

Jonah Chapter Three Study Guide¹

“And the people of Nineveh believed God.” Jonah 3:5

Jonah three is where the book should have begun - *if* Jonah had submitted himself in obedience when first commissioned. However, chapters one and two serve a larger purpose for the readers in dealing with their hearts before God as becomes most plain with chapter four.

Chapter three is almost a self-standing chapter as it is the full sweep of Nineveh's narrative for the book. Here one observes that a prophet of God is being dispatched to them to proclaim their imminent demise because of their great wickedness, their exceptional response that reflects the work of the Spirit of God within them, and the scope of God's character in choosing to accept their faith and its fruits of repentance – relenting of his declared judgment. The chapter is short, but theologically dense and exuding with great hope. It is a great and worshipful joy that men who stand guilty before a holy God can find the grace to hear, believe, repent, and be forgiven.

The character of God is not challenged in his relenting, rather it is magnified – putting on beautiful display what should have been Israel's own story as prophet after prophet petitioned for the hearts of the people of Israel to believe and be humbled.

Structure

Operating Outline of Jonah 3

- 3:1-2 Jonah's Second Commissioning to Nineveh
- 3:3-4 Jonah Fulfilled his Commission – Crying Out Against Nineveh
 - 3:3 Jonah Obeyed and went to Nineveh
 - 3:4 Jonah Declared The LORD's Message of Judgment to Nineveh
- 3:5-9 Nineveh Believed, Humbled Themselves, and Repented
 - 3:5A Summary Statement of Nineveh's Response: Believed God and Humbled Themselves
 - 3:6-9A Nationwide Repentance – From the King Down
 - 3:6 The King Humbles Himself
 - 3:7-9 The King's Proclamation of Response to God's Message
 - 3:7-8 A Call for all to Humble Themselves, Call Out to God, and Repent
 - 3:9 Hope That God Will Have Mercy – Turning From His Fierce Anger
- 3:10 God Observed Nineveh's Response and Chose to Relent from His Judgment

The structure of chapter three mimics the structure in chapter two.

2:1-3 providing a summary, 2:4-9 providing a more detailed recounting, and 2:10 providing the conclusion/response.

3:1-5 providing a summary, 3:6-9 providing a more detailed recounting, and 3:10 providing the conclusion/response.

3:1-2 Jonah's Second Commissioning to Nineveh

The word of The LORD came a second time.

This is exactly what was observed in chapter one. The unique and high privilege of The LORD speaking through a man of his choosing by the means of his choosing. Again, Jonah is set apart as God's man for God's work. This was a post expulsion second commissioning for Jonah, an uncommon grace extended toward him both as a man and a prophet. The work of God would persevere with or without him, and yet The LORD was pleased to use him for both the immediate salvation of the Ninevites and to demonstrate the larger argument for submission to the expressed heart and character of God in relation to the covenant people of Israel and all men.

It was exceptional that the word of The LORD came to Jonah the first time and now it has come to him a second time; this speaks not of Jonah's worth, but of God's kindness and his good pleasure to use whom he will use.

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray's Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School
ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

This new introduction is almost a refresh on the book, with the obvious differences being that this is now the second occurrence and Jonah is not again identified by this father - we are now familiar with Jonah. It is important to note that if the narrative was simply about Nineveh and their repentance then chapters one and two would not be necessary to include; they simply provide a backstory that does not in any significant way impact Nineveh. Even if the argument could be made that perhaps some of the backstory of chapters one and two were made known to the Ninevites and this was an element of providential persuasion for them to believe, I would still conclude that this at best would be a helpful element, and since it is not overtly connected in this chapter I do not think it would inherently be necessary to include in the narrative for Nineveh's sake alone. Therefore, it appears that chapters one and two are present for the crafting of the larger argument of the book. They are not simply developing the principle characters of The LORD and his prophet Jonah either. Rather, chapters one and two demonstrate what the book is driving Jonah, Israel, and all subsequent believing readers to regarding the heart of God and one's own heart toward other peoples when it comes to enjoying the compassionate mercy of God and rejoicing in that for others. The mariners play no direct role to Nineveh and Jonah's personal prayer had no direct correlation either. So, their inclusion is informative (particularly when we know effectively so very little about Jonah outside of his one other reference in the Old Testament Scriptures –but it simply was not necessary/important). Finally, regarding this matter of the larger contextual flow and argument of the book, it is proper to note that Jonah was never fleeing from Nineveh, but from the presence of The LORD (1:3,10). The book was fundamentally about these matters of which Nineveh was a critical contextual element, but not the true central element.

The Second Commissioning

The word of The LORD had again come to Jonah and this second commissioning was structured almost exactly the same as the original in chapter one, providing the same urgency and immediacy of the command.²

While almost identical to the original call the second commissioning appears to be a little less precise in that while Jonah was to call out against Nineveh, the message that The LORD tells him at this time does not include the overt statement "for their evil has come up before me." However, it would appear reasonable to conclude that this is still explicitly implied as Jonah was to still "call out against" Nineveh and there is no reason to conclude their situation has changed - it is their evil that has pressed them to judgment before The LORD.

Another important change of detail to this second commissioning is that while the term "proclaim" or "call out" remained the same, it's prepositions and their nuances have changed in such a manner that it was communicating less of an adversarial call to judgment and more of a positive call with the inference of potential deliverance in conjunction with repentance.³ The context of their great sins and offenses have not changed nor has the requirement that they be addressed accordingly, but what has shifted was the approach to the offense. This was always Jonah's fear, which is why he initially fled his charge (later recorded in 4:2), and it is likely a shift provided to demonstrate the greater intention of this mission, which becomes increasingly clear with the flow of the book.

So, in view of these minor changes in Jonah's otherwise duplicated commissioning from The LORD, we see that the larger intent was to continue to press Jonah in such a way as to demonstrate his heart and its inherent conflict with God's own. The book itself thereby proves to be a masterful wooing to see and address this offense as present not only in Jonah's heart but its subsequent readers too.

Finally, it is important to remember that this was God's message, not Jonah's message; as such it proved to be uniquely powerful in the cutting to the hearts of the Ninevites and provoking faith and repentance even when delivered by this most unwilling of messengers.

3:3-4 Jonah Fulfilled his Commission – Crying Out Against Nineveh

Jonah Obediently Went to Nineveh

While, as addressed, the initial verses of chapter one and three are strikingly similar, the most overt difference between them would be, "So Jonah arose and went to *Nineveh*...." This obedient follow through was how the first narrative should have begun. Finally, here Jonah was restricting or submitting his conduct to the "word of The LORD." Jonah obeys, he did as commanded, he arose and he went to Nineveh.

² NET Bible, Jonah 3:2, Note 2

³ NET Bible, Jonah 3:2, Note 4

Nineveh, The Great City

Nineveh was referenced as a great city in 1:2 and 3:2, but in 3:3 it was referenced as an exceedingly great city. It appears that "great city" and "exceedingly great city" are demarcations constituted by its size - three days' journey in breadth (3:3) and more than 120,000 persons and much cattle (4:11).

Sidebar: Strategic Value of Great Cities

What role does a "great city" have in the plans and strategy of God?

Does God care more about big cities or is it that they are more strategic in general reach?

How are large cities viewed in term of mission?

It is curious because size does appear to matter here - yes one soul is valuable, but there is a punctuated value to the many souls present here. Giving attention to the many, does not inherently diminish the value of the one, but because there is value in one there is a compounded value with the many.

Perhaps an illustration could be helpful. If one child is lost in the woods, there is great effort to find him and little expense spared in the immediate and urgent effort in his safe recovery. However, there is a palpable difference and great consternation if there were a dozen small children missing, and there would be a proportionate increase in effort and resources applied to their safe recovery. It is precisely because each singular person matters that a multitude of persons secures greater attention. Therefore, in this context it would be a disingenuous fallacy to state that valuing many is a diminishing of the value of one.

So how do great cities fit into missional strategy? There appears to be a clear advantage to establishing churches and gospel driven works in areas of denser population. However, this does not appear to be a formulaic emphasis in the Scriptures. Certain cities will inevitably draw more attention because of their active roles in the larger affairs of men, but on the opposite side many effective and longtime ministries occurred outside of the largest of cities too. God has his people all over this world and in various contexts. So while determining where to go, there should be wise examination of providential opportunities and the seeking of good counsel. However, the greater matter is to be one prepared to be sent or sending and then to act in obedience to the clearly articulated charges of the Scriptures for the Church.

A Day's Journey in Nineveh

Several commentators appeared to place a disproportionate amount of attention on Jonah having gone a day's journey into Nineveh and preaching. I presume that this was in response to critics who would challenge the veracity of the book on the grounds of Nineveh's size as determined through archeological finds and comparisons with other ancient cities.

The matter of Nineveh's size was addressed in the "Jonah Overview" Study Guide.

Regarding what is occurring in the narrative of chapter three, James Kennedy and John Hannah both state that it is likely that this was the first of three days of proclamation for Jonah and not necessarily a full day of penetrating the city before beginning his declarative work.⁴ Others have argued that when the larger metropolitan area of Nineveh is factored into its great size it was a day of travel before he reached the area of his actual preaching. Either way it is clear that Jonah was immersed in Nineveh and not simply declaring a message from its walls or even its city gates. Further, both conclusions recognize that Jonah proclaimed God's message to this great city and the emphasis of the narrative appears to be more on the size of the city and then of greater importance his message and the people's response.

God's Message of Judgment

Regarding the message proper, this was the first time that the precise message of The LORD was made plain to the readers. However, what is not disclosed is whether this was the full message or just a representative element of it like what was present in 1:9-10 (where we have what Jonah stated, but are informed that he had told them more too). What is not disclosed is whether there was any call for Nineveh to repent or a chance that this could be reprieved? It is likely that this was the whole message or at the least the central element to it, and that the proclaimed element did not necessarily have a message urging repentance as no such allusion is made later and the king appears to be cast himself and his people to the mercy of God – unsure of what might come.

⁴ Studies in the Book of Jonah, James Hardee Kennedy, Broadman Press, 1956 (Hereafter: Kennedy), Pgs. 47-48
The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Jonah: John D. Hannah, David C. Cook Publisher, 1985 (Hereafter: Hannah), Pg. 1469

The core of the message was quite plain, Nineveh was on the precipice of being overthrown by God, and it appears that this is exactly how they understood the proclamation. While it is possible that any number of threats were on the horizon, such as plague or war, the reaction of the whole of the city and its leadership make it clear that by whatever means it was God who was going to overthrow their great city.

This was a message of complete destruction and/or conquest. It is the term that was used when referencing an anticipated military conquest by King David in 2 Samuel 10. But, there was likely a greater weightiness intended with its application here and almost certainly an overt allusion by the author to another great destruction by the hand of God. This term “overthrown” is the same one used when speaking of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, Lamentations 4, and Amos 4 – a correlation that would not have escaped the attention of a Hebrew reader just as the earlier and less direct allusion to the offense of the city reaching God in 1:2 (not unlike the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah coming before God in Genesis 18).

3:5-9 Nineveh Believed, Humbled Themselves, and Repented

3:5 A Summary Statement of Nineveh’s Response: Believed God and Humbled Themselves

Jonah 3:5 appears to be a summary statement of what is unpacked in greater detail in 3:6-9.

It appears that the sweep of response was comprehensive. While many may have responded under compulsion of the king’s orders, the flow of the narrative appears to clearly indicate that, if not all, then at the least the critical mass of persons genuinely believed and responded accordingly. This appears to also find a measure of support by the choice to not simply reference the response to Jonah’s preaching by “Nineveh, the great city,” but by “the people of Nineveh” believing God.

The People of Nineveh Believed God

In what way did the people of Nineveh believe God?

That Nineveh would be destroyed? Yes.

That Nineveh deserved destruction? Yes.

That Nineveh was guilty before God? Yes.

That Nineveh needed to repent? Yes.

Just as great storms at sea were terrible, but natural occurrences, yet the storm of Jonah 1 was clearly understood to be supernatural; so also, great cities being overthrown are terrible, but natural occurrences in the affairs of men. Yet the imminent overthrow of Nineveh was clearly understood to be supernatural and so was the response.

It is argued that the fish experience contributed to the exceptional reception of Jonah’s declarative message, and this likely did serve to provide an interest and even provoke the hearts of the people. However, signs and wonders are validations and not the actual means – as with the prophets, Jesus, and the Apostles the miraculous proved to be validating, but not salvific. Believing is an act of the heart/mind in response to the unique illumination and work of the Spirit of God through the declaration and revelation of his truth. It was not persuasion by the miraculous that brought belief to the Ninevites, but the work of the Spirit of God.

Further Examination: “Believed God”

“And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Genesis 15:6

Abram was struggling with understanding how The LORD would fulfill his promise to have an heir, and he was in turn directed to gaze upon the innumerable stars at which time The LORD stated, “So shall your offspring be.” Then the most important of statements follows, “And he believed The LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6) Abram’s believing this sure promise of God, the scope of what The LORD had revealed to him up to this time, was credited to him as a justifying faith (it is God who justifies and he effectually applies that through the one who exercises faith in his revealed truth). Following this most consequential of exchanges, The LORD enters into a unilateral covenant with Abram.

The New Testament references this moment three times (twice by Paul and once by James).

The first reference is Romans 4:3, "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'"

Now the overall context of Romans 4 is critical to properly appreciate this statement, and I will provide a portion of it here to help demonstrate the nature of salvific faith, that it is genuinely believing God. This is particularly important given the historical context of a Hebrew prophet going to an uncircumcised Gentile people.

"What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.' Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." Romans 4:1-12

The second New Testament reference to Genesis 15:6 comes in Galatians 3.

"Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." Galatians 3:5-9

In view of these two references... it appears that what happened in Jonah 3 was all but a foretaste of the nations coming to faith and thereby becoming true sons of Abraham.

Regarding this, I am not persuaded that the lack of enduring faith of Nineveh, or even the allusion to it later, is sufficient to say that this was not the case. I think either side of the argument is from silence, but that the initial results of Jonah's visit was within the reasonable theological conclusion of saving faith. Further, I find additional support in that Jesus rebuked those who had the unique privilege of hearing him proclaim God's truth directly and yet did not in a like manner as the people of Nineveh at this time.

"But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.'" Matthew 12:39-41

The third New Testament reference to Genesis 15:6 is in James 2.

"Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." James 2:20-26

This particular passage can be confusing when taken in isolation. The larger argument of James is that genuine faith, by its nature, will be accompanied by demonstrable works of its presence. I am persuaded that this is exactly what is being articulated in the Ninevites' actions too - humbling themselves, fasting, and repenting. This appears to be a distinguishing mark that is absent with those who only have a moment of cognitive recognition regarding God and his truth – this was a belief that was rooted in the heart and, I am persuaded, can be regarded as faith. Of additional interest is that Rahab, a Gentile woman, is also referenced here – her believing God (faith) and her accompanying works.

Further Examination: “Fasting and Sackcloth”

The response of the people of Nineveh having believed God: they fasted and humbled themselves... all of them.

What does it mean to call for a fast?

Calling for a fast is a time of giving solemn attention to The LORD in a season of intense petition. It is going without natural sustenance to demonstrate absolute focus and dependence on God.

Why did people put on sackcloth?

One adorned themselves with sackcloth for a particular occasion or time to communicate humbling themselves, to communicate one's complete brokenness, or to express great mourning.

The range of persons participating was everyone from the greatest to the least, and according to Jonah 4:11 this would have been more than 120,000 persons whose belief was accompanied by identifiable/tangible actions (fasting and sackcloth).

Fasting was a pattern of placing one's whole attention and complete dependence on The LORD, forsaking natural provision in a humbling petition before The LORD. Examples include:

2 Samuel 12, where King David has been rebuked for his terrible offenses surrounding his affair with Bathsheba, and he is told that their child will die. He was broken in this time and sought The LORD's mercy while praying and fasting through the night for seven days. Tragically the child died, but the beauty of David's faith comes through so clearly at this time - not only in his fasting and praying, but in his disposition during this time, trusting The LORD with his own “who knows...” statement, reflecting a content and humbled dependence.

“Then Nathan went to his house. And the Lord afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, ‘Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.’ But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, ‘Is the child dead?’ They said, ‘He is dead.’ Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. Then his servants said to him, ‘What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.’ He said, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?’ But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” 2 Samuel 12:15-23

2 Chronicles 20, where King Jehoshaphat of Judah was fearful of an imminent attack by three other kingdoms, and before the nation he declared a fast and made great petition before The LORD who was pleased to respond in miraculously delivering his people.

“Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.”

2 Chronicles 20:3

Ezra 8, where Ezra exercised leadership and directed those in his care to fast and pray – trusting The LORD for safe travels amidst a hostile context in which he actively chose to trust God over men.

“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, ‘The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.’ So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.” Ezra 8:21-23

Nehemiah 9, in a context of spiritual restoration, the people first humble themselves with both fasting and the wearing of sackcloth.

“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads.” Nehemiah 9:1

Esther 4, when Mordecai learned of Haman's plot to extinguish the Jews, he and many others fasted and humbled themselves with sackcloth and ashes.

"When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes." Esther 4:1-3

Continuing in the same context, Esther later petitions that the Jews pray and fast for her as she plans to violate standard procedure and initiate a shrewd rescue plan for the Jews.

"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." Esther 4:16

Daniel 9, where Daniel is confessing the sins of his people as he works through the revealed timeframe of Israel's captivity and where The LORD reveals that which is to come in the later days.

"Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." Daniel 9:3

Both sackcloth and ashes were used in a variety of contexts to demonstrate humility, brokenness, and mourning, also as observed not uncommonly associated with the act of fasting too.

Jesus, on repentance in sackcloth and ashes, appears to further affirm the genuine response of Ninevites in their hearing and believing God.

"Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.'" Matthew 11:20-21

A helpful word from John Calvin on the Ninevites' acts of fasting and adorning themselves in sackcloth.

"...repentance consist not in these external things: for God cares not for outward rites, and all those things which are resplendent in the sight of men are worthless before him; what, indeed, he requires, is sincerity of heart. Hence what Jonah here says of fasting, and other outward performances, ought to be referred to their legitimate end, -- that the Ninevites intended thus to show that they were justly summoned as guilty before God's tribunal, and also, that they humbly deprecated the wrath of their judge. Fasting then and sackcloth were only an external profession of repentance. Were any one to fast all his life, and to put on sackcloth, and to scatter dust on himself, and not to connect with all this a sincerity of heart, he would do nothing but mock God. Hence these outward performances are, in themselves, of small or of no value, except when preceded by an interior feeling of heart, and men be on this account led to manifest such outward evidences."⁵

3:5-9 Nineveh Believed, Humbled Themselves, and Repented

3:6-9 A Corporate Repentance – From the King Down

The Humbling of the King

The word of The LORD delivered through the prophet Jonah reached the ears, and subsequently penetrated the heart, of the king.

The king appears to have a rather punctual response... he does not appear to investigate or argue, but act. The king completely humbled himself: dethroning and disrobing - then clothing himself with humbled sackcloth and seating himself in ashes.

Throne to ashes. Robe to sackcloth. This was a potent outward demonstration of an inward act of brokenness and submission. The king believed and was repentant.

⁵ John Calvin; Calvin's Commentaries, Volume 14 – Twelve Minor Prophets, Third Volume: Jonah, Micah, Nahum. Baker Books, 2003, Pgs. 103-104

The king's actions are reminiscent of the repentant/humbled kings in Israel:

"As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the LORD." 2 Kings 19:1

"When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, [King Josiah] tore his clothes." "But to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the LORD." 2 Kings 22:11, 18-19

Sidebar: Rising in Humility, Not Humbled to Rise

The king of Nineveh *arose* to *humble* himself and does not appear to have been directly commanded to do so. By contrast, Jonah was directly commanded to *arise* and he did not... until he has been completely *humbled*.

1:2 Jonah commanded to arise.

1:3 Jonah rose and fled in disobedience.

3:2 Jonah commanded to arise.

3:3 Jonah arose and obeyed (post consumption by fish).

Sidebar: Strength of Word

There is certainly a fitting criticism regarding all talk and no action, but it would be unwise to diminish the power of words (they are one of the most consequential tools that The LORD uses throughout the entire sweep of Redemptive History,) and here it was not Jonah assaulting the city that provoked radical action from the king, but his simple declaration of the words of The LORD provided to him.

Corporate Humbling and Repentance

The king's proclamation spans from 3:7-9 and has four parts to it:

First, the king established the authority by which the decree was being made: by the decree of the king and his nobles (3:7).

Second, the king gave the command for the people to humble themselves, and in their humbled disposition to call out to God for mercy: no creature was to eat or drink (a total fast in breadth and content), all creatures were to be clothed in sackcloth (humbling themselves), and in this dependent and humbled disposition they were to cry out mightily to God (petition with full strength and heart to him who they have offended).

Third, the king directed the people to completely repent of their personal offenses (repent of evil ways and repent of violence).

Fourth, the king framed the whole of the response in the context of hopefulness that God, though not compelled to respond in any given way, just might be pleased to express mercy toward them and relinquish their due judgment (they have no standing to expect God to relent, but are hopeful he will be pleased to do so - this is their only hope).

The king knew that God relenting was their only hope. This was not works based hope in any manner whatsoever (this includes their repentance), as it was wholly at the discretion and good pleasure of God to restrict his judgment.

Corporate Humbling

In the summary section (3:5) it is stated that "they" called for a fast and clothed in sackcloth, but in the more precise breakdown that follows (3:6-9), it is clear that while the people certainly had some ownership of action, it was the king who called for the fast and appears to have at the least set the example with the humbled clothing too (3:6).

The king ordered a complete fast for all persons and creatures within the kingdom and that all persons and creatures be clothed in sackcloth.

The inclusion of animals can be confusing, and while there are general arguments that clothing animals with sackcloth in like instances was a Persian custom, John Calvin argues that it was to put a plain demonstration of guilt before the people. He further likens this to the process of animal sacrifices where the animal bears no inherent guilt, but serves to address man's sin.⁶

Corporate Calling Out

The decree was a direct response to the prophetic message... and the decree clearly communicates that Nineveh being overthrown would be an act by God and an act in response to their sin (their evil ways and the violence of their hands). Therefore, it is to God that they must mightily, earnestly, and with great vigor call out to for mercy.

When does one robustly petition God... when they come to the intimate awareness that they must.

1:6 The captain exhorts Jonah to call out to his god...

1:14 The mariners call out to God for mercy for their action...

2:2 Jonah testifies to having finally called out to God...

3:8 The command of the king was to call out to God...

"And it is also worthy of being observed, that the king proposes no other remedy, but that the people should have recourse to prayer."⁷

Corporate Repentance

The king is clearly articulating a call to repentance: turning from one's evil way and from the violence in his hands.

The king found himself and his people in bad company and to be bad company. Repentance was immediately necessary.

"The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence." Psalm 11:5

"Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment." Psalm 73:6

Comprehensive Repentance: Everyone.

The command was for each and every person to repent, it was not just a generic corporate charge, but a charge for every man.⁸

Comprehensive Repentance: Everything.

Turning from their sinful ways was a whole life repentance and not simply a singular act for a singular offense.⁹

The Hope of Mercy

Jonah's testimony in 2:8 spoke to the hopelessness of those who pay regard to idols. By contrast here the people are pleading to God, who was their only hope, and it proved to be an effectual hope.

All the Ninevites had, understanding that they were under judgment, was a speculative hope - not a sure hope (no grounds for that to be completely secure). There were grounds for some hope, just not a guarantee of it given their conduct and its merited judgment.

This appears to be an extreme perception into the character of God... almost as though "who knows" should be a "perhaps he just might..." They understood that the staying of God's judgment was wholly dependent on God's choice.

The conclusion is very clear: they are rightfully under the judgment of God, their culpability demands repentance, and upon repenting and petitioning God, he might just spare them (conducting himself consistently with his character when he chooses to express/extend mercy) - further they seem to understand that it is mercy as they do not expect this outcome, but only know of its possibility.

⁶ Calvin, Pgs. 105-106

⁷ Calvin, Pg. 108

⁸ NET Bible, Jonah 3:8, Note 15

⁹ Calvin, Pg. 108

God Relenting

The king had a right view of man and a right view of God. Therefore he understood that God relenting was Nineveh's only hope as the threat was that the city of Nineveh and its people would perish, be destroyed, meet their final demise at the hand of God. The king recognized that The LORD's anger was fierce toward them... and that God's fierce anger toward Nineveh meant that: "Nineveh shall be overthrown" 3:4 and they will "perish" 3:9.

The king had his theology right (it is faith and repentance, 3:7-8), and it is completely within the revealed character of God to be pleased to turn and relent in forgiveness. The threat of judgment was absolutely real and yet The LORD was not compelled to act in response to the conduct of man. Rather, he was pleased to act in response to conduct that pleased him and that would be fundamentally impossible if he had not also worked it out in the hearts of men himself (they repented and believed because The LORD worked in their hearts, and he relented because he so chose to do this) - wholly the work of God: working in the affairs of the natural world, the hearts of men, and his own conduct. This complete sovereignty of God does not diminish man or creation, but magnifies God.

Sidebar: Moses' Intercession and Jonah

It is unclear how long the fast was called for here, but there is a striking parallel of intercession associated with extensive fasting by Moses - petitioning to stay the wrath of God. How did Jonah miss this? I don't think he did, and that frightens me as it would further affirm his own heart's great need of work in being brought into conformity to God's own heart.

"Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also." "So I lay prostrate before the Lord for these forty days and forty nights, because the Lord had said he would destroy you. And I prayed to the Lord, 'O Lord God, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.' " Deuteronomy 9:18-19, 25-26

Forty days and forty nights.

No food or water.

Interceding for great sins before The LORD - sins that provoked his anger.

The LORD was ready to destroy the offenders.

Now compare this with what the king was hoping to accomplish (3:8-9)

Call out mightily to God

Turn away from their evil ways and violence.

Hoping for God to relent:

Turning his anger away.

Not destroying Nineveh.

Even though it is doubtful that the Ninevites would have been overtly mimicking Moses' action, it does reflect a like heart of complete humility and great petitions for mercy. It is a tragedy that Jonah failed to appreciate this, but grew angry by it.

3:10 God Observed Nineveh's Response and Chose to Relent from His Judgment

What Nineveh Did

The people of Nineveh turned from their wicked way - effectively they embraced faith and repentance. They believed, they fasted and humbled themselves, they cried out to God, and they repented.

The people did just as the king commanded in 3:8 - they turned from their evil ways and the violence of their hands.

What God Did

God relented of his plans to overthrow Nineveh. However, it must be noted that there is a magnificent difference between The LORD choosing to act within the parameters of his revealed will and character and his being compelled to respond to the actions and responses of men.

God relented - he did not do what he said he would do.

This, however, was not executed in a vacuum, but in a precise context and in a way that was consistent with his articulated character and will. The LORD acted in a larger expression of what he had said when he declared his glory to Moses:

"The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'" Exodus 34:6-7

This was the reasonable and speculative hope articulated in 3:9, "who knows" became what God did.

A Bigger Picture of God Relenting Judgment

The merciful relenting of God is the experience of all the redeemed as we were formerly children of wrath, but God in his great mercy redeemed us - this all by the work of God and not the work of man (thereby making faith and repentance gifts of God) Ephesians 2:1-10.

God's judgment is actively on one who is a child of wrath, but it is relented from as the child of wrath is forgiven (faith and repentance), and this wrath debt is satisfied through the Son. Therefore the propitiatory work of the Son brought about the same response for the beloved.

Again, the very act of forgiving is a changing of mind. Therefore, those outside of Christ are enemies and under present judgment and subject to eternal death, but at the moment of conversion all matters are now changed. So by its very nature, forgiveness is a turning away from that which was previously a guaranteed reality.

Patterns and articulations of God relenting in Scripture:

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.' But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, 'O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." Exodus 32:9-14

In this context we have a striking conversation revealed that could have remained silent along with innumerable other conversations that occurred between Moses and The LORD, but this was for our instruction and good. Here we see that The LORD was again operating within his revealed character, and it was this very element that Moses was petitioning, the glory and fame of God. Note also that The LORD could have maintained covenant faithfulness by rebooting the nation through Moses as he was of the necessary line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, there were larger elements in place, and this was clearly not The LORD's desire.

"God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" Numbers 23:19

In the context of an attempt to curse Israel they can only be blessed as God has set his sure blessing on them and he will not change. He is operating within his revealed character, his affection for his people, and the unilateral covenant that he chose to bind himself to in these matters. In this he will not change his mind – he has spoken and he will do it.

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 'Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.' So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.'" Jeremiah 18:1-10

In this passage The LORD provides a direct object lesson on this very subject. It is within his character and good pleasure to relent of his judgment of a repentant people.

“‘Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.” Joel 2:12-13

Here we see the expressed desire to relent in response to repentance and that this desire is rooted in the articulated character elements first expressed in his declared glory to Moses in Exodus 34.

Note that what is critical to understand is that *relenting is not a change in character*:

By its nature, *mercy* is possible because *relenting* is possible (self identified character qualities of God).

By its nature, *mercy* is possible because *debts/punishment are satisfied* by another person:

Judgment and punishment certainly come - either immediately or at a time prescribed by the Judge.

Judgment and punishment can be satisfied vicariously (by substitution) by a qualified second person - regarding sin, there is only one such qualified person: The Son of God, Jesus Christ.

For this to be effectually applied in faith did not require a full knowledge of such matters at this time in Redemptive History as it had not to this time been fully revealed. It was enough to know that guilt was only satisfied by God and through his prescribed means.

An appreciation of such truth must by its very nature provoke worship to God. So it is such a striking and even shocking reality that this great moment is followed by 4:1, "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry."