



Jonah - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

Having repented of his own sin, Jonah is now in a place to obey God, who again instructs his prophecy to go to Nineveh, which he does. After he proclaims God's displeasure and the coming destruction on the city, the people believed and the king of Nineveh issued a decree that all the people and their livestock should fast and put on sackcloth. Because of their demonstration of repentance, God relented of the judgement that would have otherwise come upon the city.

III Jonah 3:1-10 - Conversion of Nineveh

Refer to the chapter summary above.

III.a Jonah 3:1-3a - Jonah's recommissioning and compliance

The fourth episode parallels the first (Jonah 1:1-3) and focuses on the second question raised at the beginning of the story: "What will happen to the Ninevites?"

¹ The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'

Jonah 3:1-2

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time underscores God's determination to get his message to the Ninevites and to use Jonah in the process. The message that I tell you replaces <<*for their wickedness has come up before me*>> (Jonah 1:2b).

This shows the amazing love of God to his wayward people. Although Jonah did everything he could to resist the first call of God, after Jonah repented God called him again, although God was under no obligation to do it. He did it out of

mercy and grace. By paralleling here the book's opening remarks, almost word for word, the author skilfully conveys the idea that Jonah is being offered a new beginning. God was determined to do the work through Jonah, so he did not give up on the reluctant prophet. God is often this committed to achieving his work through people.

Proclaim to it the message that I tell you. Instead of telling Jonah to cry out against Nineveh, this time God simply tells Jonah to go there and wait for further instructions. God often works this way, and people often find it irritating that he does. The story of Jonah demonstrates why God so often leads his people one step at a time without telling them more. When God told Jonah what he would say in Nineveh, Jonah rejected the call. God often only tells his people what they can handle at the time. This is demonstrated by his sending the disciples back to Galilee, where they decided to go fishing because they did not know what to do next; refer to John Chapter 21.

^{3a} So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.

Jonah 3:3a

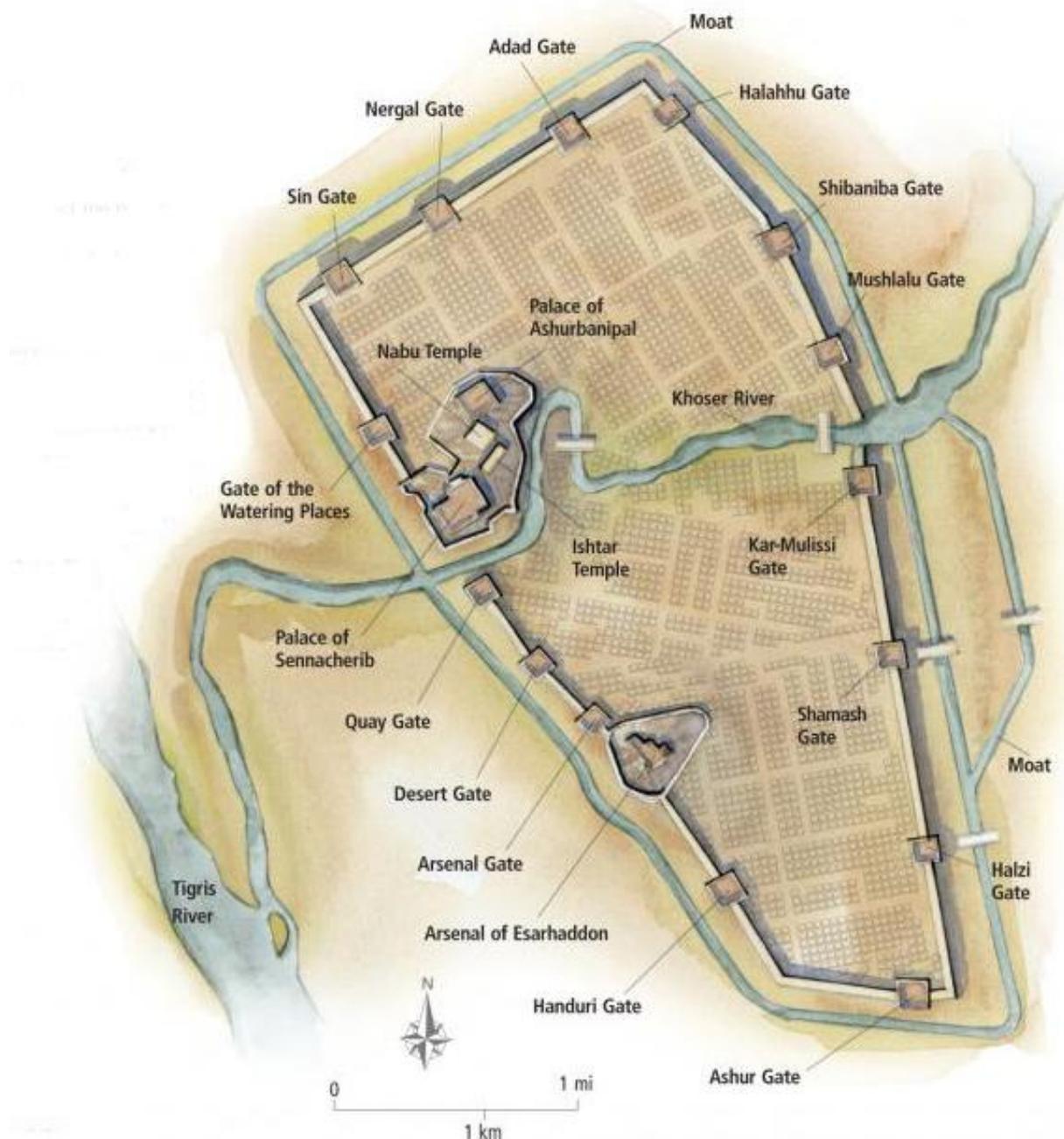
So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh. Jonah went to Nineveh instead of fleeing to Tarshish. He complies with God's will, i.e. according to the word of the Lord, but whether this compliance is from the heart remains to be seen.

Nineveh, which was situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Khoser rivers, the site of modern-day Mosul in Iraq, was first settled in the 7th Millennium BC. According to the Bible, Nimrod was the founder of the city: <<*From that land he went into Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city*>> (Genesis 10:11-12).

Major excavations took place under the direction of Henry Layard from 1845 to 1854. The diagram pictures the results of those excavations, especially as they reflect the period of the Assyrian Empire (1420-609 BC). Around 1000 BC there occurred a great revival of Assyrian power, and Nineveh became a royal city.

It was a thriving city during the first half of the 1st Millennium, and contained such luxuries as public squares, parks, botanical gardens, and even a zoo. One of the great archæological finds of the period is the library of King Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC), who is called Osnappar in Ezra 4:10. The size of the city was approximately 1,850 acres.

The Book of Jonah reflects the flourishing nature of Nineveh at this time. Nineveh eventually fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC. The invading armies dammed the rivers that supplied water to the city, causing a flood that broke through one of the perimeter walls, giving the foreign armies access to the city.



The City of Nineveh in Ancient Times

III.b Jonah 3:3b-10 - Jonah and the pagan Ninevites

The fifth episode parallels the second (Jonah 1:4-16) and focuses on how responsive the pagan Ninevites are to God's Word, just like the pagan sailors. The structure follows the pattern of corporate repentance found elsewhere in the OT, such as 1 Samuel 7:3-14 and Joel Chapters 1-2. It demonstrates:

1. A message of divine judgement (vv.3a-5).
2. An account of human repenting (vv.6-9).
3. A record of divine relenting (v.10).

^{3b} Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across.

Jonah 3:3b

Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a great city to God. Nineveh was important to God and will be the recipient of his great compassion.

A three days' walk across can possibly be translated as 'a visit was a three days' journey'. In Jonah's day neither the circumference nor the diameter of the walled city of Nineveh was a three-day walk. The phrase may refer to the time it would take Jonah to walk throughout the city, preaching his message. Nineveh could also refer to the much larger administrative area including the city and the outlying villages, which was 30-56 miles or 48-90 km across.

⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'

Jonah 3:4

Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown! Overthrown is the same verb used for God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:25, Lamentations 4:6, and Amos 4:11. Although the threat sounds unconditional, a condition was implied: If people repent, God will relent: <<*At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it*>> (Jeremiah 18:7-8). Jonah knows this condition is included: <<*He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing'*>> (Jonah 4:2), and the king of Nineveh will hope that it is (v.9).

⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

Jonah 3:5

And the people of Nineveh believed God. Repentance begins with believing God. As people come to believe him and his Word, they have the power to transform their lives as he wills. There are many other things associated with repentance that can be done, but if they do not begin with believing in and trusting God, they are all useless works of the flesh. No one can believe God apart from the Word of God. Therefore, any real revival or repentance will begin with faithful preaching and faithful hearing of God's Word, just as it was in Nineveh. Believed is the first

word in the Hebrew text of the sentence, and the grammar underscores the immediacy of Nineveh's repentance.

They proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. Repentance means doing something. The people of Nineveh fasted, mourned as if for the dead, and they did it from the highest to the lowest in social status. To fast and wear sackcloth were ancient demonstrations of mourning: <<*Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads*>> (Nehemiah 9:1), <<*In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes*>> (Esther 4:3), and: <<*Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes*>> (Daniel 9:3).

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Jonah 3:6

The news or word that reached the king of Nineveh was the Word of the Lord, just as it had been given to Jonah (v.1). The king of Nineveh was probably not the king of Assyria, since Nineveh was not the Assyrian capital in Jonah's day; he may have been a provincial governor who ruled from Nineveh. The ruler of Assyrian nation at that time was King Ashurbanipal (669-626 BC).

The king sat in ashes. This too was common practice in times of grief and repentance: <<*So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes*>> (Job 2:7-8), and: <<*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes*>> (Luke 10:13).

⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water.

⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.

Jonah 3:7-8

Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh. It seems odd that the king would tell everyone to fast and put on sackcloth when they had already done so (v.5). Therefore, it is more likely that v.5 and vv.6-9 are in topical rather than

chronological order. First, the king issued the proclamation, and then the people carried it out. This is a similar summons to repentance as: <<***Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Grain-offering and drink-offering are withheld from the house of your God. Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord***>> (Joel 1:13-14). By putting the people's response ahead of the king's proclamation, the author underscores the immediacy of the people's response and that they are responding to Jonah's message, not just to the king's command. The Ninevites shall each turn from their evil ways, whereas the Israelites did not: <<***Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.'*** They would not listen but were stubborn, as their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God>> (2 Kings 17:13-14).

By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. If repentance is anything, it is not business as usual. When repentance comes, something has to change and something has to be different. In their case, the people of Nineveh took off their normal clothes and put on sackcloth, a thick coarse cloth normally made from goat's hair. Wearing it displayed the rejection of earthly comforts and pleasures. They and their animals then went without food or water as part of their repentance, showing they were determined to go without even life's basics to show remorse for their sins.

They shall cry mightily to God. Repentance means crying mightily to God. It means coming to God with passion and seriousness about personal sin and the need for his mercy and forgiveness. So much of modern repentance, with its claim of excuses and reasons why the person sinned, is really not repentance at all. It is only an attempt to justify and excuse sin. Nevertheless, a person either sinned or they did not; if they did, there is no excuse, and if they have not, there is no need to repent. Repentance and excuses simply do not belong together. In the Christian life, repentance does not describe what a person must do to turn to God; it describes the very process of turning to God. When his people truly turn to him, they turn away from the things that displease him.

⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

Jonah 3:9

'Who knows?' expresses hope that God may turn and relent, which is what David stated when his child was ill: <<***He said, 'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, "Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the***

child may live””>> (2 Samuel 12:22). This was the precise hope of the prophet Joel for the people of Judah: <<Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God?>> (Joel 2:14).

So that we do not perish. This is the third time a pagan has been concerned that people not perish; ironically, Jonah has not expressed any such concern.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Jonah 3:10

God saw what they did and changed his mind. God honoured their repentance, even though their past sin was just reason enough for an outpouring of judgement. The state would never forgive a cold-blooded murderer who vowed to never do it again, but God mercifully relented from judgement against the people of Nineveh. God is never obligated to forgive people when they repent. Instead, repentance appeals to God’s mercy, and not to his justice.

Both terms evil and calamity translate Hebrew *ra’ah*. The use of the same word underscores the close connection between human action and divine response. God did not carry out the threatened disaster because the Ninevites repented of their evil. From a temporal perspective, God responds to human action; from an eternal perspective, God chooses the means (human repenting) as well as the end (divine relenting). The repentance of Gentiles contrasts with the repeated lack of repentance on the part of Israel.

Did God’s relenting make Jonah a false prophet, when he prophesied <<Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!>> (v.4)? Not at all, for two good reasons:

- 1. God acted in total consistency with his Word: <<At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it>> (Jeremiah 18:7-8). Jonah’s preaching was like all warnings of judgement: it was an invitation to repent and avert the promised judgement. His words had an implied ‘if you do not repent’ in front of them. Remember the sum total of Jonah’s preaching is not recorded; although it can be assumed that the statement in v.5 is the central theme of what Jonah said, it should not be assumed it was all that he said.**
- 2. God did judge Nineveh, as recorded in the Book of Nahum. Nevertheless, in light of their repentance he delayed it another 150 years.**