

The Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Nineveh Repents at the Word of God

Jonah 3:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson holds together two truths that the modern mind likes to separate: God's justice and God's mercy. God really does threaten judgment ("Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown"), and He really does relent toward those who truly repent. Teach that God's relenting is not divine fickleness or a denial of His justice; it is the consistent character of a God who declares that if a wicked nation turns, He will not bring the threatened disaster (Jeremiah 18:7–8). His mercy and His justice meet at the point of repentance.

Guard against two errors. First, do not let God's mercy to Nineveh collapse into the idea that judgment is never real or final; Jesus Himself warns that the men of Nineveh will rise in judgment against those who refuse to repent (Luke 11:32), and the New Testament affirms a coming final judgment (Acts 17:30–31). Second, do not present repentance as a human work that earns forgiveness; it is the God-given turning that He graciously receives. Keep both the seriousness of sin and the readiness of God's mercy in full view.

This passage forms the student as much as it informs. It calls us to obey even after failure, to repent genuinely and not just feel sorry, to humble ourselves as the king did, and to trust that God truly receives those who turn. Teach toward real, turning repentance and toward confidence in the mercy of God.

Question 1

Student Question:

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time" with the same commission as before (3:1–2). What does it reveal about God's character that He recommissions a prophet who had run from Him, and how does this shape our understanding of grace and second chances?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the sheer grace of verse 1: "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time." God does not abandon His failed prophet; He recommissions him with the identical assignment. The God of the second chance is on full display before Jonah preaches a word.

Help the class feel the weight of this for their own lives. Many believers carry the quiet conviction that one big failure has permanently disqualified them from usefulness to God. Jonah says otherwise. God's calling is not a one-time offer revoked at the first failure; His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22–23).

Note that grace is not the same as the absence of consequences. Jonah went through the storm and the fish; there was real discipline. Yet on the far side of discipline stood not rejection but recommissioning. God disciplines those He loves precisely so He can use them again (Hebrews 12:6, 10–11).

Point to New Testament parallels: Peter, who denied Christ three times and was restored and recommissioned to feed the sheep (John 21:15–17); Mark, who deserted Paul and later became useful again (2 Timothy 4:11). The pattern of God recalling failures runs straight through Scripture into the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is the God of the second chance (Jonah 3:1).
- Past failure does not permanently disqualify us from usefulness.
- God's mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22–23).
- Grace coexists with real discipline and consequences.
- Scripture repeatedly shows God recommissioning those who failed (John 21:15–17).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the second call to Jonah tell us about how God treats our failures?
- Why do believers so often feel permanently disqualified by failure?
- How does God's discipline actually prepare us for renewed usefulness?

Question 2

Student Question:

This time “Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord” (3:3). Where in your life is God calling you to a delayed obedience, something He has already made clear that you have not yet done?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes Jonah's obedience (“Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord”) and asks about our own delayed obedience. The contrast with chapter 1 is the point: same call, opposite response. The difference is a chastened, willing heart.

Help the class name areas of delayed obedience. Most of us are not flatly refusing God; we are postponing. There is a reconciliation we know we should pursue, a habit we know we should drop, a step of service or generosity we have been meaning to take. Delayed obedience is still disobedience until it is done.

Address the cost of delay. Jonah's first delay cost a storm, a near-drowning, and three days in the deep. Our postponed obedience often costs us peace, spiritual momentum, and sometimes harm to others, while the thing we are avoiding rarely gets easier with time.

Move toward a concrete next step. Obedience becomes real when it is specific and scheduled. Invite each person to name one delayed obedience and the first action they will take this week to begin doing it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Delayed obedience is still disobedience until acted upon.
- A chastened heart turns same-call resistance into same-call obedience.
- Postponing what God has made clear has real costs.
- The thing we avoid rarely gets easier with delay.
- Obedience becomes real when it is specific and scheduled.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to a delayed obedience right now?
- What has delay cost you in an area where you knew the right thing to do?
- What is one specific step you can take this week to begin obeying?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jonah's entire sermon was, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4), with no mercy explicitly promised, yet the city repented. What does this teach us about the power of God's word itself, even through a flawed and reluctant messenger?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 4 records the shortest, plainest sermon imaginable: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." No eloquence, no explicit offer of mercy, no rhetorical polish, and Jonah himself was a reluctant, resentful preacher. Yet the city believed God. The power was not in the messenger but in the message.

Teach the inherent power of God's word. Isaiah 55:11 says God's word does not return empty but accomplishes His purpose. Romans 1:16 calls the gospel the power of God for salvation. The effectiveness of God's word does not depend on the polish or even the enthusiasm of the one who carries it.

Offer encouragement to ordinary believers. We often excuse our silence by saying we are not gifted speakers. Jonah was a worse than ordinary messenger, and God used his eight words to turn a city. Faithfulness to speak God's truth matters more than eloquence in delivering it.

Add a sober note. The same word that brings life when received brings judgment when rejected. The Ninevites believed; Israel often did not. The word is powerful either way, which is why how we respond to it matters so much (the next question).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The power is in God's word, not in the messenger (Isaiah 55:11).
- God uses even reluctant and flawed messengers.
- Eloquence is not required; faithfulness to speak is.
- The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16).
- God's word brings life to those who receive it and judgment to those who reject it.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Nineveh's response teach about where the power of preaching really lies?
- How does this free ordinary believers to speak God's truth?
- Why does our response to God's word matter so much?

Question 4

Student Question:

The Ninevites' repentance was not just words; they fasted, put on sackcloth, and "turned from their evil way" (3:5, 8, 10). How does true repentance go beyond feeling sorry to actually turning, and where might that distinction matter in your own life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the nature of true repentance. The Ninevites did not merely feel bad; they fasted, put on sackcloth, and crucially "turned from their evil way" (3:8, 10). Repentance in Scripture is fundamentally a turning, a change of direction, not merely a change of mood.

Help the class distinguish worldly sorrow from godly repentance. Paul says godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation, while worldly grief merely produces regret (2 Corinthians 7:10). One feels bad and changes; the other feels bad and continues. Many of us mistake feeling guilty for actually repenting.

Make it concrete. True repentance shows up in changed behavior: the gossip stops gossiping, the dishonest person makes things right, the angry person seeks reconciliation. Without a turning, sorrow is just emotion that leaves the life unchanged.

Keep grace in view. Repentance is not a meritorious work that twists God's arm; it is the God-enabled turning that He graciously receives. We turn because He has shown us our sin and offered mercy, not to earn a mercy He withholds until we perform.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance is fundamentally a turning, not merely a feeling.
- Godly grief produces change; worldly grief produces only regret (2 Corinthians 7:10).
- True repentance shows in changed behavior.
- Feeling guilty is not the same as repenting.
- Repentance is the God-enabled turning He graciously receives.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between feeling sorry and truly repenting?
- Where might God be calling you to turn, not just to feel bad?
- How does genuine repentance show up in changed behavior?

Question 5

Student Question:

The king of Nineveh rose from his throne, removed his robe, sat in ashes, and led the whole city in repentance (3:6–7). What does it tell us about genuine humility before God that even the most powerful man in the city would humble himself this way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 6–7 spotlight the king of Nineveh, the most powerful man in the city, rising from his throne, removing his royal robe, covering himself with sackcloth, and sitting in ashes. He then leads the entire city in repentance. Power did not insulate him from humbling himself before God; it gave him a platform to lead in it.

Teach the connection between greatness and humility before God. The higher a person's position, the harder it often is to admit need and to bow. Pride clings to thrones. The king's willingness to step down from his throne, literally and figuratively, is a striking picture of true humility.

Apply it to every form of status the class holds: position at work, standing in the family, reputation, age, even spiritual seniority. None of these exempt us from the call to humble ourselves under God's hand (1 Peter 5:6); all of them make that humbling more visible and influential when it comes.

Point ahead to Christ, the King who humbled Himself far beyond any earthly monarch, leaving His throne and taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6–8). The Ninevite king's descent from his throne is a faint echo of the One who came down from heaven for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine humility before God is required of the powerful as much as the lowly.

- Position can make pride harder to surrender.
- Leaders who humble themselves influence others toward God.
- We are all called to humble ourselves under God's hand (1 Peter 5:6).
- Christ is the King who humbled Himself supremely (Philippians 2:6–8).

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it often harder for the powerful to humble themselves before God?
- What forms of status in your life make humility harder?
- How does the king's descent from his throne point to Christ?

Question 6

Student Question:

The Ninevites repented at the preaching of an outsider, while God's own people often resisted their prophets. Are there places where you have grown so familiar with God's warnings that they no longer move you? How might you recover a tender, responsive heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on the painful contrast running beneath the chapter: pagan Nineveh repented at one sermon from an outsider, while God's own people Israel often resisted prophet after prophet. Jesus made the same point: the men of Nineveh will rise in judgment against a generation that had far more light and would not turn (Luke 11:32).

Help the class examine the danger of familiarity. Those who hear God's word constantly can grow numb to it. Warnings that once pierced us become background noise. Long exposure without response can callous a heart more than ignorance ever could.

Name the symptoms gently: sermons that no longer move us, sins we have made peace with, convictions we have learned to silence. The Ninevites had a tender, responsive heart with little light; we can have a hardened heart with much light. That should sober every long-time believer.

Point toward recovery. A tender heart is restored through honest confession, fresh attention to God's word, and prayer like David's, "Create in me a clean heart" (Psalm 51:10). God can soften what has grown hard when we ask Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Familiarity with God's word can dull our response to it.
- Much light without response hardens the heart.
- Nineveh's tender response rebukes those who resist greater light (Luke 11:32).
- Making peace with known sin is a symptom of a calloused heart.
- God can restore a tender heart when we ask (Psalm 51:10).

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you grown so familiar with God's warnings that they no longer move you?
- Why can much spiritual exposure sometimes harden rather than soften?
- What helps recover a tender, responsive heart toward God?

Question 7

Student Question:

The king reasons, "Who knows? God may turn and relent... so that we may not perish" (3:9). What does this humble "who knows?" reveal about a right posture before God, who is not obligated to us yet is rich in mercy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 9 records the king's reasoning: "Who knows? God may turn and relent... so that we may not perish." This humble "who knows?" is theologically rich. The Ninevites do not presume on God or claim a guarantee; they cast themselves on His mercy without demanding it. They repent because it is right, hoping in a mercy they cannot command.

Teach this posture as the right one before God. God is not a vending machine that dispenses forgiveness in exchange for the correct ritual. He is a free and sovereign Lord who is rich in mercy. The proper response to His warning is not bargaining but humble, hopeful turning.

Distinguish this from despair on one side and presumption on the other. Despair says, "There is no use turning; God will not have me." Presumption says, "God owes me mercy." The Ninevites walk the narrow path between: they turn in genuine hope, trusting God's character without dictating His response.

Reassure the class with the fuller revelation we now have. We can say more than "who knows?" because in Christ God has clearly revealed His readiness to forgive all who come to Him (1 John 1:9; 2 Peter 3:9). The Ninevites hoped in the dark; we have the full light of the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A right posture before God is humble, hopeful, and non-presumptuous.
- God is free and sovereign, not obligated to us, yet rich in mercy.
- Avoid both despair and presumption about God's mercy.
- We turn because it is right, hoping in God's character.
- In Christ, God has clearly revealed His readiness to forgive (1 John 1:9).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the king's humble "who knows?" teach us about approaching God?
- How do we avoid both despair and presumption regarding God's mercy?

- How does the gospel let us say more than “who knows?” about God’s forgiveness?

Question 8

Student Question:

Nineveh’s repentance was citywide, from the king to the common people to even the animals (3:7–8). How does genuine spiritual renewal tend to spread through families and communities, and how could your own turning to God affect those around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question draws on the citywide sweep of Nineveh’s repentance: the king, the nobles, the common people, and even the animals were caught up in the turning (3:7–8). Genuine renewal rarely stays private; it spreads through households and communities like light through a dark room.

Help the class see how spiritual change moves through relationships. A repentant parent reshapes a home; a renewed believer changes the atmosphere of a workplace or a friendship. We are not isolated individuals but members of families and communities whose turning to God ripples outward.

Encourage responsibility without pressure. We cannot repent for anyone else, and we must not try to control others’ hearts. Yet our own genuine turning is one of the most powerful influences we can offer those around us, often more by example than by words (1 Peter 3:1–2).

Point to the gospel pattern of household and community faith. Throughout Acts, whole households came to the Lord (Acts 16:15, 31–34). God delights to work not only in solitary hearts but through the connected web of families and congregations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine renewal tends to spread through families and communities.
- Our turning to God influences those connected to us.
- We cannot repent for others, but our example carries weight (1 Peter 3:1–2).
- God often works through households and communities (Acts 16:31–34).
- Personal repentance has communal effects.

Discussion Prompts

- How could your own turning to God affect the people around you?
- Where have you seen one person’s renewal change a whole family or group?
- How do we influence others toward God without trying to control their hearts?

Question 9

Student Question:

“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” (3:10). How does this hold together God’s justice (He really does judge sin) and His mercy (He genuinely relents toward the penitent) without denying that God will still bring a final judgment on all who refuse to repent?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, resting on verse 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.” The teacher’s task is to hold God’s justice and His mercy together without surrendering either.

First, affirm that the threatened judgment was real. God was not bluffing; Nineveh’s wickedness genuinely deserved overthrow, and God said so plainly. We must not soften the reality of God’s justice or pretend He never judges sin. The seriousness of the warning is what makes the mercy meaningful.

Second, explain God’s relenting rightly. This is not God changing His mind in the sense of being fickle, mistaken, or learning something new. It is the consistent expression of His revealed character: God declared through Jeremiah that if a nation He has threatened turns from its evil, He will relent of the disaster He intended (Jeremiah 18:7–8). God’s relenting toward the penitent is itself a fixed principle of who He is. His mercy and justice meet at the point of repentance.

Third, guard against the error that mercy now means there is no final judgment ever. Jesus warns that the men of Nineveh will rise at the judgment and condemn those who refused to repent (Luke 11:32). The New Testament is clear that God has fixed a day on which He will judge the world through Christ (Acts 17:30–31). Nineveh’s reprieve is a real picture of grace, not a denial of the coming reckoning for the unrepentant.

Finally, draw the gospel line. God’s readiness to relent toward penitent Nineveh foreshadows the gospel offered to all nations: “God now commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30), and He is patient, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). The same God who spared Nineveh offers mercy in Christ to everyone who truly turns, while warning that the door will not stand open forever.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s threatened judgment was real, not a bluff.
- God’s relenting expresses His fixed character, not fickleness (Jeremiah 18:7–8).
- God’s justice and mercy meet at the point of repentance.
- Mercy to the penitent does not deny a coming final judgment (Luke 11:32; Acts 17:30–31).
- God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that they turn and live (Ezekiel 18:23).

- Nineveh's reprieve foreshadows the gospel offered to all nations (2 Peter 3:9).
- God offers mercy to all who truly repent, while the door will not stand open forever.

Discussion Prompts

- How does this verse hold God's justice and His mercy together?
- What does it mean that God relented, and how is that consistent with His unchanging character?
- How do we affirm God's mercy to the penitent without denying a final judgment?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole chapter, from God's second call to Nineveh's deliverance. Name one specific way Jesus is using this account to call you to fresh obedience, deeper repentance, or greater confidence that He receives all who truly turn to Him.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question asks the student to look back over the whole chapter and name one specific way Christ is calling them to fresh obedience, deeper repentance, or greater confidence in His mercy. Press for a concrete, personal answer.

Gather the threads: the God of the second chance, the call to delayed obedience, the power of God's word, the nature of true turning, humility before God, and the meeting of justice and mercy. Each is a place the Spirit may be working.

Help different people land differently. For one, the lesson is receiving God's recommissioning after a failure. For another, it is turning genuinely from a sin they have only felt bad about. For another, it is resting in the assurance that God truly receives all who come to Him.

Close in prayer that turns, asking God for repentance that is real and for confidence that the God who spared Nineveh receives every penitent heart through Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Transformation is specific and personal.
- Obedience after failure, true repentance, and confidence in mercy are the chief fruits.
- God receives all who genuinely turn to Him.
- The same text meets different hearts differently.
- Self-examination should end in repentance and prayer.

Discussion Prompts

- Name one way Christ is calling you to fresh obedience or deeper repentance through this chapter.
- Where do you most need to hear that God receives those who truly turn?
- What concrete step of turning will you take this week?