

Jonah 3

- We rejoin Jonah having come up from the fish at the end of Chapter 2
 - As we studied last week, Jonah hadn't prayed for release from the fish
 - Rather he assumed he had died, expelled from God's presence, as he says in verse 4
 - And in the midst of his uncomfortable circumstances he praises God and commits to faithfulness
 - Had Jonah actually been in the after-life, outside God's presence, then this kind of petition would have had no effect
 - Jonah's opportunity would have been lost
 - But now, he has been deposited on the shores of Israel
 - Can you imagine what must have gone through his mind in the moment
 - Again, I am reminded of the scene from Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, where Ebenezer Scrooge awakens to discover that he hadn't died after all
 - And upon his resurrection from his final vision, he is a new man
 - He excitedly sets about making amends for his callous and uncaring life
 - I wonder did Jonah lie there for a while trying to make sense of it all?
 - Did he immediately rejoice over his return from the dead?
 - Did he run excitedly toward home in Gath-Hepher to tell everyone of what had happened?
- Well, if he had made it home, I suspect Jonah wouldn't have received quite the welcome he expected
 - Remember, he's spent 72 hours in the stomach of a fish

- And though we understand that Jonah was protected supernaturally in that situation, don't assume it was a consequence-free experience
- If you subject a person to that kind of environment for that length of time, it's likely certain things happen
 - For example, his body was exposed to the chemicals of the fish's stomach
 - Those chemicals are designed to dissolve organic matter and digest it
 - Like any acid, they would likely have begun to dissolve body hair first
 - And bleached the skin white
- Given the violent nature of the storm, it's also possible that Jonah may have lost some or all of his clothing in the waves
 - And what was left probably wasn't in good shape after leaving the fish
- So imagine if you can, a hairless, bleached white, stark naked man walking up from the beach
 - Except this isn't California
 - This was ancient Israel
 - Not only will Jonah likely not be well-received at home
 - He will present a striking image to the city of Nineveh
- Speaking of Nineveh, God hasn't forgotten that this is why He gave Jonah the reprieve

Jonah 3:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,
Jonah 3:2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you."

Jonah 3:3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk.

- Very pointedly, the author says the word of the Lord came a second time

- This is the second time God has given Jonah instructions, and you can't help but get the point
 - In light of what has just transpired in the previous chapters, we're reminded that this is the second time Jonah has been given to get it right
 - The first time the word came to Jonah, he fled and all the misery of Chapters 1 and 2 were the result
 - Even the symmetry with 1:1 reinforces the picture...
- The instructions this time were substantially the same as what God gave Jonah the first time
 - Arise and go to Nineveh and proclaim what I tell you
 - Specifically, that judgment would come upon the city unless they repented
 - The way Chapter 3 begins reminds me of a practical Biblical principle for godly obedience
 - If you want to be obedient to God's will in your decision-making, but you don't know what God's will is in a particular situation
 - Do the last thing God told you to do, until He gives you new instructions
 - Jonah heard God tell him to go to Nineveh
 - And now after traveling a long distance by foot over land and then spending days tossed on a sea and in a fish
 - Then back on the land
 - Jonah might have asked the question what does God want me to do now?
 - And the answer is clearly to do the last thing God told him
 - Although I wouldn't call this a law or Biblical certainty, I do believe that God generally doesn't give you new direction until you first obey the direction you've already received
 - God seeks obedience more than anything

[1Sam. 15:22](#) Samuel said,

**“Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
As in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.**

- Until He has our obedience, I don't believe He's inclined to move us forward in His plan
 - Jonah knew everything he needed to know from God's original command
 - God just gives Jonah the courtesy of repeating it here
- And with the experience of the fish fresh on Jonah's mind, he obeys and leaves for Nineveh
 - The end of verse 3 raises a bit of a puzzle for us though
 - At first reading, we might conclude that Nineveh was three days walk from where Jonah found himself
 - But that interpretation doesn't fit for at least two reasons
 - First, Nineveh was much farther than three-days walk away from anywhere in Israel
 - Secondly, the description was included at the end of verse 3 as a way of explaining the “greatness” of Nineveh
 - And telling us Nineveh was 3-days walk away doesn't say anything about how great it was
 - It's a description of how big it was
 - The answer is found in the verse where we first hear of Nineveh in Genesis

[Gen. 10:11](#) From that land he went forth into Assyria, and built Nineveh and Rehoboth-ir and Calah,

[Gen. 10:12](#) and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.

- When Nineveh was founded by Nimrod in the years after the flood, it was actually a large city called Nineveh and three smaller surrounding cities or suburbs
 - Taken together they are called the great city

- And it was so great, it took three days to walk from one end to the other
 - And since the average man could walk 20 or more miles in a day, it was a very large city
 - Almost the distance between San Antonio and Austin
- This is a huge area
 - Think about your challenge to convert such a city, if you were Jonah
 - No radio, no phone, no cars, no bull horns
 - How could we hope to accomplish what God demanded?
 - If you thought that, though, then you were already on the wrong track
 - Because you're already thinking that your success or failure is dependent on your human physical abilities
 - But declaring God's truth to men is not a function of men's ability – it happens by God's power whether on foot, by car, with a satellite or just one man's voice

[Jonah 3:4](#) Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

[Jonah 3:5](#) Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

- Jonah sets out in this city and makes it one days' walk
 - And he cries out with the words that God gave Him
 - What Jonah says is that in 40 days the city would be overthrown
 - The Hebrew word for overthrown in *haphak*
 - In the days since Moses wrote the Torah, the word *haphak* gained a new unique meaning
 - Think of it like the phrase "9-11"
 - Before September 11, 2001, the phrase 9-11 probably had little or no special meaning to anyone

- But since that date, the phrase 9-11 is loaded with meaning
 - If a person were to walk into an airport today and announce to the guards at the security checkpoint that before today was over, there would be another 9-11, what do you think would happen?
 - Well this word, *haphak*, was the word God used repeatedly in His conversation with Abraham in Chapter 19 of Genesis, as He disclosed his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah
 - And ever since Moses recorded those words, they had become synonymous with the destruction of those two cities
 - So what Jonah had actually declared to the inhabitants of Nineveh was that in 40 days, your city is going to experience the same judgment as Sodom and Gomorrah
- If you don't know much about that story, you should know that S&G were utterly destroyed by God for their wickedness
 - Nothing was left
 - They were wiped off the face of the earth
 - And their destruction was so complete and so obviously supernatural, that they became legend
 - Think about it?
 - We're still talking about them today
 - Even people who have never read the Bible know about Sodom and Gomorrah
 - We even have a term - sodomy - to remind us of the depravity of that city
 - And just like today, Gentiles like the Ninevites knew of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and knew that a powerful God had been responsible for their destruction
 - And Jonah said that in 40 days they were going to be recipients of a similar outcome
- It's also interesting to note that Jonah walked just one day's walk

- It's not clear whether that means he only walked one day because the city responded so quickly that he didn't need to walk farther
- Or perhaps it's a sign of his half-hearted effort at his ministry to that city
 - We've said before that Jonah had little interest in seeing the city repent, principally because of their longstanding conflict with Israel
 - But as I alluded to on the first night, there is more to Jonah's opposition than first meets the eye
- Jonah's ministry took place during the reign of King Jeroboam II of the northern kingdom of Israel, around the years of 780-770 BC
 - There was another prophet in Israel at the same time, a man called Amos
 - Amos was a farmer called by God to pronounce God's word to a wicked nation and many of the surrounding countries
 - As a contemporary of Amos, Jonah would have been well aware of Amos' prophetic words to the nation
 - And what Amos told the nation of Israel was quite disturbing
 - It declared that God had lost patience with the Northern Kingdom and hope was lost
 - They were going to be judged harshly and there was no reprieve
 - No amount of appeals nor requests for mercy were going to stop the judgment
 - In fact in Amos says:

[Amos 4:11](#) "I overthrew you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, And you were like a firebrand snatched from a blaze; Yet you have not returned to Me," declares the LORD.

[Amos 4:12](#) "Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; Because I will do this to you, Prepare to meet your God, O Israel."

- And at one point in Amos' book, he tells the nation that they will be taken into captivity to a place called Kir
 - Kir is an ancient name for the region of Mesopotamia, the land of Assyria, whose capital was Nineveh
 - So here's Jonah, walking through the capital city of the nation he knows God said will be the country He will use to destroy Israel
 - In fact, Amos' prophecy included references to Sodom and Gomorrah
 - And now here's Jonah given word to proclaim the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah upon Nineveh
 - What a paradox for Jonah
 - On the one hand, his own beloved people stand in jeopardy to God's wrath with no hope of a reprieve
 - And on the other hand, God brings a similar message of judgment upon a nation designated as Israel's destroyer, but this time the opportunity for repentance is included
 - And to add insult to injury, A prophet to the nation of Israel has been designated as the one to deliver the message to Israel's enemy
 - Now we have an even better understanding of why Jonah worked so hard to avoid obeying God's call
- It seems to me there is a clear message about the nature of our ministry in service to God, hidden in the story of Jonah and Amos
 - God calls men to serve Him and His call is unqualified
 - It is unqualified in that he may call a trained religious servant like Jonah or a farmer like Amos
 - He may call us to minister to our own people in our own neighborhood, or a foreign people thousands of miles away
 - He may call us to deliver a message that people want to hear, or a message they refuse to hear
 - He may call us to a ministry that agrees with our personal desires and goals, or to a ministry that offends our pride and frustrates our plans

- He may call us to witness for people, or to witness against them
 - But above all and regardless of which place we find ourselves, God calls us to obey Him and trust Him for whatever purpose He has in mind
 - Though they were contemporaries serving the same God, Amos and Jonah had very different ministries
 - And though we are of one Body and united in one Spirit, we will have different ministries with different purposes and different results
 - Our ministries will often intersect
 - And at least for a time may align to work together toward a common purpose
 - But ultimately we must all be true to our own calling
 - Or be prepared to suffer “the fish”
- Finally, the people of Nineveh responded, we’re told in verse 5
 - Jonah didn’t ask them to repent
 - He didn’t even offer the option
 - The message was strictly one of coming judgment
 - And the people react by believing God, calling a fast, and putting on sackcloth
 - The statement about belief speaks for itself, and it’s a dramatic turn of events
 - First, Jonah hasn’t exactly been a persuasive speaker in this ministry
 - Think about it
 - He’s not exactly the most motivated guy when it comes to seeing his message embraced
 - He hasn’t even reached the majority of the city
 - Yet his proclamation is a big hit
 - The people are professing belief and showing obvious signs of repentance

- How did they know to show repentance?
 - Or why did they think it would work?
- Well, if there's an answer for that (beyond the obvious answer that God brought about repentance) it's the fact that they received a warning at all
- One of the notable aspects of the Sodom and Gomorrah story was the suddenness of the cities' destruction
 - There was no warning, no prophet sent to spare the city
 - Only the righteous Lot and his immediate family received mercy on the basis that they were already righteous by faith

[Luke 17:28](#) "It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; [Luke 17:29](#) but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.

[Luke 17:30](#) "It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.

- Those cities were destroyed in a moment without prior warning
 - And they became an example in that way
- So when a prophet strolls into town with this message, it leaves hope that the end is not pre-determined
 - And they respond with acts of repentance obviously hoping to forestall the destruction
- Ultimately the real answer for why the people do what they do, is that God purposed to save the city and His Spirit brought this response to God's word
 - And if there were any doubts, we can know this from two details in the description
 - First it was all people in the city, not just some or just those who heard Jonah
 - Secondly, it was the least to the greatest
 - It wasn't limited to a certain group, or a certain age
 - This was universal acceptance

- Take a comparison with Billy Graham, about to step into Yankee Stadium, full of people
 - And beforehand I asked you to predict how many would respond
 - How many would you guess?
 - What about the entire stadium?
 - And then the entire City of New York?
- But instead of Billy Graham it's a very irritated and impatient New York cabbie giving the invitation
 - Now when you get that response, who do you credit
 - It's a supernatural response
- It's time we in the church lived what we say we believe – faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ
 - We think too small when we say people will not listen to us unless we can sit down and talk with them in a certain way, on a certain level
 - Jonah was about as unlikely an evangelist as you can imagine, and not even Pentecost can compare with the response he received to God's word

[Jonah 3:6](#) When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.

[Jonah 3:7](#) He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.

[Jonah 3:8](#) "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.

[Jonah 3:9](#) "Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."

- Having reached everyone else in the kingdom, naturally it also reached the king
 - And like the people, the king displayed repentance in response to the message

- This was probably King Adad Nirari III, who according to ancient Assyrian records was monotheistic – a rarity in that culture
- He did three things to demonstrate humility before this God
 - He left his throne, signifying that God was the authority in this matter
 - He took off his robe and put on sackcloth like the people
 - A rough cheap material identified with mourning
 - Finally, he sat in ashes, another sign of public mourning and repentance
- Then he ordered that all men and cattle should be in sackcloth as well
 - The reason for including the livestock was not because they needed, much less felt, repentance
 - It was an expression of what the owner felt and a sign of the entire nation joining in a common response
- The king also decrees that no one eat or drink anything
 - Though this seems harsh, it's probably the clearest example of how surely the King believed Jonah
 - He was so sure that the entire city was going to be destroyed in 40 days, that he was willing to risk leading the city to death by dehydration if it could alter God's plans
 - It seems a sure sign that he was convinced that the death was coming one way or another unless God relented due to their earnest appeals
 - It was an all or nothing strategy that could only make sense if it was based on a true faith in God's prophetic word
- Finally, the king orders everyone to turn from their evil deeds
 - It's important to note that repentance isn't true repentance if it isn't accompanied by a turning away from the sin that prompted the repentance

- And now the King says perhaps we will have persuaded this God to turn away from His anger
- And in verse 10 we read

Jonah 3:10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

- God relented or changed His mind regarding His plans
 - This kind of summary statement always carries with it confusion over how it is that God could essentially change His mind
 - The language suggests that kind of outcome, and yet the reality in scripture is that God doesn't change His mind
 - His purposes are known and set before the foundation of the world
 - And in fact, the conversion of Nineveh could have only happened by God's hand in the first place
 - And even before that, it was God who worked so hard to bring Jonah to Nineveh
 - Clearly God intended Nineveh to respond in the way they did, and therefore God relented as He planned
 - But in the normal ordinary language of the author, the best way to characterize God's response is to say He relented or changed His plan
 - It's a natural way to present the narrative, but it isn't meant to be a theological thesis on the nature of God's mind or His ability to plan for the future
- But from the perspective of the men of Nineveh, their repentance had the effect of appeasing God and causing Him to spare the city, which it did, as He intended