

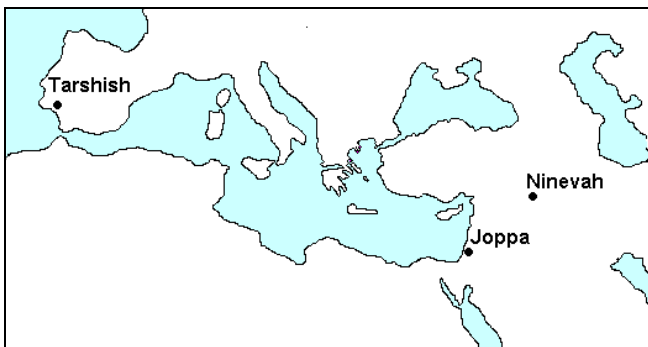
jonah : God's outrageous grace

jonah 3

the story so far...

In chapter 1, God called Jonah to go to Ninevah. Jonah refused, and instead set off for Tarshish. But God showed his power and sovereignty over the situation, and a great storm threatened the ship. Jonah knew that it was because of his presence on board, and so the sailors threw him into the sea.

After almost drowning, Jonah was rescued by a huge fish, also provided by God. This was a clear demonstration of God's grace and faithfulness, and Jonah turned back to God. Chapter 2 records his prayer from within the fish as he experiences God's grace for himself. He is able to declare, "salvation comes from the Lord" (v9). At the end of chapter 2, Jonah is vomited onto dry land by the fish.



v1-2 jonah's second chance

God gives Jonah another chance to fulfil his instructions. This in itself is gracious on God's part – rather than forgetting about Jonah after his mistake, God asks him again. Once again, God tells Jonah to go to Ninevah to preach to them. Although God does not tell Jonah specifically what he has to say, it is the same message he was told to preach in 1v2 – he is to preach against the city because of their wickedness (we see a summary of what he preaches in v4).

v3-4 jonah responds

This time, Jonah's reaction is very different. He heads straight for Ninevah to carry out the mission he's been given. In verse 3 we are given more details about Ninevah. It is a huge city, which takes 3 days to cross. Jonah goes a third of the way into the city, telling people as he goes, "forty more days and Ninevah will be overthrown." He probably said more than this, as the inhabitants knew that they needed to turn to God. But this is the thrust of his message – in forty days, God will judge and Ninevah will fall.

v5 the ninevites respond

On hearing this message, the Ninevites respond. They declare a fast, and they put on sackcloth. These were symbols of mourning, and are used to show humility and repentance. They are used often in the Bible as people turn back to God (e.g. 1 Kings 21v27, Esther 4v1).

We are supposed to realise that this was complete repentance. Everyone, from the greatest to the least, participated in this collective act of repentance. This was not something which only a small group did – the whole city humbled themselves before God.

But we must be careful when we think about what they were doing by fasting and wearing sackcloth. There is not reason to think they became followers of Jonah's God. They did not offer sacrifices or make vows to God like the sailors (v16) or Jonah (v9). They may have just been seeking to escape the judgement of Jonah's foreign God.

Some commentators also suggest that political unrest and a terrifying solar eclipse may have made them unusually willing to humble themselves to escape God's anger. This doesn't, however, rob the message of its power. God's word still convicts them and, however poorly or briefly, they recognise who God is.

v6-9 the king of ninevah responds

When the king hears about this, he reacts in the same way – he exchanges his royal robes for sackcloth. And he makes their repentance law by decreeing that the whole city should fast and wear sackcloth, and that they should give up the evil which had brought God's judgement upon them. His hope is that God might show compassion and relent, sparing them from the judgement Jonah predicted.

v10 God responds

In response to their repentant attitude, God relents, and does not bring the promised judgement upon them. This enrages Jonah, as we will see in chapter 4. But God's response shows the same grace and mercy we have seen all along. God hates the evil they have been committing. But he is also merciful, as the King of Ninevah had hoped. And so he graciously withholds his judgement... this time.

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questions

Remember, these are **suggestions** – feel free to add, remove or change them!

v1-4 - jonah

discover What does God say to Jonah this time?

understand Is Jonah's second chance surprising? How would you deal with someone who had let you down the way Jonah had let God down?

respond How should God's dealing with Jonah be an encouragement to us?

v6-9 – the ninevites and their king

discover What do the Ninevites and their King do when they hear the message.

understand

respond What should our response be when we hear God speak? What response should we be looking for our non-Christian friends to make?

v10 - God

discover

understand What do these verses tell us about God's character?

respond

where does Jesus fit in?

Each of us rightly deserves God's judgement. We are as guilty of rejecting Him as any of the Ninevites. Yet we are incapable of cleaning up our act completely – even if we never sinned again (which is impossible) we have still lived without God. What the Ninevites ultimately needed, as do we, was Jesus. In Jesus, God demonstrates his love and his justice, his grace and his mercy. God graciously sent Jonah to the Ninevites to warn them of the coming judgement. And he graciously sent the Lord Jesus to us to save us once and for all from the coming judgment, and to bring us fully into a relationship with him.

Can God change his mind?

In chapter 3, God appears to change His mind, based on the behaviour of the Ninevites. But this could present us with a problem. The Bible says God never changes (Psalm 33v11, James 1v17). So why does he change his mind here? If we believe God is all-knowing, then He knew that the Ninevites were going to repent. So, in a way, there was never going to be any need for God to punish them. But the Bible never uses God's knowledge or sovereignty as an excuse for our sin. The Ninevites were still guilty of their own sin, and they still deserved punishment. As far as they (and we) are concerned, the threat of judgement is very real, and the response must be too.