

# Obeying God

Jonah 3:1-10

## Introduction

One of the most famous plays in football history happened on New Year's Day in the 1929 Rose Bowl. Georgia Tech was playing the University of California. A player for California by the name of Roy Riegals recovered a fumble but somehow got turned around and ran over 60 yards the wrong way. A teammate by the name of Benny Lom caught Riegals and tackled him just before he crossed the goal line. A few plays later California would attempt a punt deep in their end zone as a result of "wrong way Riegals" run, only to have the kick blocked with Georgia Tech scoring a safety. Those two points would eventually be the margin of a Georgia Tech victory.

Riegals mishap occurred in the first half. During half-time, Roy settled into a corner draping a blanket around his shoulders and cried like a baby. The locker room was uncharacteristically quiet that day. Just as half-time was coming to an end, California Coach Nibbs Price looked at his team and simply said, "Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second." Everyone started out of the locker room except for Roy Riegals. The coach approached his broken player and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will start the second." Roy Riegals looked up at his coach and with tears still streaming down his face said, "Coach, I can't do it to save my life. I've ruined you. I've ruined the University of California. I've ruined myself. I couldn't face the crowd in the stadium to save my life."

Coach Nibbs Price reached out and put his hand on the shoulder of Roy Riegals and simply said, “Roy get up and go on back. The game is only half over.” Roy Riegals did get up and go back onto the field, and he played an outstanding second half of football against the Yellow Jackets of Georgia Tech.

A story like this moves one to say, “What a great coach!” However, when we come to the third chapter of Jonah we are inspired to say, “What a great God!” How often it is that we run in the wrong direction just like Roy Riegals and just like Jonah. We blow it big time. We drop the ball for God. We conclude that God can no longer use us. We feel ashamed and determined never to try again.

But God does not give up on us. He comes to us with both challenge and encouragement. He reminds us that it is not our ability he desires as much as it is our availability. He is not looking for talent. He is looking for obedience. God works in surprising and marvelous ways through the lives of very ordinary people who are simply obedient to His call. The testimony of many believers who had obeyed God’s call to both volunteer and career missions bears eloquent witness to this fact. The life of Jonah likewise is a reminder of God’s faithfulness to honor our obedience and bless His Word.

### **1. God Sometimes Gives Second Chances (Jonah 3:1-2)**

Jonah has just experienced the miraculous deliverance from drowning by the great fish God provided (1:17). Jonah’s time in the fish was for the purposes of salvation, transportation and education. Jonah is a different man following all of this and he receives the Lord’s (*Yahweh*) recommission in chapter three. **The word of the Lord came. . . a second time: Go to the great city of Ninevah and proclaim to it the message I give you.** There is a clear parallelism with 1:1-2. The wording is almost

identical. In the Hebrew text three imperatives convey the Lord's command to Jonah: *arise, go, proclaim*. Jonah discovers God is a God of the second chance. He also discovers God's expectation that he be obedient to the original commission.

We do not know how much time had passed between Jonah's being **vomited onto dry land** (2:10) and the Lord's call in 3:1. It may have been immediately, a few days or several months. Regardless of the time lapse, the text signals a "new beginning" for God's reluctant missionary.

Verse two speaks of Ninevah as a **great city**. It was certainly that; a city great in significance and size, but also a city great in sin. God has granted his prophet a second chance because he is patient, gracious and merciful. Ninevah likewise discovered God's grace and mercy, and what kind of God the prophet Jonah served.

Jonah was told precisely and specifically what he was to preach. **Proclaim to it [Ninevah] the message I [God] give you**. Jonah has only one assignment: obey the Lord. He is on a short leash with respect to the message he delivers. His marching orders are clear at two crucial points: 1) where he will speak and 2) what he will say.

Sometimes God's children may feel they are disqualified from serving Him because of past failures and sin. Jonah, however, teaches us that our God is the God of the second chance. Such kindness on God's part is not something about which we should be presumptive however. One should never dismiss God's call or delay in responding to Him. God may provide a second chance, but He does not guarantee a second chance. Further, a second chance may not involve a call that is identical to the first call or even be a call to the same task. Sin and disobedience do have consequences, and it is possible to miss God's best when we refuse His plan or attempt to run from His presence like Jonah.

God's will is **good, pleasing and perfect** (Rom. 12:2). It is the wise believer who does not hesitate, but immediately and completely obeys the word of the Lord. Never forget, it is an honor to serve our great God.

## 2. God Expects Obedience (Jonah 3:3-4)

In chapter one Jonah ran from God. Now in chapter three, Jonah runs with God. The response of God's reluctant missionary in 3:3 is what it should have been in 1:3.

**Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Ninevah.** God is a good God. He had extended His mercy to His servant Jonah. He would now use His servant to extend His mercy to the sinners of Ninevah. Both the messenger and his message would be an evidence of God's love and compassion for the souls of lost people.

When God called Jonah in chapter one he headed two thousand miles west by sea. This time in obedience he heads five hundred miles northeast by land. Traveling by normal means (by camel or donkey caravan) it would have taken approximately one month to get to Ninevah. If he traveled by foot the journey would have been even longer.

**The text says Ninevah was a very important city—a visit required three days.**

The phrase **a very important city** in the Hebrew text is literally *a city great to God*. The phrase occurs no where else in the Old Testament in this particular form. Some Bible scholars understand it to address the physical size of Ninevah. It was a very large city. Others take the phrase as a reference to the significance of the city and its importance in the Assyrian Empire of the day. Still others see it as a reference to the large population (cf. 4:11) of Ninevah. However, there is no reason not to interpret the statement in its most literal sense. The focus of much of Jonah is upon Ninevah and its relationship to God. Ninevah was a city that greatly concerned God. It was important to Him. It was

significant to Him. The thousands of persons of that city who were on the verge of experiencing His just and righteous wrath mattered greatly to Him. They were wicked and evil, but they were not beyond the Lord's hand of mercy. These were people He had created in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). These were people for whom God's Son would die (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2).

Verse three also says a trip to Ninevah was **a visit [that] required three days**.

Critical scholars have accused the author of Jonah of either excessive exaggeration or not knowing his facts. In the first century B.C. Diodorus Siculus stated that Ninevah's total circumference was approximately fifty-five miles. However, the great Assyrian king Sennacherib (701-681 B.C.) wrote that he enlarged the circumference of the city from 9,300 to 21,815 cubits, or about three to seven miles (NAC, vol. 19B, p. 260). If this latter record is correct, a visit requiring three days would seem incorrect. However, the phrase itself is ambiguous and open to more than one reasonable interpretation. The phrase may be intended to cover the entire administrative district of Ninevah which would include cities like Assur, Calah (Nimrud), and even Dur-Sharruken (Khorsabad). Genesis 10:11-12 would support this view. Another position is that the phrase refers to the ancient Oriental practice of hospitality in which a three day visit was the custom. The first day was for the arrival, the second day was given to the primary purpose for the visit, and the third day allowed for the business to be concluded and the return. A third possibility and one I find more attractive is that the phrase refers to the length of ministry necessary for Jonah to evangelize Ninevah proper. Sennacherib's Ninevah had more than a dozen gates. Jonah certainly would have planned on visiting many if not all of these strategic locations, as well as the heart of the city and perhaps the palace, temple

courtyards and other significant public places. To accomplish the mission which God had given him would require a minimum of three days.

When God gives believers a second chance to obey his call, they are to be obedient. This time Jonah does as God has commanded. On the first day of his visit, perhaps a day which involved meeting the leading officials and dignitaries (it is unlikely Jonah would have quietly wandered in unannounced and unnoticed), Jonah proclaims the message which God had given him: **Forty more days and Ninevah will be overturned.** The message is short and to the point. It is only five words in the Hebrew text, though it is quite likely Jonah preached to the Ninevites in their native tongue of Aramaic. It is both a message of mercy and judgment. **Forty days** speaks of God's mercy. There is perhaps still time for repentance. **Ninevah will be overturned** speaks of God's judgment. A time of reckoning has come for Ninevah. While we cannot be certain that this is all Jonah said (verse 4 could be a summary of Jonah's preaching), it seems clear the message was brief and that Jonah delivered it in a straightforward manner. Some have chided Jonah for delivering such a harsh and brief message as if he were attempting to make it as hard as possible for the people of Ninevah to respond. This is unfair. We have no reason for believing that Jonah did anything other than proclaim the message which the Lord had given him (v. 2). It is true Jonah was reluctant in all of this, and that in his heart he still harbored disgust and perhaps even hatred toward Ninevah (see chapter four). Still he did what God commanded. He obeyed God even if he may not have agreed or even understood all that God was doing. It is often the case that we too must obey when we do not fully understand all that God is doing.