

The God of the Second Chance

Jonah 3:1-10

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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 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 halftime, Roy settled into a corner draping a blanket around his shoulders. He cried like a baby. The locker room was uncharacteristically quiet. As halftime 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 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 to play 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 should be inspired to say, “What a great God!” How often it is that we run in the wrong direction just like Roy Riegals, 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 think about giving up, never trying again!
- However, I’ve got great news! God does not give up on us. He comes to us again and again 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 faithfulness. 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 life of Jonah is a wonderful reminder of the awesome truth: Our God is the God of the second chance. Why? Three reasons are noted in our text.

I. Our God is a Good God. (3:1-4)

- Jonah has just experienced God’s miraculous deliverance from drowning by the great fish the Lord provided (1:17). Jonah’s time in the fish was for the purposes of salvation, transportation, re-commission, and education. Jonah is a different man following all of this and he receives the Lord’s (*Yahweh*) re-commission in chapter three. The Word of the Lord came...a second time: go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you. God’s goodness is seen in the fact that...

1. God Extends His Mercy to His Servants. (3:1-2)

- There is a clear parallelism here with 1:1-2. The wording is almost identical. In the Hebrew text three imperatives convey the Lord's command to Jonah: arise, go, preach. Jonah discovers that God is a God of the second chance and that he extends His mercy to His servants. He also discovers God's expectation is 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.
- Jonah 3:2, like Jonah 1:2, speaks of Nineveh 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. Nineveh likewise will discover 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. "Preach to it [Nineveh] 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.
- **Application**. Sometimes we may feel disqualified from serving God because of past failures and sin. Jonah, however, teaches us that our God is the God of the second chance. However, such kindness on God's part is not something about which we should be presumptive. We should never dismiss God's call or delay in

responding to him. God may grant 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 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.

- God's goodness is seen in the fact that...

2. God extends His mercy to sinners. (3:3-4)

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

A. **God's mercy is seen in His messenger.** (3:3)

- Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh. 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, to the citizens, of Nineveh. God's messenger is 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 Nineveh. If he traveled by foot, the journey would have been even longer.

- The text says Nineveh 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 nowhere else the Old Testament in this particular form.
 - Some Bible scholars understand it to address the physical size of Nineveh. It was a very large city.
 - Others take the phrase as a reference to the significance of the city and its importance to the Assyrian empire of the day.
 - Still others see it as a reference to the large population (cf. 4:11) of Nineveh.
 - However, there is no reason not to interpret the statement in its most literal sense. The focus of Jonah is upon Nineveh and its relationship to God. Nineveh was a city that greatly concerned God. It was important to Him. It was significant to Him. The tens of thousands of persons who lived in that city were on the verge of experiencing His just and righteous wrath, and yet they 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 Nineveh 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 Nineveh'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 open to more than one reasonable interpretation.

- The phrase may be intended to cover the entire administrative district of Nineveh 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 Nineveh proper. Sennacherib's Nineveh 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. This time Jonah does as God has commanded.

B. God's mercy is sounded in His message. (3:4)

- 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 Nineveh 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. “Nineveh will be overturned” speaks of God's judgment. But time of reckoning has come for Nineveh.
- 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 crude message, as if he were attempting to make it as hard as possible for the people of Nineveh 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 that Jonah was reluctant in all of this, and that in his heart he still harbored disgust and perhaps even hatred toward Nineveh (see chapter four). However, 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. Remember, these are the exact words the Lord gave him. Forty days opened the door to the possibility of repentance and a stay of judgment. Our God is a good God.

II. Our God is a Great God.

(3:5-9)

- Jonah disappears from the text at this point (until chapter 4). Nineveh is now the center of attention and the Scriptures record their response to Jonah's message and ministry. Billy Graham has said, "I have found that when I present the simple message of the gospel of Jesus Christ with authority, quoting the very Word of God, that the Holy Spirit takes that message and drives it supernaturally into the heart." Jonah's message found a similar response in Nineveh. He proclaimed the simple message God gave him and the results were nothing less than supernatural. God should be honored by all.

1. God should be honored by the insignificant. (3:5)

- The Ninevites believed God. The word "believe" is *aman* Hebrew. We get our word "amen" from it. Jonah had only preached for a single day. He was just getting started and the people of Nineveh believed the message he proclaimed. The sailors of chapter 1 had been ready to believe God (1:16). Now, a second group of Gentile pagans commit themselves to God. Jonah's words had found **eager ears and open hearts.**
- A reasonable question at this point would be, "Why?" Why were the Ninevites so ready and receptive? Several possible reasons can be offered:
 - 1) The power of God and His Word (cf, Heb. 4:12);
 - 2) Although we cannot be certain, Jonah's physical appearance following his sojourn in the great fish could have been rather startling;
 - 3) Several natural disasters perhaps served as omens. History records plagues in both 765 and 759 B.C. A total solar eclipse occurred during the reign of the Assyrian king Assur-Dan III (773-756 B.C.) on June 15, 763

B.C. It is interesting to note that ancient Assyrian texts give ominous predictions of what could happen following a solar eclipse. This includes “The king will be deposed and killed and a worthless fellow will seize the throne”; “The king will die, rain from heaven will flood the land. There will be famine”; “A deity will strike the king and fire consume the land”; “The city walls will be destroyed.”¹

- We should remember that God often uses such devices available to His sovereign control to humble prideful human hearts and prepare them for His Word. It may be that God had been at work for some time in getting Nineveh “ready” for the message of His prophet. From our limited, finite perspective, sending someone to Nineveh to preach to such a wicked people would seem foolish and a waste of time. From God's perspective, the people were in need and the time was right. A tremendous revival broke out that had an effect on the entire city. The evidence of the genuineness of the revival is summarized in verse 5 and detailed in verses 6 through 9.
- Fasting and the putting on of sackcloth were both signs of mourning, humility, and repentance over sin (cf. 1 Kings 21:27; Neh. 9:1). Fasting involves the self denial of food and sometimes water with the specific purpose of focusing upon the Lord and one's relationship to Him. A fast may be short (a day) or long (40 days; cf. Jesus in the wilderness in Matt. 4:1-11). It may be partial (abstaining from food) or total (abstaining from food and water). A total fast is usually of a shorter duration because of the essential need for water by the body for survival. Fasting is most often a private matter, although there are those occasions (such as

¹ Cited in Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, p. 491.

that which took place in Nineveh) where it is of a corporate nature. Under no circumstances is fasting to be for show. Jesus sternly criticized such behavior as hypocritical, Matt. 6:16).

- The putting on of sackcloth (and *ashes*, which can be translated “dust” in verse 6) has a wide background in antiquity. The use of sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning and contrition was widespread. Anguish and distress over a tragedy or sin were at the heart of the act. Jacob mourned the apparent death of his son Joseph by tearing his clothes and putting on sackcloth (Gen. 37:34). Job observed the rite to demonstrate his grief and pain (Job 16:15). The rite may have begun in the mourning of the dead. It became popular in times of national emergency and lamentation, as we see here. By these actions, persons sought to convey their genuine remorse over sin and the earnestness of their plea for mercy. This is certainly what we see in Jonah and the extent to which the people went to demonstrate their repentance over sin is truly remarkable.

2. God should be honored by the important. (3:6-9)

- Even the king of Nineveh, a reference to the Assyrian king, or the chief leader of Nineveh rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

A. **We should honor God by what we do.** (3:6)

- He that held the highest position in the land humbled himself and took the lowest position. The implication is that he did this in view of the citizens of Nineveh. In this instance, a public display would not be an act of spiritual pride or arrogance. This was the king! Nothing but total and complete

humiliation could have been the result. The leader of the land acknowledged his sin before God. Where are such leaders today?

B. We honor God by what we say. (3:7-9)

- Verse 7-9 record the official decree that was sent out by the king. Verse 6 was the king's personal response to Jonah's message. These verses contain his official response. In a sense, the decree was a royal seal or stamp of approval with respect to what had already happened spontaneously and completely throughout the city (v. 5), That the nobles are included in the proclamation of the decree would suggest that the king of Nineveh (Assyria) was perhaps operating at this particular time from a position of weakness, not strength.
- The decree contains four expectations in response to Jonah's preaching: 1) A total fast (v. 7); 2) Wearing of sackcloth by both man and animals (v. 8); 3) Calling upon God with a sense of urgency (v. 8); and, 4) Turning from evil ways and violence (v. 8). That animals would be included in both the fast and the wearing of sackcloth is unusual and rare, but not altogether unexpected. This is a desperate and unique situation. Total humiliation and submission before Jonah's God is the only appropriate response in light of what the prophet has said.
- Our walk should match our talk. The Assyrians were an evil and wicked people. There had to be a change. Verse 8b literally says, "Let them *each* turn from his evil ways." Both a general (them) and individual (each) responsibility is indicated. The word "evil" is significant in Jonah. It is the Hebrew word *raca* and it occurs nine times. It carries the idea of evil, trouble,

calamity (destruction, v.10).

The phrase “their violence” is literally “from the violence which is in their hands.” The term “violence” is a popular one with the prophets (Isa. 59:6; Ezek. 7:23; Hos. 12:1; Amos 3:10) and suggest moral wickedness and aggressive violence toward others (especially other nations).

- Verse 9 recalls the words of the ship captain in 1:6. The heathen both on the ship and now in Nineveh have come to understand the central truth of the book (really the central truth of the Bible!): “Salvation comes from the Lord” (2:9). The Lord, however, is sovereign. No one dictates to Him how He will act and the king of Nineveh recognizes this very well. Who knows? God may yet relent...so that we will not perish.
- The God of Jonah is a God of compassion. It is true that He is fiercely angry with sin (cf. Rom. 1:18ff), yet we can hope that in light of our turning from sin, He will turn and deliver rather than destroy. Indeed, this is what God did, as verse 10 records.

III. Our God is a Gracious God. (3:10)

- Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way. God relented (he had compassion) from the disaster. God relented (the *KJV* says “repented”). Relenting on the part of God does not involve a change in His nature. He is the same always and forever (Heb. 13:8). Rather, God’s relenting is His consistent and appropriate response to repentance over sin and intercessory prayer. Nineveh changed direction, not God!
1. God requires repentance from sin.

- It was the people of Nineveh who changed. Before they were going against God and destruction lay in their path. Now they are going with God and forgiveness is their experience. They changed in their will and God willed a change.

2. God responds to repentance from sin.

- God's hand of judgment is withdrawn toward Nineveh, but, sadly, only temporarily. This generation repented and it was a real turning (conversion) to God. God responded with forgiveness. The words of Jesus in Matt. 12:41 indicate a true and genuine salvation of the Ninevites. However, and tragically, the revival was short lived. Why? We do not know. Nineveh would soon return to its evil and violent ways and in 612 B.C. the city would be completely destroyed by the Babylonians. The prophet Nahum would be raised up by God to deliver that message. Then there would be no repentance. Then there would be no deliverance. However, on this day, the grace of God was released and it flowed bountifully throughout the city of Nineveh.

Conclusion

- Our God is the God of the second chance for sinners and saints alike. When God calls, we must not presume, we must answer with a "yes." When He sends, we must not hesitate, we must go, and what He tells us to say, we must not adjust, we must speak. Then people will hear his message and have the opportunity and responsibility to respond. Not all will believe, but some will. And, we might be surprised at who does say "yes" to the Word of the Lord.
- The famous evangelist Charles Finney said, "It is the great business on earth of every Christian to save souls. Now if you are thus neglecting the main business of life, what are you living for?"