

The Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah

Lesson 4: Nineveh Repents at the Word of God -- Jonah 3:1-10

Chapter 3 begins with five of the most hopeful words in the Bible: “the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.” After the running, the storm, the sea, and the fish, God comes back to His failed prophet with the very same assignment. He does not give up on Jonah, and He does not hand the job to someone more reliable. He simply calls again. If you have ever wondered whether God still has a use for someone who has already blown it, this verse is for you.

This time Jonah goes. He walks into Nineveh, the great enemy city, an exceedingly large place, and begins to preach the shortest sermon recorded in Scripture: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Eight words in English, perhaps five in Hebrew. No gospel invitation, no altar call, no promise of mercy attached. Just a warning of coming judgment. By every measure of preaching technique, it should have failed.

Instead, something astonishing happens, something that never seemed to happen back home in Israel no matter how many prophets God sent. The whole city believes God. From the greatest to the least they put on sackcloth and fast. The news reaches the king himself, and he comes down off his throne, takes off his royal robe, sits in ashes, and orders the entire city, people and animals alike, to turn from their evil and cry out to God. A pagan empire repents at the preaching of a reluctant foreigner.

And God responds. “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.” This is one of the clearest pictures in all of Scripture of how repentance and mercy meet. God is utterly serious about judgment, and He is utterly ready to relent toward those who truly turn. Nineveh does not earn forgiveness by a clever ritual; they genuinely turn from their evil, and the God who threatened destruction shows mercy. It is a preview of the gospel going out to the nations, and a searching question for every heart that has heard God’s warning and not yet turned.

Group Discussion: God gave Jonah the same assignment a second time after his failure. What does it mean to you that God is a God of second chances, and how have you seen Him use people who had already failed Him?

Personal Reflection: The Ninevites heard a warning and turned immediately, while Israel often heard many warnings and did not. Is there an area where you sense God has been warning you, gently or clearly, and you have been slow to turn? What would real repentance look like there?

Read Jonah 3:1-10

Study Questions

1. "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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. "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?
10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Luke 11:32, the men of Nineveh will rise up and condemn this generation, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; 2 Peter 3:9, the Lord is patient, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance; Acts 17:30-31, God now commands all people everywhere to repent; Romans 2:4-5, God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance; Ezekiel 18:21-23, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that he turn and live.

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