

Reaching Out to Nineveh

An Exegesis of Jonah 3

by Pastor Peter Sternberg

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Introduction

The book of Jonah is rather unique among the Old Testament prophets in its mission focus. That does not mean that other prophets did no evangelism—preaching to unrepentant Israel could often be seen as reaching out to unbelievers who seemingly had little knowledge of God’s Word. But Jonah was sent as a prophet to Gentiles, specifically in this chapter the Assyrians of Nineveh. Even though they were not God’s chosen people, in his love the Lord still called them to repentance.

Jonah is no model missionary. In the context of the book’s four chapters, Jonah’s goes from rejecting his first call so that he could run the other direction (imagine on Call Day being assigned to Miami and then deciding to drive to Anchorage) to getting angry when the Lord forgives the Ninevites and spares them. But he serves for us as an example of how God can use even sinful men for his holy purposes.

There is no exact date for Jonah’s journey to Nineveh. In 2 King 14:25, “Jonah son Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher” is mentioned under the reign of Jeroboam II who reigned from 793 to 753 BC. A date of 780 BC has been accepted as a possible date for his journey (Spaude 32).

It is interesting to note the similarities in pattern between chapter 3 and chapter 1. The opening verses are repeated relating to Jonah’s call as will be noted below. But Jonah’s Gentile mission work, rather unintentionally, began with the crew of his ship. They heard about the Lord from Jonah, and witnessed God’s power in the storm before finally offering prayers, sacrifices and vows to him. Whether Jonah knew it or not, the Lord was preparing him for what lay ahead in Nineveh.

וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-יוֹנָה שֵׁנִית לֵאמֹר: 1

שֵׁנִי : adj – f sg – (ordinal) – second

Translations

v. 1 – And the word of the Lord was to Jonah a second time, saying,

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: (NIV)

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, (ESV)

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: (HCSB)

Commentary

As chapter 3 opens, it returns to chapter 1 with a virtually identical repeating of 1:1 with only the omission of Jonah's heritage ("son of Amittai") and the addition of שְׁנִית ("a second time"). The Lord of free and faithful grace was giving Jonah a second chance after his flight and rescue through the great fish. This was never Jonah's idea, but it was the word of the Lord that called him to such a task.

קוֹם לְךָ אֶל-נִיְנוּהַ הַעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקִרְא אֵלֶיהָ אֶת-
הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ׃

קוֹם & הִלֵּךְ & קִרְא : qal imv 2 sg

הַקְּרִיאָה : 1x : noun – proclamation

דֹּבֵר : qal part m sg

Translations

v. 2 – “Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call to it the proclamation which I am speaking to you.”

² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” (NIV)

² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” (ESV)

² “Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you.” (HCSB)

Commentary

The first half of this verse is identical to 1:2. But then there is a change in preposition from עָלֶיהָ to אֵלֶיהָ (calling “against” vs. calling “to”). In chapter 1 the Lord had given an explanation for the preaching, “because their wickedness has come up before me.” Here in chapter 3 the focus is on Jonah. He is to preach only what the Lord speaks to him. Is this perhaps an extra reminder for Jonah after his open rebellion to his first call? His mission was not about what he wanted for Nineveh, but about what the Lord wanted for Nineveh. Nineveh as “the great city” will be addressed under verse 3.

וַיִּקַּם יוֹנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־נִינְוֵה כַּדְּבַר יְהוָה וְנִינְוֵה הִיא עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לֵאלֹהִים מֵהֶלֶךְ שְׁלֹשׁ יָמִים³

הֵלֶךְ & קוּם : qal vc-impf 3 sg

הִיא : qal pf 3 f sg

מֵהֶלֶךְ : 5x : noun – m sg cs – walk, journey

שְׁלֹשׁ : noun – m cs – three

JM 159f – “A verbal clause with a waw forms a sort of parenthesis (now Nineveh was an enormous city)”

Translations

v. 3 – And Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord, and Nineveh was a great city to God, a walk of three days.

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important [*large*] city—a visit required three days [*it took three days to go through it*]. (NIV 84) [*NIV 11*]

³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. (ESV)

³ So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the LORD’s command. Now Nineveh was an extremely large city, a three-day walk. (HCSB)

Commentary

This time Jonah did as the Lord commanded and traveled to Nineveh. It would have been a trip of 500-600 miles over the course of 25-45 days. Imagine Jonah’s mindset over the course of such a trip. He would have had a long time to consider his past actions as well as wonder how circumstances would unfold when he arrived.

The city of Nineveh was located on east bank of the Tigris River (today in northern Iraq, across the river from the city of Mosul). It served as the capital for the Assyrian Empire. Although whether it was the capital at the time of Jonah is up for debate. Prof. Gawrisch in a 1992 WLQ issue cited an article by Jay Lemanski in the *Concordia Journal*. Lemanski states that Sennacherib did not move the seat of his government to Nineveh until 704 BC. If Jonah’s journey is dated around 780 BC and Assyria is known to have been weak during the reign of its kings of that time, then “it is quite possible that Nineveh at the time of Jonah’s ministry was an independent or semi-independent city-state with its own ruler” (Lemanski). This could help to explain why the king in verse 6 is referred to as “the king of Nineveh” and why Assyria is not mentioned throughout the book of Jonah.

Three times in the book of Jonah (1:2, 3:2, 3:3) Nineveh is referred to as a “great city.” Such a description is only used two other times in the Old Testament, once for Jerusalem (Jer 22:8) and once for Gibeon (Josh 10:2). There were many physical details that would warrant labeling Nineveh as a great city. Its population at Jonah’s time is estimated at 500,000 (taking the 120,000 as children in 4:11). Its walls at one point were 100 feet high and broad enough to drive three chariots abreast (Spaude 66). But here it is described as a “great city to God.” Many translators take this as a superlative construction (note the translations above: “very, exceedingly, extremely”). But this would be the only time in the Old Testament such a construction is used with a prepositional phrase. All other times involve a construct form. Lessing sees this instead as a circumlocution for a genitive expressing possession, “a great city belonging to God” (279). This would also be seen in Laetsch’s thoughts on this verse. Nineveh was “great in God’s eyes, an object of living concern for Him. Even though Jonah saw only its wickedness when he came there, it was for God a great city, a city whose eternal welfare He sought” (234).

Critics will take the opportunity here with the perfect form of הָיָה (“was a great city”) to point to a late authorship of Jonah when Nineveh was no longer great. But “the perfect often denotes a past action or state which still continues at the speaker’s time” (Laetsch 233), citing GKC 106g.

One of major exegetical discussion of this chapter surrounds the further description of Nineveh as “a walk of three days.” The term itself, מַהְלָךְ, is used elsewhere to describe a ten cubit walk or passageway in the temple (Ezek 42:4), the journey of Nehemiah from Babylon to Jerusalem (Neh 2:6), and a place to stand or walk (Zec 3:7). As Laetsch notes, “the term says nothing about the direction of the journey, whether straight ahead, or zig-zagging. The context alone can give this information” (233). There have been many interpretations of this description. Some have thought this to be the time needed to walk from one end of the city to the other or around the perimeter. But with archaeology revealing an area of 1,850 acres with three miles at the widest part and a circumference of just over seven miles, three days would be too long for those distances. Some have suggested a “greater Nineveh” theory, with the surrounding towns and fields included, citing Genesis 10:11,12 which mentions Nimrod building Nineveh and the surrounding cities of Assyria. But in Jonah, only Nineveh is mentioned and in 4:5 Jonah goes outside the city to wait, which would be harder to do with a greater Nineveh. Another idea is the “diplomatic process” theory based on the oriental practice of hospitality. The first day is for the arrival, the second day for the business and the third day for the departure. But in verse 4 Jonah will already begin his preaching on the first day. Best is the idea alluded to by Laetsch’s “zig-zagging.” It would take Jonah three days to go throughout the streets and neighborhoods of the city to share the word of the Lord.

וַיֵּחַל יוֹנָה לְבוֹא בְעִיר מִהַלְךְ יוֹם אֶחָד וַיִּקְרָא⁴
וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוָה נִהְפָּכֶת:

חָלַל : hif vc-impf 3 m sg – to begin

בּוֹא : qal inf cs

מִהַלְךְ : 5x : noun – m sg cs – walk, journey

עוֹד : adv – still, yet, again

אַרְבָּעִים : noun – pl – forty

הִפָּךְ : nif part f sg – to be overturned, overthrown (BDB 2d)

Translations

v. 4 – And Jonah began to go into the city, a walk of one day, and he called and he said, “Still forty days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” (NIV 84)

⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” (NIV 11)

⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (ESV)

⁴ Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, “In 40 days Nineveh will be demolished!” (HCSB)

Commentary

As Jonah began his preaching on that first day in Nineveh, his message was simply shared with those five Hebrew words. Some have said (Luther, Spaude) that these words served as a summary of Jonah’s message as he gave a fuller explanation throughout his preaching. Others have said (Laetsch, Lessing) that these words were his entire sermon because of the command of 3:2 to speak the message that the Lord would give him and Jonah’s seeming reluctance to see Nineveh saved. Either side is defensible. While some see these five words as strictly law, there is gospel as well – the forty days serve as a time of grace for Nineveh to repent. The last word, הִפָּךְ, could even signify that possibility. It can mean to overthrow or to change. Would the city face destruction or would there be a change of their hearts and lives?

5 וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ אַנְשֵׁי נִנְוָה בַּאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרְאוּ צוֹם וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ
 שָׂקִים מִגְדוֹלָם וְעַד־קִטְנָם:

אָמַן : hif vc-impf 3 mpl – to trust in, believe in (w/ב of person)

צוֹם : noun – fast

לְבַשׁ : qal vc-impf 3 mpl – to put on (a garment), wear

גְּדוֹל : adj – m sg w/3 m pl sf

קָטָן : adj – m sg w/3 m pl sf – small, insignificant

GKC 133g & JM 141j – The superlative can be expressed with an adjective made determinate by a suffix

Translations

v. 5 – “And the men of Nineveh believed in God and they called a fast and they put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.”

⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast [*A fast was proclaimed*], and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. (NIV 84) [*NIV 11*]

⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. (ESV)

⁵ The men of Nineveh believed in God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least. (HCSB)

Commentary

Whatever Jonah’s specific proclamation was to the people, the Holy Spirit used it to work a miracle in the hearts of the Ninevites. Critics have said that this could not have been a full conversion on their part, but simply a reaction of fear to the promised destruction.

But the same hifil form of אָמַן is used in Genesis 15:6 for Abraham’s belief that is credited to him as righteousness. Their faith showed itself through their actions of fasting and putting on sackcloth. Critics have said that such a mass conversion on the part of the city, from the greatest to the least, would also be impossible. But Jonah’s message spread throughout the city and nothing is impossible with God as he works through his Word. This may not have meant that everyone held on to their belief in the long term. But there is little question of a genuine repentance as Jesus held up the example of the Ninevites who repented at the preaching of Jonah (Mt 12:41, Lk 11:32).

וַיִּגַע הַדְּבָר אֶל־מֶלֶךְ נִינְוָה וַיִּקָּם מִכִּסְאוֹ וַיַּעֲבֵר
 אֶדְרָתוֹ מֵעָלָיו וַיִּכַּס שֵׁק וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל־הָאֵפֶר:

נִגַּע : qal vc-impf 3 ms – to touch, reach

קוּם : qal vc-impf 3 ms

כִּסֵּא : noun – m sg cs w/3 m sg sf

עֲבַר : hif vc-impf 3 ms – to cause to pass away, put off

אֶדְרָת : 12x : noun – f sg cs w/3 m sg sf – mantle, cloak

כִּסָּה : piel vc-impf 3 m sg – to cover (here reflex. w/acc. of garment, BDB Piel #1)

שֵׁק : noun – sackcloth

יָשַׁב : qal vc-impf 3 ms – to sit

אֵפֶר : noun – ashes

Translations

v. 6 – And the word reached the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne and he put off his cloak from upon him and he covered himself with sackcloth and he sat on the ashes.

⁶ When the news [*Jonah's warning*] reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. (NIV 84) [NIV 11]

⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. (ESV)

⁶ When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. (HCSB)

Commentary

The word of the Lord reached even to the king of Nineveh. It was seemingly not through direct contact with Jonah, but the message spread by word of mouth throughout the city. It worked repentance in the heart of this king which showed itself in his actions involving sackcloth and ashes. As to why he is called the king of Nineveh, under v. 3 it was suggested that he was local king under a weaker Assyrian king. It could also have simply been another title as Ahab was called the king of Samaria (1 Ki 21:1) and the king of Aram was called the king of Damascus (2 Chr 24:23).

7 וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִינְוָה מִטַּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וּגְדֹלָיו לֵאמֹר
הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבֶּקֶר וְהַצֹּאן אַל-יִטְעֲמוּ מֵאֹמָה
אַל-יִרְעוּ וּמִים אַל-יִשְׁתּוּ:

זַעַק : hif vc-impf 3 ms – to cry out; + ויאמר = to have proclamation made (BDB Hif #3)

טַעַם : noun – decision, decree (BDB – late Aramaism; Laetsch – Assyr.an-Babylonian term)

גְּדֹל : adj – m pl cs w/3 m sg sf

טַעַם : qal impf 3 m pl (jussive) – to taste

מֵאֹמָה : indef pron – anything

רָעָה : qal impf 3 m pl (jussive) – to graze

שָׁתָה : qal impf 3 m pl (jussive) – to drink

Translations

v. 7 – And he made a proclamation in Nineveh, “From the decree of the king and his great ones saying: both man and beast, both cattle and flock, do not let them taste anything, do not let them graze and do not let them drink water.”

⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. (NIV 84)

⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. (NIV 11)

⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, (ESV)

⁷ Then he issued a decree in Nineveh: By order of the king and his nobles: No man or beast, herd or flock, is to taste anything at all. They must not eat or drink water. (HCSB)

8 וַיִּתְכַסּוּ שִׁקִּים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל-אֱלֹהִים
 בְּחִזְקָה וַיָּשׁוּבוּ אִישׁ מִדְרָכּוֹ הַרְעָה וּמִן-הַחֲמָס אֲשֶׁר
 בְּכַפֵּיהֶם:

כָּסָה : hitpael vc-impf (jussive) – to cover oneself

J-M 128c – “The second object of a doubly transitive verb remains in the accusative when the verb is used passively” (or in this case reflexively).

קָרָא : qal vc-impf (jussive)

חִזְקָה : 6x : noun f sg – strength, force, violence

שׁוּב : qal vc-impf 3 m sg (jussive)

חָמָס : noun m sg – violence

כַּף : noun f dual cs w/3 m pl sf – hollow, palm of hand

Translations

v. 8 – “And let man and beast cover themselves with sackcloth and let them call to God with strength and let each turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in their hands.”

⁸ But let man and beast [*people and animals*] be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. (NIV 84) [*NIV 11*]

⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. (ESV)

⁸ Furthermore, both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth, and everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from the violence he is doing.

Commentary

The king took Jonah’s message seriously and along with his nobles issued a decree to spread the news of the repentance that had already begun in verse 5. Everyone was to repent of their evil ways and violence. The Assyrians were known for their violence, for example it was their practice to impale enemies on large poles implanted in ground (Lessing 315).

It is interesting that the king’s decree extended even to their animals. Of course the Lord was not concerned about the repentance of animals, that they should fast and be covered in sackcloth. But it was a practice not unheard of in the ancient world (Laetsch 235). Herodotus described the Persians who mourned the loss of an army officer by cutting

off not only their own hair but also that of their horses. In the apocryphal book of Judith (4:10,12) the Jews placed sackcloth on their cattle and on the altar (consider our own practices on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday). For the Ninevites such a practice probably reflected the seriousness and extent of their repentance.

9 מִי־יֹדֵעַ יִשׁוּב וְנַחַם הָאֱלֹהִים וְשׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אָפוֹ וְלֹא
נֶאֱבַד:

יֹדֵעַ : qal part m sg

יִשׁוּב : qal impf 3 m sg & qal vc-perf 3 ms

נַחַם : nif vc-perf – to be sorry, have compassion

חֲרוֹן : noun – m sg cs – (burning) of anger

אָף : noun – m sg cs w/3 ms sf – nose (BDB w/prev “fierceness of anger”)

נֶאֱבַד : qal impf 1 pl – to perish

Translations

v. 9 – “Who is knowing, God will turn and have compassion, and will turn from the fierceness of his anger (lit. burning of his nose) and we will not perish.”

⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” (NIV)

⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” (ESV)

⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent; He may turn from His burning anger so that we will not perish. (HCSB)

Commentary

“The syntactical position of ‘Who knows?’ (מִי־יֹדֵעַ) corresponds with its theological function” (Lessing 315). It comes after their repentance but before God’s response. The king was not trying to force God’s hand by this edict of repentance. He knew God’s opinion of their evil and violence—his burning, fierce anger. No one but God knew if he would relent and have compassion on the Ninevites or if he would destroy them. The same two words (מִי־יֹדֵעַ) were used by King David (2 Sa 12:22) to describe his thought process when he was still hoping that God would spare his child with Bathsheba. The same four words (מִי־יֹדֵעַ יִשׁוּב וְנַחַם) were used by the prophet Joel in his call to God’s people for repentance.

10 וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שׁוּבוּ מִדֶּרֶכָם

הֲרַעָה וַיִּנָּחֵם אֱלֹהִים עַל־הֲרַעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר

לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

רָאָה : qal vc-impf 3 ms

מַעֲשֵׂה : noun – m pl cs w/3 m pl sf – deed, work

שׁוּבוּ : qal pf 3 pl

נָחַם : nif vc-impf 3 m sg

דִּבֶּר : piel pf 3 m sg

עָשָׂה : qal inf cs

Translations

v. 10 – And God saw their deeds for they turned from their evil way and God had compassion for the evil which he said to do to them and he did not.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion [*relented*] and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (NIV 84) [NIV 11]

¹⁰ 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. (ESV)

¹⁰ Then God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster He had threatened to do to them. And He did not do it. (HCSB)

Commentary

A brief comment on רָעָה (the first one, an adjective, the second, a noun): their evil, from which they turned, averted the evil that God would have brought on them. God's punishment is not evil of itself but is only in response to the evil that is perpetrated.

The bigger discussion surrounding verses 9 & 10 involves the meaning of the nifal verb נָחַם. There are two basic verb meanings: to be sorry and to comfort. Being sorry has two different shadings: to be sorry for someone and have compassion or to be sorry and repent. BDB lists 3:10 under this second meaning, being sorry for ill done to others. The King James Version used “repent” as a translation for these verses which leads to some confusion. Some then question, did God change his mind because he made a mistake? The

idea of God changing his mind would be anthropomorphic in nature because he does not operate like us. In his omniscience, God always knew the end result of Jonah's preaching. But his stated plan to the Ninevites changed in view of their deeds. They repented and so he chose not to destroy them. It is better that "he had compassion" than that "he repented." The last two words (וְלֹא עָשָׂה) are not an admission of fault on God's part, but are pure gospel—he did not do it because of his grace and compassion.

Conclusion

Imagine going back home tomorrow to your ministry setting with a plan to go out to everyone in your area to preach a message of forty more days, a plan that has the guaranteed results of Jonah—everyone from the greatest to the least would turn from their evil ways and believe in the true God. We would jump at the chance to see such a change in our home communities!

But there is no such guarantee when it comes to results of our preaching. There will always be those who continue on in their sinful ways, waiting for the day when they will be overturned. We can become discouraged and like Jonah prefer to run away from the Lord's call. But there is still a guarantee we have—the word of the Lord works! In spite of our sinful weaknesses and human limitations, as the message is shared it will bring about a change in people's lives that shows itself in the fruits of repentance. The Lord of grace and compassion is still searching for his children and we are privileged to be used by him for this great task of bringing them the word of the Lord.

Resource Abbreviations

Hebrew

BDB – Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon

GKC – Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley Grammar

JM – Joüon-Muraoka Grammar

Translations

NIV – New International Version

ESV – English Standard Version

HCSB – Holman Christian Standard Bible

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