



Jonah 3

3:1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

6 The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Have you ever heard of *The Gospel Blimp*? It’s a parable written in 1962 about a group of Christians who purchase a blimp to evangelize their town. Here’s a paragraph from the book.

Afterward we all got in our cars and drove out to the hangar, where the Gospel Blimp was christened. Herm’s little girl broke a bottle of 7UP over it. We had originally thought of Coke, but someone pointed out that seven is the number of perfection, so we used 7UP. George Griscom invited us over to his house afterwards— everybody who’d been there that night we had the original idea for the blimp, almost a year ago. We were sort of sober,

thinking of all that lay ahead. “You know,” George said, “if only my next-door neighbors are saved. If they are, it’ll be worthwhile. All the work and money and time.” “Listen,” Herm said, “it can’t fail. They can read, can’t they? Well, tomorrow morning at eight sharp they’ll see the gospel in the sky. Right over their house. I promise you, George, in my capacity as General Director of International Gospel Blimps, Incorporated. And not just your next-door neighbors. The whole block. My block. Every block in the city. Every last one. But we’ll start with your block, George. Seems only right, doesn’t it?”¹

They started by posting Bible verses on the blimp. Then they moved to “gospel bombs.” They’d drop these little packets with gospel tracts and decision cards by the thousands all over the city. Then they began to broadcast Christian hymns and short sermons over the PA system. The members of the International Gospel Blimp Incorporated worked tirelessly on the blimp for years but you can guess how it worked out—not so good.

If it were only that easy, right? If billboards, bumper stickers and gospel blimps worked, most everyone would have been converted by now. If only you could walk the streets of Viroqua and preach about the coming judgment and have the whole town repent. Wouldn’t that be awesome?

That is exactly what happened to Jonah when he preached his message of destruction to the wicked Ninevites. As soon as Jonah began to preach his message, the word of judgment spread like wildfire through the enormous city. It was the quickest and largest revival in all of Scripture. Even the revival on the Day of Pentecost did not come close to this—the Great Assyrian Revival.

How do we explain this outpouring of repentance? You would no more have guessed that the entire city of Nineveh would have repented any more than the city of Berlin would have repented at the height of Hitler’s power. Pretty much everything was stacked against it ever happening.

First, of course you had the reluctant prophet. God commanded him in chapter one, verse two to “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” However, we know that it took a tempest and three days in the fish’s belly to change his mind. Reluctant is far too nice of a word to describe him. Jonah was disobedient, careless, wimpy and faithless. No one will ever be sure why he was chosen as a prophet of the Lord. Nevertheless, chapter three tells us that *Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.*

Then you have the wickedness of the city itself. Israel was always surrounded by wicked nations but God never commanded a prophet to go there and preach to them before. God intended that the blessings of Israel would eventually extend to all nations but God had not sent prophets to them before Jonah went to Nineveh. So this is another reason to go easy on Jonah. He really is the anti-hero of the story. Great stories have great quests as a part of them. Lord of the Rings is one of the best known in our day. Despite how Peter Jackson ruined the Hobbit, the LTR trilogy was well done. There are many valiant heroes in the story but Tolkien chose the pint-sized Hobbit Frodo to be the true hero. The entire story is one long quest. Frodo was reluctant, but brave. Frodo had a small body but an enormous heart. All was entrusted to Halfling. The quest rested on his shoulders.

So it could have been with Jonah. He was tasked with taking a message of destruction to his enemy. The sender was no mere wizard, but the Lord of heaven and earth. If this were like many great stories, the entire quest would have rested on Jonah's shoulders. But this is truth and not fiction and God is the stories author.

The third reason this revival should have never taken place is that Jonah's message was a message of destruction. We know what God really intended but from the perspective of the Ninevites, this was no message of grace and hope. *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* As he walked he cried out these words of judgment upon all hearers, young and old. The clock is ticking. Your destruction is imminent.

The people of Nineveh perfectly fit the description of Psalm 14.

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds,
there is none who does good.

2 The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand who seek after God.

3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good, not even one.

4 Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread
and do not call upon the Lord?

5 There they are in great terror,
for God is with the generation of the righteous.

6 You would shame the plans of the poor,
but the Lord is his refuge.

7 Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people,
let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

We have to understand this Psalm in its historical context. There has never been a culture throughout history who were objectively atheist. All cultures have had some form of worship within them. This psalm is referring to functional atheists. The people of ancient Nineveh were idol worshippers. They had various names for god but they acted as if he did not exist. Did you notice what the fool does? He says in his heart, "There is no God" but this is not shown by writing books on atheism but by their evil actions. "They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good." By their collective evil deeds, the people of Nineveh were functional atheists. They were like the Israelites during the time of the judges. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). There was no right and wrong. There was no such thing as absolute truth.

The fourth hindrance to this revival was a simple communication problem. Jonah was one man in a large city of at least 120,000 people. He did not have TV, email or social media. He did not have a short wave radio tower that would simultaneously broadcast over the entire city. And he

certainly did not have a gospel blimp. So practically speaking, revival would have taken weeks to spread over the city of Nineveh.

Incidentally, these are really the same barriers that missionaries face today.

- We have reluctant missionaries and disobedient missionaries. Our friend worked for a large missions' agency and her job was to help process missionaries returning from the field for moral/character reasons.
- Missionaries face huge barriers of wickedness and people who love their wickedness. Most missionaries work in cities and like Nineveh, cities have the most concentrated areas of wickedness.
- We have a message problem. This is less of an issue but the pull on missions is to become a social justice organization rather than a gospel-centered ministry. Without strong doctrinal and gospel fences, mission agencies begin to drill wells for the sake of drilling wells as opposed to drilling wells to gain an audience for the gospel message.
- And of course, missionaries have a communication problem. Language and cultural barriers have always and will always be significant obstacles.

Jonah had all of these barriers and more—and, he was just one guy. So how did he overcome all of these seemingly impenetrable barriers to mass revival? He didn't. God did. What's the theme of this book? Swallowed by Mercy. That's the simple answer to this complicated question about massive barriers. The people of Nineveh were swallowed by God's mercy. God's sovereign grace was poured out on them. That's the simple answer but let's dig further to see some of the wonderful details of the revival.

Belief

And the people of Nineveh believed God. In light of the barriers mentioned, verse five ought to pop off the pages of your Bible. How did they get from a collective wickedness and hardness of heart to simple belief in one verse? It's all the more staggering when you realize the content of their belief.

As we work through these, I want you to be thinking about someone in your life who does not know the Lord. Everyone we know that is currently an unbeliever has one or more of these barriers. What God did for the Ninevites, he can do for your friend or family member for whom you are praying. How do I know this? Because he already did it for you and for me. We were just as lost as these ancient Assyrians but God overcame every barrier to reach us with his message.

In direct contrast to Psalm 14, they had to believe that there was a God and that they were accountable to him for their actions. This is a huge problem for most unbelievers, is it not? Granted, your unsaved grandmother may not be sacrificing her grandchildren in the fire to Molech, but neither does she want to make herself accountable to a holy God. She has yet to bend her knee to our Savior.

Do people instinctively know that there is a God and that they are accountable to him? This is exactly what Romans 1 teaches.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them (Romans 1:18-19).

Your unsaved friend or family member knows the truth but they suppress the truth. And only God's sovereign grace can penetrate this barrier of unbelief. Don't think for a moment that you admitted your sin because you were smarter or wiser than those who have not yet relented.

Repentance

The second major thing the Ninevites did was to repent. *They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.* Then the king did the same and issued a decree that everyone follow in step. They:

- Fasted
- put on sackcloth—which was intended as an outward symbol of their internal repentance
- “Called out mightily to God
- Turned from their evil ways and violence

This is the wonder and beauty of true repentance. In one moment they were content—maybe even happy with their evil ways. Then as soon as they heard Jonah's message, they immediately repented. Inherent in their belief was an understanding of right and wrong. Deep down they always knew the truth but they stopped suppressing it.

The miracle of their belief and repentance knows no end. Why would they have believed this crazy foreigner preaching a crazy message? Another part of their belief was the knowledge that God would indeed bring judgment down upon them—and that his judgment was fully deserved. They believed that God was real; that they were accountable to him; they understood right from wrong; that judgment was very real and very much deserved.

You can see why doing missions in foreign cultures and doing evangelism across the street so hard because all of these barriers need to be breached in order for belief and repentance to come. We can also see how only the Lord can break through these impenetrable barriers—why only his grace has the power to overcome.

But there is one more thing that the Ninevites came to believe. They believed that this God of judgment who was about to destroy them was also a God of mercy. *Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.*”

I love how the king says, “Who knows...?” He knew that this God has decided to bring judgment upon them and that in order for that not to happen, this God would need to relent. He would need to change his mind and make a different decision. So the king did not have a guarantee that mercy would come their way but he knew it was at least a possibility. If there was not at least the possibility of God's mercy, then why repent? If you knew that whatever you did in a certain situation, it would have no effect on the outcome, then you are not going to go through with that action. This is the way some people feel about voting. They conclude that the nation is such a mess and both parties are equally corrupt so my vote won't make a lick of difference. That's

cynicism. So in this sense, the Ninevites were not cynical. We are not told how they suddenly discovered all of this important information about God. It obviously came directly through the Holy Spirit who convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment.

But the king was not quite right. While he knew that mercy was at least within the realm of possibility what he did not know was that mercy is always available to the person who truly believes and repents. This is something that we must be careful with as we share the gospel. Today's gospel presentations are most definitely 'gospel-lite' versions which downplay the reality of God's holiness and judgment. Most Christians need a correction in this direction. But we must never lose sight of the guarantee of God's mercy that will accompany true belief and repentance. The king was taking a gamble. He knew it was possible but he was far from certain. But the Bible presents God's mercy as guaranteed to those who believe and repent.

This is also important for believers. Many Christians fail to repent of their sins because they do not really believe that God is merciful. I don't mean that they think that they will lose their salvation but they hold back for fear of feeling God's disappointment with them. Think about it. If you knew you had to apologize to someone but you also knew this person was sure to blow up at you, that there would be some yelling and screaming, would that effect the chances of you offering the apology? And turn that around—if you knew the person to whom you were apologizing would certainly be kind and gracious, wouldn't you be more likely to approach them?

The Jonah story screams God's mercy from the top of its lungs. Just because the king was not confident of God's mercy does not mean that you and I should not be. I was talking with someone a while back who was confessing a sin and he said "I'm glad I got caught." This person experienced the freedom of no longer bearing the weight of that sin but they also felt the mercy and acceptance of God.

Ephesians chapter 3 offers this reassurance.

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

And then there's Hebrews 4.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).

So God's infinite mercy as shown in the Jonah story is ours...

But some have doubted whether the Ninevites were truly saved or not. But were they really saved or were they just scared straight? Were they running to God or just afraid of being judged? Was this a genuine revival or was it a city filled with frightened people. After all, sadly we all know people who appeared to repent, who seemed to be converted who later completely fell away. And we have the parable of the four soils. In that parable, at least 2 of the four soils

represent people who never converted but who initially received the word. Maybe that's what happened with Jonah and the Ninevites.

Something very similar happened to the wicked King Ahab.

27 And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. 28 And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 29 "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house." (1 Kings 21:27-29)

Ahab's repentance may have been genuine, but did it really result in his salvation? There's not much evidence of that in the Bible. Not to mention that there are no other stories in all of Scripture that tell about an entire city filled with people all repenting at one time. Can 120,000 people repent on the same day? Furthermore, we know that the repentance did not last because Nineveh was never known for being just and good. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

I would second guess it myself if Jesus had not weighed in on the subject with such clarity. If you recall, Jesus taught about Jonah as if it were an actual historical event.

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39 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. 40 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."

Jonah was a type of Christ. Of course Jonah did not know this at the time, but God wrote this story so that it would point to the death and resurrection of his son Jesus. But notice what Jesus said next.

41 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.

Does that sound like they were truly repentant or not? Would an unbeliever rise up at the judgment and condemn someone else? Jesus is clearly saying that the repentance of the people of Nineveh was absolutely genuine. It was so genuine, in fact, that these same men will rise up at the final judgment and themselves cast judgment on the unbelieving generation of those in Jesus' day. Now I would not say that every last person in the city was converted. Some may have felt pressured but the king's command. However, this text does tell us that *the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.*

This was the single greatest recorded revival in human history. It exceeded the Day of Pentecost. It exceeded anything we know. It was an outpouring of God's sovereign grace on undeserving sinners. It is the same grace that saved you and me. And it is the same grace that will continue to be poured out until the last day. It is the only thing that will break the impenetrable barriers of the person for whom you are praying. Don't give up on them. Do your part of sharing the truth in love but don't ever try to do God's part of sovereign grace.

BARRIERS

1. A reluctant prophet.
2. Wickedness of the city.
3. A message of destruction.
4. Communication challenges.

} SAME
BARRIERS
TODAY

REMOVING BARRIERS

1. Belief

- God exists and we are accountable to him.
- God will bring judgment which is well deserved.
- God is merciful.

2. Repentance

- Fasted/sackcloth
- Called out to God/turned from their sins

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¹ Bayly, Joe (2014-09-30). *The Gospel Blimp (and Other Parables)* (Kindle Locations 167-175). Clearnote Press. Kindle Edition.

Later in the book: "Tonight I invited them over to have supper with the group because— well, to cut it short, God has answered our prayers. They've become Christians." Well, you should have heard the group when George told us that. We were really excited. Everybody wanted to ask questions at the same time. "Was it a verse on the blimp or a fire bomb?" "Day or night? I mean, was the verse in electric lights?" "It must have been while we were still using the PA system. Do you remember what Herm said in his message?" "Did you both accept the same invitation— I mean, at the same time the invitation was given over the PA system?" "What tract was in the fire bomb? And did you fill in the decision cards?" "Hey," George says, loud enough to be heard. "Hey, give them a break. One question at a time. And don't jump to any conclusions. Let them tell you." So we finally quiet down, and the next-door neighbor begins to speak. "Like George told you, we're Christians now. Both of us. But it wasn't the blimp."