

## “The People of Nineveh Believed”

### Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Jonah (3)

*Texts: Jonah 2:1-3:10; Luke 11:29-32*

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It is impossible to imagine the misery Jonah endured for those three days and nights he spent in the belly of a huge fish—both his tomb and his salvation. Jonah’s distress is great—it is that of a dying man. Yet, Jonah is not dying. Beyond all human expectation, YHWH sent a huge fish to rescue the “reluctant prophet” from certain death in a watery grave. Jonah’s entombment in the fish is neither the end nor even the high point of the Jonah story. But it is the literary hinge upon which the story turns from Jonah’s flight from YHWH to the fulfillment of his prophetic mission.

The Prophecy of Jonah opens with YHWH commissioning Jonah to go and preach to the Ninevites, something which Jonah refused to do. Attempting to flee from YHWH’s call, Jonah boarded a ship bound for Tarshish. But YHWH sent a great storm which threatened both Jonah’s ship and its crew. Realizing that his own sin was the cause of the storm, Jonah was confronted by the pagan crew—whose own gods were of no help in calming the storm. Unless the storm ceased and soon, all onboard would be dead. Jonah told the crew who he was, what his mission entailed, and that unless the crew threw him overboard, they would not be spared. The frightened crew did exactly that—they threw Jonah into the sea where he was certain to drown. The moment Jonah was off the ship, YHWH relented, calmed the storm, and delivered the crew, who witnessed YHWH’s great power. The grateful crew offered YHWH sacrifices of thanksgiving. But unbeknownst to them, YHWH miraculously rescued Jonah. At this point, Jonah’s story turns from an account of his flight from Nineveh, to a time of prayer and repentance (chapter 2), which are the preparation for the fulfillment of YHWH’s greater purpose that the gospel be preached in Nineveh (chapter 3), Jonah’s ultimate mission.<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen in previous weeks, the Book of Jonah is neither an allegory nor a moralistic fable designed to teach the reader that opposition to the will of God is futile. No doubt, attempting to run from God is one of the most foolish things we can do, but the underlying message of Jonah is not the usual moralizing object lesson—obey God’s call or else suffer the consequences. The Prophecy of Jonah reveals that it is YHWH’s redemptive purpose to save Gentiles who are outside of his covenant with Israel. While dwelling in Canaan (the promised land) YHWH intended his people (Israel) to serve as witnesses of his holiness and righteousness to the neighboring Gentile nations. Once the unified nation of Israel (as in the days of David and Solomon) was divided by a Civil War and the Northern Kingdom became more and more apostate and disobedient to YHWH’s covenant, Israel was no longer a faithful witness, but became a sad illustration of happens to those who reject YHWH’s gracious covenant promises and protection in exchange for a mess of pagan porridge.

As Israel failed in its role as YHWH’s witness, covenant judgment came upon the nation as foretold by the prophet Amos and described by Hosea (the next Minor prophet in our series, and the last of the prophets YHWH sent to the Northern Kingdom). During the days of Hosea’s ministry (he appears shortly after Amos and Jonah) the Assyrians invaded and conquered Israel, decimating its people. Since Israel failed to be YHWH’s witness to the nations, YHWH calls Jonah to serve as a prophetic witness to

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 471-2.

the Gentiles—Jonah is to preach in Nineveh, the very heart of the pagan Assyrian empire.

But Jonah was a Jewish patriot and deeply hated the Assyrians (Israel's current enemy). Jonah even claims that he would rather die than see the Assyrians converted through his preaching (Jonah 4:3). So, like the nation from which he hailed, at least initially, Jonah also fails in his role as YHWH's witness to the neighboring Gentiles. He refuses to obey YHWH's prophetic call and attempts to flee to Tarshish only to discover that you cannot escape from YHWH. YHWH's word will be preached in Nineveh, by Jonah, and to great effect just as YHWH decreed.

Jonah's reaction to his miraculous deliverance from certain death is revealed in the second chapter of his prophecy. Somehow surviving in the belly of a large fish appointed by YHWH to save him, once inside the fish Jonah might have thought it would have been far better had YHWH simply let him die. It is hard to think of a more uncomfortable and miserable environment. In this "song of deliverance" (Jonah 2:1-10) also known as "Jonah's prayer," we learn of Jonah's change of heart which leads him to go to Nineveh and preach in fulfillment of his divine call. Jonah shows himself to be quite familiar with the Psalter as his words and expressions frequently echo well known passages from the Psalms. In this, Jonah models how Christians ought to face pain and suffering—clinging to God's words and promises. We also see Jonah's expression of thanksgiving unto YHWH for delivering him from certain death, as well as an indication that now confined in the most difficult of conditions, Jonah will become a student of YHWH's ways, and of YHWH's mercy.<sup>2</sup>

Regaining his wits and realizing that he was not dead, but had been swallowed by a great fish, we read, *"then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.'"* There is little said by way of transition from the declaration in 1:17 to chapter 2:1—although Jonah does speak briefly of this in verses 5-7 of his song. The Jonah story focuses neither on the fish, nor upon the manner in which Jonah survived. The Book of Jonah is primarily concerned with the bigger redemptive-historical purpose behind YHWH's sending both the storm in judgment and the great fish in redemption. Jonah has miraculously survived and is now being prepared for his mission to Nineveh.

As we have seen, the Book of Jonah is filled with puns and ironies. In the song which follows, we see Jonah's personal repentance and thanksgiving—things he denies to the Ninevites by fleeing from his prophetic call. One of the first things we notice is just how different the prayer of chapter 2 is from the plea recounted by Jonah in 1:12: *"Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you."* Jonah had offered himself as a sacrifice to turn aside God's wrath directed at him, so as to save the ship and its crew. Now, Jonah acknowledges that YHWH has heard his prayer and graciously delivered him from certain death—even though Jonah speaks of his presence in the belly of the great fish as though he were buried in the grave. YHWH rescued Jonah when the fish initially swallowed him, now YHWH acts to preserve Jonah's life while entombed for three days and nights—the final outcome is something of which Jonah is not yet sure, but is soon to learn.

Apparently, Jonah does not fear death. After all, he was willing to sacrifice himself to save the ship's crew. What Jonah fears is being abandoned to the grave (Sheol). Sheol was understood as that place where the dead wait until the final judgment. A number of near-Eastern death legends held that the

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 471.

journey to the underworld took three days and nights.<sup>3</sup> Jonah prays to YHWH to be delivered and he is so very thankful that YHWH hears his plea. Jonah begins his prayer (v. 3) with an acknowledgment of YHWH's sovereignty over all things—including the storm and the actions of the crew. *“For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.”* The crew acted freely and out of desperation, yet their actions fulfilled YHWH's purpose. The Bible frequently presents free human actions as the fulfillment of God's will with no attempt to resolve the apparent conundrum—which is why we have theologians and philosophers. Jonah sank quickly into deep water—below the crashing waves and billowing sea. Notice that Jonah speaks of the seas, the waves, and the storm as YHWH's possession. YHWH formed the oceans, he controls the wind and the waves. These become YHWH's means to both discipline and rescue his reluctant prophet.

In verse 4, Jonah speaks of his despair and then acknowledges YHWH's mercy. *“Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’”* The most terrible thing anyone who trusts in YHWH can ever experience is being “driven from YHWH's sight.” “Being driven” is a word which is translated as “banished” in Leviticus 21:7 as when under Jewish law a husband divorces his wife and banishes her with due cause (i.e., adultery).<sup>4</sup> Entombed in the belly of the great fish, Jonah feels banished from YHWH's presence. He pleads with YHWH, “may I yet again worship at your holy temple,” presumably the temple in Jerusalem—an interesting request, since Jonah is a loyal citizen of the Northern Kingdom which had separated from Judah, in part, over Judah's claim (rightful) that the true temple of YHWH is that built by David and Solomon in Jerusalem. Jonah's desire is the same as the Psalmist's (84:1); *“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!”* Perhaps Jonah will survive to someday lay eyes on that magnificent temple. An element of hope is now present.

In verses 5-7, Jonah again reflects upon the greatness of God's mercy in delivering him from the depths of the sea. *“The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.”* Jonah was buried in the waters as in a tomb (the pit). Seaweed was wrapped around his head. So deep was he, it appeared as though he was at the very roots of the mountains (land). It felt as though he was in the deepest part of the ocean with absolutely no one to help.<sup>5</sup> Who could possibly reach down into the depths of the sea to save him? Only YHWH. This is why Jonah's song reflects his new appreciation for the sovereign mercy of God who reached down to Jonah in those dark depths to rescue him from certain death.

YHWH has mercifully brought Jonah up from the pit. As Jonah's life was ebbing away (as he was losing consciousness) his final thoughts remembered the Lord to whom he utters what he assumes to be his final words. His words again virtually repeat the Psalmist (88:2), *“let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry!”* In this we see that YHWH never leaves us nor forsakes even in times of great danger, illness, or even at the approach of death. He is ever present and always with us.

Jonah's song closes with words of doxology and praise to YHWH (vv. 8-9) who saved the reluctant

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<sup>3</sup> Wiseman, Alexander, and Waltke, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah, Jonah 2:1.

<sup>4</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Jonah 2:4.

<sup>5</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Jonah 2:5-6.

prophet from the dark and terrifying depths of the sea. “*Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!*” Jonah is likely thinking of, or loosely quoting the words of Psalm 31:6, “*I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD.*” Jonah trusts in YHWH from whom salvation comes, and of which Jonah is the grateful recipient. Jonah is thankful to have experienced such an amazing and seemingly impossible deliverance from certain death. The reluctant prophet is reluctant no more. He boldly speaks out against those who embrace idols, cutting themselves off from YHWH’s covenant love and faithfulness.<sup>6</sup> The unanswered question is whether Jonah is speaking of his own people, Israel, who have abandoned YHWH’s covenant and have openly embraced idolatry and Baal worship. To break the covenant is to abandon YHWH and suffer loss of covenant friendship and fellowship with him. Jonah condemns idolatry in a way previously impossible for him.

As Jonah’s song ends, the prophet will endure the three days and nights as a man made ready to receive and obey YHWH’s call. Having completed his ordeal and preparation, the sovereign God will ensure that Jonah’s mission resumes, a point reinforced by the declaration of verse 10. “*And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.*” YHWH’s agent, the great fish, does exactly as YHWH commands, and deposits Jonah presumably on the beach somewhere in Palestine where Jonah will be re-commissioned for his missionary journey to Nineveh. We do not know upon what beach Jonah was deposited, but I’ll bet a bath or a shower soon followed.

Chapter 3 opens with a virtual rewind of verses 1-2 of chapter 1—Jonah is to “arise,” “go” and “call out,” but with one major difference—this time Jonah does not attempt to flee.<sup>7</sup> “*Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD*” In light of all that has happened to Jonah, it is remarkable that he is neither scolded, nor is he allowed to go on his way. The word of the Lord came to him a second time, which, in effect, indicated that YHWH re-commissions Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh to fulfill his original mission. Notice too that Jonah is given the message which he is to proclaim to the Ninevites—one of the distinguishing mark of YHWH’s prophets is that they speak his words, not their own.

Aside from the significance of YHWH ensuring that his greater purposes will be fulfilled when Jonah is re-commissioned—the gospel will go out to the ends of the earth, in this case to Nineveh—we also see in Jonah’s re-commissioning that God often gives us second chances to accomplish that of which we have already made a significant mess. Jonah is an example to us in that he is sustained in his time of trial by his knowledge of God’s word (specifically the Psalms), and he is also an encouragement to those of us who often take more than one time to do things the right way. YHWH commissions Jonah, but does not abandon him when Jonah rejects YHWH’s call. YHWH loves his people enough to discipline them.

In the last half of verse 3, we learn that “*Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth.*” Four times in Jonah’s prophecy the city is described as large (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:1). But the Hebrew text of 3:3 is much more specific as to why the city’s size is so important to what follows. The verse can be variously translated as Nineveh is “large to the gods,” or “a large city to/for God.” The

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 478.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Estelle, Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy, 106.

latter makes more sense in context.<sup>8</sup> The point is that Nineveh is a large city in the heart of pagan Assyria with its multiple deities. Yet, Jonah is told that the city is YHWH's. Jonah would naturally assume that YHWH is Lord over the cities of Israel. But YHWH is also Lord over the pagan Assyrian city to which Jonah is being sent. Jonah might see Assyria as enemy territory, he now knows the city is under YHWH's authority. To paraphrase the Psalm 24:1, "the earth is the Lord's, every square inch of it." No doubt, the same thing holds true today.

That Jonah "arose" and "went" (v. 3) tells us there has been a complete change in Jonah's previously reluctant attitude. It would have taken Jonah a month or so to travel the 500 miles north to Nineveh. As we read in verse 4 as soon as he got there, "*Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.*" The Nineveh of Jonah's day was not quite the great city it had been a millennium earlier, or that it would become under the reign of king Sennacherib a hundred or so years later. But it still was large enough to take Jonah a full day to pass through the city. Jonah did not wait to get to the city's center—the summer palace of Assyrian kings—but he began preaching the words YHWH gave just as soon as he entered the city. "*And [Jonah] called out, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'*" Jonah's message is briefly summarized, but it is not a stretch to assume that the heart of Jonah's preaching was that which we've already read in Jonah's prophecy—the city had become a place of exceedingly great evil, and this had come to YHWH's attention. The words of Jeremiah 18:7–8 also factor in when we consider the content of Jonah's preaching. "*If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.*"

When God speaks, a decision is demanded. Unless the people of Nineveh repent of their sin and trust in YHWH's great mercy to save them, the city would be destroyed in forty days. We know that the number forty is not a random number. "Forty" years or days appears several times in Scripture as a time of waiting and testing. Israel was in the wilderness of the Sinai forty years. Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness for forty days. According to Deuteronomy 9:18, 25, Moses spent forty days of supplication before the Lord.<sup>9</sup> Now Nineveh has forty days to repent.

Jonah does not make his reader wait long to discover the outcome—again, loaded with irony, in this case, bitter irony. We read in verse 5 that upon hearing Jonah preach, "*the people of Nineveh believed God.*" It is interesting that Jonah does not use YHWH here (God's covenant name), but Elohim (a word for the supreme God—the creator), not the covenant Lord of Israel, a name which would have made little sense to pagan Assyrians. In light of the history of Israel (the Northern Kingdom), this is a shocking declaration. YHWH sent prophet after prophet to Israel; Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and a host of others. Instead of repenting and turning back to YHWH in faith, seeking forgiveness, the people and their kings from Jeroboam on, only harden their hearts and pursue pagan ways with greater vigor.

But in pagan Nineveh, the people hear the creator God's call to repentance but one time, they receive it, and they believe in him—that if they repent, their city will be spared. So much so, they respond to YHWH's call to repentance by demonstrating the fruit of faith in YHWH and his promise—action. "*They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.*" These are signs

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<sup>8</sup> Estelle, Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie C. Allen, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), on Jonah 3:4.

throughout the ancient world of grief, sorrow, and mourning. The contrast between the faith and repentance of the Ninevites and the people of Israel could not be greater. When Jesus speaks of the Ninevites repenting and appearing as witnesses in the judgment, the indication is that many of those in Nineveh were genuinely converted—the gospel did go beyond the confines of Israel. Jonah was YHWH’s witness to the neighboring Gentiles which Israel failed to be.

So great was the effect of Jonah’s preaching upon the people that *“the word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.”* Even the unnamed king repented by taking upon himself the garments of grief and mourning, something much different from the royal robe the king usually wears in public. The king too is aware of his sin and the threat of judgment, lest he lead his people in repentance. He was so taken by Jonah’s call and the citizen’s reaction, *“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, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God.’”* So serious was the king to divert YHWH’s wrath, even the animals were made symbols of repentance. The people engaged in a national fast and were exhorted to call out to God. Again, contrast this reaction to Jonah’s preaching, with that of Israel’s reaction to Elijah, Elisha, and Amos.

The king’s decree as not merely symbolic. As we read in the last part of verse 8–verse 9, the king commanded *“let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”* Implied in this is that the great evil—which is never specified, and which came before YHWH’s attention like a bad odor—was something which had been identified by Jonah in his preaching and conduct which came to the realization of the people. The Ninevites knew they must grieve and mourn at their sin, and they must also turn from their evil ways and cease their violent behavior. Desirous of protecting his people, the king hopes that God’s anger will be turned aside and that he may relent. He got his wish, for as we read in 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, and he did not do it.”*

Verse 10 has been the subject of much theological debate across the centuries. Did God actually change his mind and relent, or as in the KJV puts it, did God “repent” (i.e., change his mind) and spare the city? Repentance implies turning from sin, which is why older translations raise controversies that are not actually found in the biblical text. There are those who seek to limit God’s decree by human action, and who say “yes,” God did change his mind and relent *because* the Ninevites believed. But if true, this makes God a mere reactionary to human decisions.

Conundrums like this are easily solved by simply considering the matter of perspective, God’s and ours. As humans limited to both time and space, we can only see God’s eternal decree as it plays out in history. God’s will is hidden from us because we are sinful time-bound creatures who cannot possibly know what God decreed to do from all eternity—unless and until we actually witness the execution of his decree in time. It was always God’s purpose that the gospel be preached in Nineveh. And it was always God’s purpose that many would repent and believe when Jonah arrived (God ensured that he did) and preached.

From a human perspective, Nineveh was a city of concentrated evil. It certainly seemed to be a place doomed to destruction, a place where the inhabitants would likely kill a prophet like Jonah for daring to call people to repentance. Yet it was God’s eternal will that the Ninevites would believe Jonah’s preaching. But from a human perspective, it certainly looked to Jonah and to the king of Nineveh as though the Ninevites realized their sin, repented, gave up their evil ways, and only then did YHWH spare

them from certain judgment. From our limited and sinful perspective it sure looks to us as though God changed his mind and relented once the Ninevites believed. Yet, this is what God has willed all along. But we cannot see things in light of eternity. The problem is not that God's will is pliable—his will does not change, God's will is immutable. The problem is our finite and limited understanding as creatures who can only watch things play out before our eyes. When we describe what we see, yes, God relented and spared Nineveh. But he willed this from all eternity. It is a matter of perspective.

What then do we take with us from Jonah's song and Nineveh's repentance? As we read in our New Testament lesson (both last week in Matthew 12:38-42 and from the parallel passage, our text, Luke 11:29-32) Jesus makes repeated reference to the Jonah story as in some way prefiguring his own messianic mission. Responding to the demand for additional signs, Jesus emphasizes two elements from Jonah's prophecy. The first is our Lord's reference to the "sign of Jonah"—Jonah's confinement in the fish for three days and nights which prefigures Jesus' own death and resurrection. The second is Jonah's role in preaching to the Ninevites which brought about their repentance.

Sadly, although one greater than Jonah had come to Israel preaching about the kingdom of God, the religious leaders refuse to believe his words and demanded more signs. Luke tells us "*when the crowds were increasing, [Jesus] began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.' The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*" As the greater Jonah, Jesus is the final prophet YHWH sends to Israel before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Jesus is also YHWH's true witness to the Gentiles. The people of Nineveh believed Jonah. But the people of Israel refuse to believe in the greater Jonah. This was an evil generation and no more signs will be given it—except our Lord's empty tomb.

Beloved in our texts this time—the story of Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites, and Jesus' warning to Israel—we have heard God's call to repent of our sins and place our trust in Jesus, the greater Jonah, whom God sent to save us from our sins. The question now before us is this: "will we be witnesses against our own evil generation? Or will we be among those on trial, who demand more signs, and who wish to remain indifferent to our sin and the evil around us?" Who are we—Ninevites who believed, or Israelites who didn't?