

Bible Study – Jonah

Chapter 3

When we look at the structure of the opening verses of chapter 3, we will see that they are almost identical to those in chapter 1:

Chapter One	Theme	Chapter Three
Verse 1-2	God's Command	Verse 1-2
Verse 3	Jonah's Reaction	Verse 3
Verse 4-13	The Threat of Judgement	Verse 4
Verse 14-15	The Prayer for Deliverance	Verse 5-9
Verse 16-17	The Rescue	Verse 10

Again, God says, “*get up and go*” (**v2**) and this time Jonah obeys (**v3**).

Nineveh

The ancient city of Nineveh was located just across the river from where the modern city of Mosul in Iraq now stands. The city was built along the banks of the Tigris River by Nimrod, a descendant of Noah, and made capital of Assyria by King Sennacherib around 700 BC. The ruins of Nineveh can be found 250 miles north of Baghdad and some 500 miles from Jonah's hometown.

The Assyrian nation descended from the children of Ham, one of Noah's sons (**Genesis 10:6, 8-11**), and grew to become the most powerful empire in the Biblical world. They worshipped a range of gods and goddesses with Ashur viewed as the head of their pantheon.

Boasting a population of over 120,000 people (although some suggest that it may have been as large as 600,000), Nineveh was the stronghold of the Assyrian army; a city with over 1,500 towers and city walls thick enough to drive three chariots side by side along the top of them. The prophet Nahum would later refer to Nineveh as a “*city of blood*” and of “*endless cruelty*” (**Nahum 3:1**).

Nineveh was a city “*so large it took three days to see it all*” (**Jonah 3:3**). Although, since archaeological excavations have shown that Nineveh was about seven and a half miles in circumference, it probably would not have taken three days to walk through, or around, the city, but it may be that it actually took three days to walk around a wider area known as Nineveh but the city itself was much smaller. This argument seems more plausible when we read about the building of Nineveh:

“From there he expanded his territory to Assyria, building the cities of Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen (the great city located between Nineveh and Calah)” (**Genesis 10:11-12**).

It is possible that these four independent cities were termed as one large megalopolis under one name, similar in some respects to what we know as ‘London’ today. The city of London itself is quite small, but the surrounding boroughs and towns, including the city of Westminster, have all been identified colloquially as ‘London’.

As we read in the previous study, some older translations of this chapter have been read to suggest that it was a “*three-day journey*” to get to Nineveh (**v3**), but this is unrealistic given the distance involved. It’s almost certainly a comment on the size of the city itself. The closest possible coast to Nineveh would be near Iskenderun, in Turkey. Even to walk from here to Nineveh could take between one and two weeks depending on your walking speed, how long you walked for each day, and what route you took.

Although we are not given the king of Nineveh’s name, it’s likely, given the assumed timeframe of the Jonah narrative, that the king of Assyria at the time was either Shalmaneser IV (783–773 BC) or his brother Ashurbanipal III (772–754 BC).

Jonah gives his message; the people have forty days before the city will be destroyed (**v4**). Interestingly Jonah doesn’t mention repentance – they simply have forty days until the city is destroyed. Maybe Jonah didn’t expect them to repent, or even want them to repent. **Chapter 4** will give us some clues as to Jonah’s feelings about the people of Nineveh. Or, we could assume this was not the full message, even though this was the central point of his message, we should not presume it was all that he said. There could have been at least an implied ‘unless you repent...’. Interestingly, on June 15, 763 BCE, The *Bur-Sagale eclipse* took place. This total solar eclipse plunged Nineveh into sudden midday darkness and is recorded on Assyrian clay tablets. Maybe this, accompanied by Jonah’s message, was what prompted the city-wide repentance.

The warning is received better than Jonah thought (or hoped), and the king declares a city wide fast and time of repentance. Even the animals must fast and wear mourning clothes! (**v5-9**). The act of repentance works as God “*saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, He changed His mind and did not carry out the destruction He has threatened*” (**v10**).

Which leads us to several questions – Firstly, was Jonah’s message a message of final judgement? Or was it a warning based on God’s judgement of the people? And if it was a warning, why didn’t Jonah say so?

Ans secondly, can God change His mind?

Some translations of this verse say “*God repented*” – the only other example we have of this is in **Genesis 6:6**, which says that “*the LORD was sorry (regretted/repented) he had ever made [man] and put them on the earth. It broke his heart*”.

Many of us will know the famous verse in **Numbers 23:19** which says, “*God is not a man, so He does not lie. He is not human, so He does not change his mind. Has He ever spoken and failed to act? Has He ever promised and not carried it through?*”. In **Malachi 3:6**, God says “*I am the Lord, I do not change*”.

However, **Deuteronomy 32:36** says that “*the LORD will give justice to his people, and He will change His mind about His servants, when He sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free*”.

When the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, we read that God threatened to destroy them after they began to make an idol out of gold. However, after Moses pleads for the people we see that “*the LORD changed His mind about the terrible disaster He had threatened to bring on His people*” (**Exodus 32:1-15**).

In Genesis we read of a conversation between Abraham and God regarding the fate of Sodom, where Abraham appears to persuade God not to destroy the city if he can find ten righteous people (**Genesis 18:20-33**). Although I’ve always held that this narrative was more about Abraham’s boldness to ask rather than God’s susceptibility to persuasion – at no point does God say He will destroy the city. In my opinion, God merely wanted Abraham to plead for it.

Another argument is that this text is written from a human perspective and not God's – Maybe God always knew the people would repent so wouldn't need to carry out His judgement. We also have to remember that the judgement remained – the city was destroyed 150 years later (see **Nahum**). Their repentance did not change the judgement, but the timing of it. One generation repented and were saved, but the next did not and were destroyed.

For me this isn't that God CAN'T change His mind – God can do anything. However, God DOES NOT change His mind about His truth and His character, but He CAN change His mind when it comes to His mercy. He always acts consistently with Himself. The repentance of Nineveh did not cause God to change His mind about His truth; but it caused Him to change His mind about the consequences of the people's sin.

Righteousness and repentance by man will always produce mercy in God. It was the people of Nineveh who aligned themselves with God and not the other way around.

As we will see, Jonah knew this all along, and he's not happy about it...