

Jonah's Mission to Nineveh

pt. 1

One has referred to Jonah's time in the fish as 'more a preface than a conclusion'. For it is the way of God, often, that what we think is the end is actually just the beginning. Whether it's the people of Israel backed up against the Red Sea, or the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, what seems to be the end is actually a kind of beginning; a beginning of something else; something greater; something more of God's purpose.

And so it was with Jonah vomited from the stomach of the fish. Truly it was an end of a fleeing life. And it was the end of a horrifying experience. But it was the beginning of real commitment to God's call, of again being about a prophet's (and not a fugitive's) life.

Clearly, the book is structured so that we see this 3rd chapter as a new section. 'The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time' (v. 1). With humor, yet with accuracy, we might grasp this 2nd section *this* way:

God sent (3:1-2), and Jonah went (3:3-4).
Nineveh repents (3:5-9), and God relents (3:10).
How Jonah vents (4:1-9) when God comments (4:9-11)!

Over the next few lessons we will see more of this under the theme of *God's abounding and more-than-abundant grace*. But we see it first, today, in terms of Jonah himself, *the man who is the preacher*. We see God's more-than-abundant grace in:

I. Jonah Receiving His Commission

We can picture the realism of Jonah's adjustment on the shore to the land of the living: To breathe real air! To see the sun's light! To hear the ebbing of the waves! To know that he is alive! And... to go to Nineveh to preach God's Word!

But *is* this Jonah? From what we read at 4:2, it seems not. Perhaps the shore, and God's voice, and where he was, only reminded him of his remaining prejudice and struggle against the will of God.

But that is only half the story. The other half is that Jonah - regardless of all this - *goes to Nineveh*: 'So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord' (v. 3). Like before, he 'rose up'. But *this* time, he does not flee to *Tarshish from the presence* of the Lord. He goes to *Nineveh according to the word* of the Lord. (Let us note the precise contrast.) In some deeper recess of the heart, he joyfully concurs with the law of God in the inner man. Though his flesh wars against him, he walks by faith.

(And he's going to need that because he has a long way to go! Remember that, having been vomited out of the Mediterranean Sea, the closest Jonah would have been to Nineveh was some 350 miles. If the Lord had the fish vomit him out further away, then it could have been upwards of 3,000. We do not know for sure which it was. But at any rate - whatever the distance between v. 2 and 3 - we know that Jonah arrived.) Which would be easier for Jonah - the journey to Tarshish, or the walk to Nineveh? *Sin* made the one *hard*; but *grace* made the other *light*. Such is the yoke of Christ. Your sin only makes you weary and weighed down. But Christ's grace gives strength for every purpose of God.

And Jonah doubtless went to Nineveh with that kind of strength.

So note God's grace to Jonah in even giving His Word 'a second time' (v. 1). If there ever was a man with 'a new lease on life' it was surely Jonah. He was not the *first* man of the Bible who was given a 'second time'. Nor would he be the *last*. In terms of returning from the realm of the dead, we remember Lazarus. And in terms of being

restored in the ministry, there is Peter, who having denied Jesus 3 times, is later restored again, ironically, on the shore, much like Jonah (*John* 21). ‘The word of the Lord came to Jonah a *second* time.’ There is grace abounding to the chief of sinners in those words.

With God, there are what we might call ‘second chances’; for He is long-suffering and patient. His mercies are new every morning. He gives us the freedom to move on. Though we *fail*, in Christ God *forgives*. Though we *sin*, by the Spirit God *sustains*.

God’s abounding grace is not a license to sin, sure enough. If we’ve learned anything of Jonah, then we have learned that! But it is to say that with Jonah’s recommissioning there is a display of God’s untiring, irresistible, and unconditional love. *It will not cease* to the one whom He has called, even though they flee far!

And we not only do well to note it *about Jonah*. We need to be reminded of that *for ourselves*. (We’ve not left our basic guide that when we see *Jonah*, we learn about *ourselves*, that we might know *Christ*.) When we read of these things in the life of *Jonah*, God is pressing his finger onto *us*. What if Christ gave up on *you* after *your* first known major failure? Or after *your* most earnest ‘flight from His presence’? Or if He took you at *your* umpteenth artificial resolution instead of His *own* solemn oath and covenant? *All* these chairs would be empty today! We would each be forever lost and doomed to everlasting ruin!

And yet with God there is ‘a second time’. Let the beginning of chapter 3 about Jonah be hope for a new beginning in *you* today. Just as there was something dramatic and effective in that occasion for *Jonah*, God offers *you* the same today in Christ, for He is the same yesterday and today and forever for *you* as He was for *Jonah*.

Jonah had prayed inside the fish. But was he *really* thankful to the Lord, now that he is on the shore? Did he *still* want to pay his vows, now that he yet must go to Nineveh to preach? So he is saved from the *past*, and safe in the *present*, will it not

guide for a *future*? So salvation is ‘*from* the Lord’. But what is it *for*? Is there not something to *be* about and to *become*; something to *seek* and something to *do*?

We do well to ask ourselves the same sort of questions. Will *I*, too, ‘work out my salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who works within me both to will and to work for His good pleasure’? Will I ‘seek first His kingdom and His righteousness’? Will I make all things tend to God’s *glory* since all things have tended for my *good*? So we, too, are *exhorted* in God’s abounding grace, even as we are *encouraged*.

And even as we ask these good questions of ourselves, we cannot escape the obvious answer. ‘The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.’ The answer has always been (and will always be) before us. ‘The word of God is very near you,’ the apostle reminds us (*Rom.* 10:8). We need no new word of revelation. We need only heed what we have been told already; for the *second* word is essentially the *first* word, because the word of God is established forever in the heavens (*Psa.* 119:89). The Spirit always calls us back to what *has been* said. You will be taught new things from the Scripture. But they will always come out of what has been said.

We go on, then, to note Jonah’s renewed commission.¹ According to our Lord’s interpretation of it, Jonah is appointed as a sign *to the Ninevites* (*Luke* 11:29). As a ‘sign’, Jonah ‘indicates’ something to them. But what extraordinary thing is that?

According to our Lord’s words, it is a resurrection from the realm of the dead. This is the sign given to His wicked generation: ‘just as Jonah was 3 days/3 nights in the stomach of the fish, so the Son of Man would be 3 days/3 nights in the stomach of the fish’ (*Matt.* 12:39-40). And what is more, He paralleled Jonah becoming a sign *to the Ninevites* with His own being a sign *to His generation* (*Luke* 11:29-30). In other

¹ Though in essence the 1st and 2nd commissions are the same, the 2nd differs slightly from the first. The 1st is to denounce the wickedness of national sin, whereas the 2nd is to declare the imminence of divine judgment. The 1st contains the basic mission and message, whereas the 2nd seems to entail more than what was stated in the 1st (as God says, ‘the proclamation that I am going to tell you’).

words, the resurrection becomes *the* sign that God's judgment is upon men, and that if they are to be saved from that, they must seek it through Him that was Himself raised.

So the Psalm that speaks of Jesus' betrayal by Judas says in the next verse: 'Be gracious to me and raise me up that I may repay them' (*Psa.* 41:10). There would be judgment upon the enemies of God *on account* of Christ's resurrection. So the 2nd Psalm, in speaking of Christ's resurrection, warns of His judgment to follow: 'Today I have brought You forth...You shall break them with a rod of iron...Therefore, O kings, show discernment - judges, take warning - worship the Lord; lay hold of true instruction' (*Psa.* 2:7, 9-12). And this is what the apostles preached:

having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent,³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead. - *Acts* 17:30-31

It is unclear from Jonah's account whether the Ninevites knew or heard of his sea-episode. But it seems entirely reasonable - it is consistent with the parallel Jesus has drawn. And it certainly relates to the threat of judgment hanging over them.

Like Jesus, Jonah proclaims judgment, yet gives solid evidence of resurrection. (And if the Ninevites had heard of Jonah's sea events, they would have thought of them - and him - in no other way than one alive from the dead!) This 'sign' would weigh heavily upon them that with this man is some truly extraordinary thing. It would alarm them (as it should you). It should get their attention (as it should yours). It adds weight to the message Jonah brought (as it does that which Jesus brings to you today). It is a sign pointing to that! ...*That as God rescued Jonah from the judgment of death, so in preaching judgment, men might seek God for that same grace by which Jonah himself was saved.*

In some ways we've here jumped ahead. But consider all this as a setting of the stage for what drama will occur at Nineveh when Jonah arrives. But we see God's more-than-abundant grace in Jonah receiving his commission. We see it, also, in:

II. Nineveh Receiving Their Preacher

Unlike Tarshish, we know a good bit about Nineveh. It is called - even *God* calls it - a 'great city' (1:1). But what makes it 'great' is not its perks or benefits to the citizen, nor God's good thought toward it so as to save it (per Keil and Luther). Nineveh is 'great' *because of its historical prominence* as a capital city and royal residence. We read in Genesis of Nimrod 'the mighty' whose kingdom advanced so as to build Nineveh (*Gen.* 10:9-11). (We would expect a mighty man to build a mighty place.) And to think that this city continued for millennia! It was still standing during the 8th century Assyrian Empire. Sargon occupied it (722-702 BC). Sennacherib fortified and adorned it (704-681 BC; cf. *2 Kings* 19:36=*Isa.* 37:37). It was a prominent city, historically.

But it was also 'great' *because of its size* (*Jon.* 3:3). It had 1500 towers, each 200 ft tall. Its walls were 100 ft tall. They were wide enough for 3 chariots to ride side-by-side around the top. Even modern excavations - if they are possible, given the residential and cemetery plots - must dig at least 30-40 ft to get to the Assyrian level to which Jonah preached. The population (depending on how one understands the 120,000 reference at 4:11) agrees with what has been found about the 1 to 7 miles circumference of the city walls, even though its total area (including outlying areas and suburbs) could be as much as 90 miles.

So it is that Jonah has a '3 day walk' through the city (v. 3) during which he would herald the message. What would such a great city - a great and exceedingly wicked city - need to hear from a Hebrew preacher? *Grace*.

And this is why it is vital that there be a true correspondence between the minister and the message, the preacher and the proclamation. Those who have *known* grace can *preach* grace. Those who have been delivered *by* it can be declarers *of* it. *An equipping/shaping grace in the preacher must come before an evangelistic/saving grace to the people.* (cf. *Psa.* 51:12-13 ; *Ezra* 7:10; *1 Tim.* 4:16).

Thus there is an interesting (and likely, intended) irony between Jonah's 3 day walk and his 3 day ordeal in the stomach of the fish. Just as he thought on sin's misery and God's salvation for that period of time, so would he have that in his mind as he went through the city preaching. He would be able to sympathize with the misery and sin of this great city.

So Jonah's warning of '40 days', like the previous reference to '3 days', is richly significant. As the period of 3 days oftentimes marks a period of trial-and-release; a period in which despair is followed by relief, and bondage leading to freedom, *a period of 40 speaks to a significant time of proving and testing under God.*

Thus the flood waters came for 40 days (*Gen. 7:4, 12, 17; 8:6*).² Thus Moses was prepared by God for 40 years to lead Israel out of Egypt (*Acts 7:30*). For 40 days he was on the mountain receiving the Law from God (*Exod. 24:18; 34:28; Deut. 10:10*). Israel wandered in the desert, being sustained by manna for 40 years (*Exod. 16:35; Num. 14:33-34; 32:13; Deut. 2:7; 8:2,4, etc.; Psa. 95:10; Amos 2:10; Acts 7:36,42; Hseb. 3:9,17*). Forty was the allotted number of lashings according to the Law (*Deut. 25:3*). The spies spied out the new land for 40 days (*Num. 13:25*). Elijah went in the strength of the raven's food for 40 days/nights (*1 Kings 19:8*). Goliath defied Israel for 40 days (*1 Sam. 17:16*). Several judges (such as Othniel, Gideon, and Eli), and even kings Saul, David, and Solomon, ruled Israel for 40 years (*Judg. 3:11; 8:28; 1 Sam. 4:18; Acts 13:18; 2 Sam. 5:4; cf. 2 Kings 12:1*). Jesus was tempted in the desert for 40 days (*Matt. 4:2*). And even as Jesus' generation was given a period of 40 years to repent and believe Him, their world came crashing down at its close (i.e., 30-70ad).

² It is unclear, but might be mentioned anyway, that Joseph had his family mourn for deceased Jacob, according to Egyptian custom, for 40 days (*Gen. 50:3*).

So, as the parallel goes, Jonah preached, ‘40 days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!’³ (If one is to make much of ‘40 Days of Purpose’, let him make much of *these* 40 days of purpose!) *Forty days and Nineveh - like Sodom and Gomorrah - will be overthrown!* A crisis has come to the land of Assyria at the mouth of a Hebrew prophet!! What will Nineveh do?

They *repent!* They repent! This exceedingly great city was brought to its knees! The king is humbled! The commoner is fasting! Even the animals are covered and fasting! Truly God is opposed to the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. A great city receives a greater grace!

They could have scoffed at Jonah. They could have jailed him or *persecuted* him (given who he was, and from where he came). But they refrained. And more, they *believed* Jonah. Even more, they believed *God*, and repented toward *Him*.

So they have the great privilege of ‘standing up’ at the judgment and testifying against other impenitent nations.

But was Nineveh really converted?

Some believe that Nineveh was *not* converted. The text, unlike what it conveys of the sailors, has the nation of Nineveh relating to God as ‘God’, and not ‘LORD’, the covenantal term. Also, there is no historical evidence that any Nineveh attended a single ordinance at the Jerusalem temple under the ministry of the priests.

But others hold that Nineveh *did* repent with a saving conversion:⁴

³ The word the Lord used in speaking of Nineveh’s threatened judgment (*baphak*) is that used of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the neighboring cities (*Gen.* 19:21, 25, 29; *Dent.* 29:22). And being in the Piel stem, it is a strong and intense judgment that is in view.

⁴ Origen said of Nineveh, ‘They obtained salvation through they were aliens to the covenant of God.’ (ANF 1:7). Keil believes that Nineveh’s repentance was not so much an embrace of the covenant of grace (for there is no historical evidence of their attending Temple ordinances), but a reprieve in God’s judgment in order to show that He is a long-suffering God toward all men, and is the God of Gentiles as well as Jews.

As a first support, there is *God's testimony* at 4:11. 'Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?' The word 'compassion' is the usual and expected word that speaks of God's saving help toward a person. God, in engaging Jonah's thoughts over God's action toward Nineveh, is contesting anyone who would question that action. 'I have shown compassion; what's wrong with that? Where have I gone wrong? How is that not appropriate?' And so God's testimony underscores His real compassion in Nineveh's conversion.

There is also *Jonah's testimony* at 4:1-3. 'I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abundant in lovingkindness, and relenting of calamity.' And for this reason, lest God show that toward the Ninevites, Jonah flees to Tarshish. Jonah has a conviction that God will save and convert the city to Himself. Therefore he flees. Jonah's own testimony shows the reality of Nineveh's conversion to God in view of His own attributes toward them.

Thirdly, there is *Jesus' testimony* in the Gospel. 'The men of Nineveh will stand up with [Jesus'] generation at the judgment and will condemn it' (*Luke* 11:32). Now, how may they have the privilege of condemning it? On the same basis that believers have to judge the world and angels (*1 Cor.* 6:2, 3). Nineveh secured it, as Jesus noted, through repentance. They repented at the preaching of Jonah. And as Jonah is a type of Christ, we know that whoever repents at Jesus' preaching is saved from their sins. Why not Nineveh under the preaching of the one who typified Christ?

Fourth, there is *Scripture's testimony* that relates what Nineveh did to every believer in the gospel. Those who are saved have repented. Nineveh did this (*Jon.* 3:10; *Luke* 11:32). Those who are saved 'believe in God' (*Acts* 16:34; *1 Pet.* 1:21). Nineveh was marked by this (*Jon.* 3:5). Those who are saved 'call on God' earnestly (*Rom.* 10:13). Nineveh did this (*Jon.* 3:8). We ought then see that when God withdrew His burning anger from them so that they would not perish it was the bestowal of saving favor.

Lastly, there is *Nineveh's testimony* at Jon. 3:9-10. They speak of God as 'the God'; not just 'God' but 'the God'. They use the definite article. Now why would they do this? Is it merely a way of referring to the covenant God of Israel as merely one among the many pagan deities or empirical rulers the Ninevites would have known? It seems not. It seems, rather, to be an express reference to the one, true, and living God as revealed to the Jewish people. The Lord who is 'one', according to the covenant creed (per *Deut.* 6:4). Now, not only Israel 'heard' this true confession (and so made it), but a Gentile city now does. The sea captain in his desperation came to acknowledge this God - 'the God' (*Jon.* 1:6, 16). And now, following suit in the flow of the book, the Ninevites do as well. 'Who knows, *the God* may turn and relent' (*Jon.* 3:9). The answer? 'When *the God* saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then *the God* relented.' There was an exact correspondence between the way the Ninevites prayed and the way God Himself replied.

So, yes, it seems that we should see Nineveh converted in such a way that they were objects of God's saving mercy.

But the ironic grace of God with this preacher and this city turns more wonderful. It seems that Nineveh did *not even need the full 3 days before they repented!* It is unclear how long word took to reach the king (v. 6). But vv. 4-5 read as though Jonah went 1 day - 1 day - and God so blessed His word that Nineveh utterly and clearly repented. He had not even gone through all the city - and Nineveh as a whole had repented!

(I wonder if this takes us by surprise in such a way that our own unbelief and lack of confidence in the power of God's Word is exposed. Do we really believe that people will repent? Do we trust God to do that? Do we seek it in pray? Do we in some real sense expect it to happen?)

Even if Jonah had taken the full 3 days to preach, and then went out of the city (4:5), Nineveh still had 37 days in which to continue sinning! And yet they stopped!

Let this be a warning to any of you who would continue in sin unalarmed or unaffected. ‘This night your life is required of you!’ Jesus preached.

Friend, is repentance something you’ve put off? Is it something you say you ‘will get to when you can or when you have the time?’ Have you had convictions that you must repent of certain sins, and yet, still, you have not? Know for sure that they may not last. ‘Seek the Lord while He may be found’ the Scripture says.

Persons who plan to repent of their sins before they die usually die in their sins before they repent.

But since God calls this day, as Jonah did to Nineveh, know for sure that if you repent and believe, then you will join Jonah, and the sailors, and Nineveh in saying *now* that ‘Salvation is from the Lord’. And you will know then, at the Day of Judgment, that through repentance and faith in Christ you have been given the distinct privilege to testify against the wicked and declare God’s righteousness to you in Christ.

‘I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; but the grace of God was more than abundant.’ (*1 Tim.* 1:13-14)

So, we have seen God’s abounding grace in Jonah receiving his commission, and in Nineveh receiving their preacher. Whether it’s Jonah’s 2nd time commission, or Nineveh’s 1st time repentance and faith, there is grace abounding to the chief of sinners.

And as you can tell, this is the end of the message. But like the beginning of it, what seems to be the end, is actually just the beginning.

May today be a day of new beginnings for each of you, given that the Lord’s mercies are new each morning, just as they were for Nineveh when Jonah arrived at their city.