

# Jonah 3

## *Nineveh's Turnabout*

### 1. Introduction

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Jonah is on the verge of a new beginning. History appears to repeat itself. Though half way through the book, Jonah has not even begun to carry out his commission. Not one single step has been taken in Nineveh's direction. Yet God has moved further; at least his prophet now stands facing the direction of Nineveh.

In 3:1-3a we hear the Lord repeat his commission to Jonah. This time the prophet listens.

From verse 3b on we find ourselves in another world. We get to know more about Nineveh. We take a look inside her walls and see Jonah at work there. What does a city “three days' journey in breadth” (RSV) mean? Is that not, and certainly for those times, improbably large? Jonah's preaching has great and unexpected success (vv.3b-5).

How is it possible that a cosmopolitan city such as Nineveh can be converted so suddenly and on such a massive scale? We are told about this conversion in detail (vv.6-9). The chapter closes with the Lord's reaction to this (v.10).

### 2. Text notes

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#### *Verses 1-3a*

The Lord gives Jonah the commission to go to Nineveh for the second time. Notice that there is no word of reproach given in Jonah's direction. The Lord does not mention what has happened. The initiative does come from the Lord again, though.

Why did Jonah not go to Nineveh out of his own initiative? Is he afraid that the Lord will not want to use him again for this mission or does he secretly hope that he will be left in peace?

Jonah receives the same commission (1:2). The first time, the Lord told him why he had to go to Nineveh. Now that he actually goes, God warns him not to change the message. *“Proclaim to it the message I give you.”* Jonah will have to tell Nineveh exactly what the Lord has commanded him to say.

Nineveh is described as a metropolitan city. The words “three days' journey in breadth” emphasize this. This is not meant to give the measurements of the city however. If that were so, one day would have been about enough time to cross Nineveh. But Jonah *began* to go into the city (v.4) one day's journey. This appears to be the first of the three.

These “three days' journey” are probably meant to indicate that you needed three days in order to get a good impression of the city. In this way this verse paints the

backdrop against which the following events are played out. But verse 4 also has a clear meaning. You may ask yourself why Jonah only goes on one day's journey. He would have been very industrious if he had made a three day journey in one day. Alternatively Jonah could have done as little of his work as possible. He went no further than one day's journey. Above all, having come so far would he only have opened his mouth the one time? The message itself could hardly have been shorter.

But *that* is not what is stated. You need three days to visit the most important places in Nineveh. One day of preaching judgment is enough to cause the inhabitants to search their hearts. Jonah's message burns through the city like wild fire and it has immediate noticeable results – repentance.

Jonah's message is short and clear. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The same word in Hebrew is also used for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nineveh awaits the same fate. As great as the evil of the Ninevites is, so great is God's wrath towards them.

One day of proclaiming judgment brings about an enormous turnaround in Nineveh. "The Ninevites believed God." That is to say, not only did they believe the words of Jonah but, moreover, they also place their trust in God on the basis of the message which they have heard. They humble themselves before the Lord and lay their futures in his hand. That humility must appear genuine, so they proclaim a fast. Further, everyone, without exception, must clothe himself in mourning. This sackcloth is a rough material which is worn from the middle down over a naked body as a sign of sorrow and penance.

#### *Verses 6 - 9*

It seems strange that the government also calls people to fast (v.7). Is not the entire population already doing so? Is such a command from high places necessary? The problem disappears if we accept that verses 6-9 expand on verse 5.

First, a summary of the reaction of Nineveh to the proclamation is given (v.5). Then follows a report of how that reaction actually took place (vv.6-9). We are given all sorts of details. The fasting appears not to be a spontaneous reaction from the people but an official time of penance declared by the king and his nobles.

In verse 6 we see the king himself give the example. He does even more than he expects of his subjects. The penance is very radical, even the animals must join in. The wearing of sackcloth by animals can also be read about in the apocryphal book Judith 4:10. Everything points to the seriousness with which people in Nineveh humble themselves before the Lord.

"Let [everyone] give up their evil ways." (v.8) "Way" indicates somebody's behaviour in its entirety. An "evil way" opens on to a dangerous and ethically lax walk of life. Notice the connection in verse 10 between the words "evil" and the "evil" with which God had threatened them. The same word "evil" is used in both circumstances (RSV). The word "evil" appears to mean harm for those involved.

"And their violence." These words point to the violent way with which people apparently dealt with each other. People had oppressed their neighbours in all sorts

of ways including violence, bloodshed, social injustice, and moral misdeeds. They understood very well the points on which repentance was necessary.

Verse 9 deals with the same as verse 5. "Who knows?" does not mean - let's chance it. It indicates that, on the one hand, the Ninevites were convinced of their own guilt. On the other hand they hoped for God's mercy. They clung to the Lord and prayed that he could forget his anger.

#### *Verse 10*

The Lord repents of the evil he had announced to Nineveh. He decides against it and does not do it.

### **3. Comments for today**

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1. For the second time, the Lord charges Jonah to go to Nineveh. He does this with virtually the same words as the first time. This emphasizes that the Lord does not give up his goal, not even when his servants are resisting. He knows how to achieve his ends even in the most godless city imaginable. He is not dependant on man to carry out his will. Let that encourage you, when the weight of your task weighs you down. Let it also prevent you from overestimating yourself and underestimating God's capacities. At the same time it warns you not to be obstructive. God carries on, with or without your help.
2. The people in Nineveh are given 40 days. After that time the judgment will be carried out. This time is no less than an appeal for repentance. This time given for repentance highlights a detail of the character of the Lord's dealings. Behind the most terrible proclamations of judgment, God's love is at work. Even then he is trying to move people to conversion and repentance.
3. Sorrow and repentance needs to take on a concrete form. Only when God "saw how they turned from their evil ways" did he find a reason not to go ahead with the punishment. Repentance cannot remain as merely inner sorrow about sin, much less can it be just a vague feeling of misgiving. It must take its form in the turning away from an evil way of life. Sorrow and repentance are not only matters of your heart, but also of all your actions in every aspect of life.
4. Living under God's guidance is something completely different than being subjected to fate. There is communion with God on the basis of the promises he gives, and we are bound to the demands he makes. That is what makes communion with the Lord so cordial and life giving.

### **4. Summary**

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Jonah 3 demonstrates various parallels with Jonah 1. Jonah 3 also begins with the charge from the Lord. After that, the background is painted in, just as in Jonah 1. Before our eyes Nineveh becomes a mighty, large city. Nevertheless, just like the sailors, she comes speedily to repentance. Verse 5 states that, in summary form, immediately. This immediate summary emphasizes the speed with which the people repented. Their repentance is in great contrast with Jonah (see Jonah 1,2 and 4).

Nineveh too, comes to repentance through Jonah's word. And what a word that is! It could not possibly be shorter or sharper. Also here a leader steps into the limelight (cf. 3:6,7 with 1:6) and calls heathens to God. On both occasions the intention of their repentance is "that we do not perish." (1:6,14; 3:9)

In the original text the same word for "perish" is used in both chapters. Verse 5 has already recounted the reaction of the people to Jonah's message. Therefore that does not have to be mentioned again, after the announcement of the decree of the government. In this way the tension-creating question of verse 9 ("Who knows?") can be immediately followed by the outcome. Like Jonah 1:15,16, Jonah 3 also ends first with the actions of the heathens, in order to give detailed attention to the prophet (see Jonah 1:1-17 -2:10 and Jonah 4).

The turning away from evil by the Ninevites, and the repentance of God from the evil he had announced sets the theme for the following chapter.

## **5. Tips for introduction and study**

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1. Place Jonah 3 against the background of both previous chapters. Compare then 3:1-3a with 1:1-3. It can be enlightening to note a few similarities and differences between both sections. Try and work out what the meaning of these are. Give attention also to the similarities and differences between 3:3b-10 and 1:4-16.
2. Just as with Jonah's repentance, Nineveh's turnabout is God's work. Note the elements in this history which make this clear. Try to show why the Lord wants us to see how his hand is at work. What does this tell us about him? Make it clear that God mobilizes people completely and yet they have responsibility.
3. Determine the place of the 40-day period as it relates to the sharp proclamation of judgment. Consider what place the threat of judgment has in the proclamation of the gospel.
4. The men of Nineveh believed God. Try to establish a concrete idea of what this actually says. Look at the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 21 in connection with the idea of belief. In all the similarities, look beyond the difference between the Old and New Testaments. Note also the place of the Ninevites, who live as heathens outside of God's covenant with Israel.
5. Pay attention to God's repentance (vv. 9,10). Alongside this consider texts of the Bible such as Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:29. Compare these with texts such as Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:11; Jeremiah 18:1-12 (see also Jeremiah 12:7-17). Determine why there is no inner contradiction between these verses.

## **6. Discussion aid**

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1. Is there any point in paying attention to the structure of Jonah 3? Is it important to see similarities and differences with the previous chapters?
2. The threat of God's judgment gives depth to the proclamation of the gospel. What do you think of this statement? What implication does it have for spreading the gospel?

3. Is there any point in asking if the inhabitants of Nineveh had saving faith? What did it really mean, that the inhabitants of Nineveh believed God?
4. The Lord did not spare Nineveh on the basis of her penance and repentance. However, there is no chance of mercy without it. What is the relationship between repentance and mercy?
5. God repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to the Ninevites. Does that make God changeable? What do you think of the statement "God will radically change course but not council" (J. Kamphuis, Aantekening bij J.A. Heijns Dogmatiek, p.25)?
6. What difference is there between a fatalistic attitude toward life and a life based on faith in the providence of God? Compare these two attitudes in connection with Nineveh's repentance.

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