

Sovereign Grace in Nineveh (Part 2)

Jonah 3: 1-10

Following his harrowing ordeal within the belly of the great fish, Jonah experienced the unrivaled grace of God. The Lord could have punished Jonah for his disobedience and refused to use him further in ministry. (Jonah may have been temporarily relieved had God not commanded him to go to Nineveh, but believers know there is no peace and victory apart from being in the Lord's will and following His guidance in life.) However, we discover that God was unrelenting in His plan and purpose for Jonah. Nineveh was a wicked city, in need of repentance, and God had sovereignly decided that Jonah was to journey there and preach of impending judgment.

Although this passage was written thousands of years ago, about an empire that has long since faded, the principles remain relevant for our day. God remains sovereign in His dealings with mankind. His pursuit of the sinful and disobedient is dictated by His divine character, rather than dealing with individuals and nations as they deserve. God's sovereign grace is front and center in the book of Jonah. He came to those who were underserving, offering a chance for repentance and reconciliation, rather than swift and destructive judgment.

As we continue to examine the [observations](#) within the text, I want to take a moment to review our previous study, which is inseparable from the verses we will consider today. Considering [Sovereign Grace in Nineveh](#), we discussed:

I. A Conversation with God (1-2)

A. Grace was Extended (1)

B. Obedience was Expected (2)

C. Competence was Provided (2)

II. The Commitment to God (3-4)

A. The Sincerity of Jonah (3a)

B. The Enormity of the City (3b)

C. The Severity of the Message (4)

III. The Conviction from God (5-8) – Having now entered Nineveh, and faithfully preaching the message of repentance, Jonah had no way of knowing how they would respond. Would they heed the words of a Jewish prophet? Would they in deed repent of their sin, or would they reject Jonah's message, and continue their wickedness? Fortunately for Jonah, the results were not up to him. These verses reveal the conviction of God and Nineveh's response. Notice:

A. The Repentance of the People (5) – So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. Upon hearing the warning of impending judgment, the people immediately responded in genuine repentance. The people believed God. This has the idea that one would expect – “believing or trusting in something.” It also has the application of “receiving something as true.” The repentance of the people was not superficial; it was genuine. They heard the Word of God and believed it as truth, causing them to examine their hearts and repent of sin.

- Their inward conviction prompted an outward display of grief over sin and their commitment to turn from sin. The people proclaimed a fast, calling for a time of reflection and deep repentance. They adorned themselves with sackcloth – an outward display of grief and suffering. These acts of repentance were performed from the greatest of the people unto the least of them.
- Their attitude toward sin is indicative of the attitude of grief and repentance from sin that all must display before God when confronted with sin. Sin must create an attitude of repentance and sorrow. Repentance is essential for salvation. One cannot merely “accept” Christ and continue to live as they were, apart from repenting of sin and genuinely turning from sin!

B. The Reaction of the King (6-8) – The conviction of sin was not reserved for the common people within Nineveh. The king also heard the word of Jonah and it created a repentant heart in him as well. Consider:

1. His Mourning (6) – For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered *him* with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. When the word of God, preached from the prophet, reached the king, he responded in a way that most would not have expected. He was king of a dominant world power. They were unrivaled in battle, accustomed to having whatever they desired. He was not familiar with submitting to anyone. However, as conviction gripped his heart, he responded in much the same way the people did. He removed his royal robe and adorned himself in sackcloth and ashes, revealing his conviction over sin and hope that God would be merciful unto them.

- You will likely agree that it is often difficult for those in positions of power to submit to anyone. The wise will heed the Word of God and respond in repentance and faith. If the king of Nineveh was willing to repent of sin and turn to God, there is hope for many in Washington!

2. His Mandate (7-8) – And he caused *it* to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not

feed, nor drink water: ^[8] But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that *is* in their hands. In response to the conviction the king felt, he made a decree throughout Nineveh, and expected the people to obey his command. The king called for:

- **Fasting (7)** – Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water. He declared that man nor beast should taste anything, having no food or water. They were not to concern themselves with physical needs, but fast and consider their spiritual condition. (We need to get to the place that we are willing to proclaim a fast, seeking only the Lord for the desperate needs in our day!)
- **Prayer (8a)** – But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God. The people were expected to adorn themselves in sackcloth, realizing the seriousness of their condition, and cry out to God in hopes He would show mercy upon them. (This is quite convicting. A sinful and rebellious people saw the need for genuine prayer, crying out mightily unto the Lord, and yet the majority of the church fails to pray unto the Lord about the needs of our day. We need a return to genuine, heart-felt prayer and intercession!)
- **Repentance (8b)** – yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that *is* in their hands. It is unlikely the king knew much about God or theological doctrine, and yet he sent out a decree that called for genuine, biblical repentance. Genuine repentance is not merely an awareness of sin, or even a brokenness over sin. Real repentance requires abandonment of one's sinful deeds. Repentance turns from sin unto the Lord. We may not want to admit it, but there is a real need for genuine repentance, even among the church!

IV. The Compassion of God (9-10) – In the closing verses we discover the compassion God extended to Nineveh in response to their repentance and prayer. Consider:

A. The Appeal (9) – Who can tell *if* God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? The king understood their dire situation. He knew they were in danger of judgment because of their sin. He hoped their display of genuine repentance would stay the anger and judgment of God, allowing them to live. He knew their fate rested in God's hands, and he hoped God would be merciful and spare their lives.

- I am thankful we serve a gracious and merciful God. In our pride and self-righteousness, we tend to assume that we were somehow “better” or “less sinful” than the Ninevites, but in reality, we were just as wicked and deserving of judgment. Thankfully, God is merciful toward us, offering His abundant grace for all who come to Christ in repentance and faith. [Titus 2:11 – For the grace of](#)

God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men. 2 Pet.3:9 – The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

B. The Awareness (10a) – And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way. God saw how Nineveh responded to His call for repentance. He was aware that they willingly turned from their sin toward Him. The Word brought conviction and they responded in repentance and faith. This was God’s desire from the beginning. Had He not desired them to repent and turn to Him, He would have brought immediate judgment and never sent Jonah to preach repentance unto them.

C. The Alteration (10b) – and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did *it* not. The hand of judgment was stayed and God showed mercy instead of wrath. Although they were undeserving, God chose to offer grace. Jer.18:8 – If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.

- Verses similar to this one has created confusion and debate over the years, but there is no reason for confusion. Some argue that if God repented, then He must have been engaged in a sinful act. That alone is heresy. God is holy and righteous. There is nothing sinful or evil about His divine character. Repentance has the idea of turning away from something and going in another direction. We always associate repentance with sin. This does not imply that God had sinned and needed to repent, but that He made the sovereign decision to turn from judging Nineveh and instead offered grace!
- Rather than confusion, this verse should bring rejoicing. Like Nineveh, we too were sinful and deserved judgment. Sin demands and deserves death. God would have been just to condemn the entire world and caused every one of us to face the righteous penalty for our sin. Instead of judging our sin, He chose to make a means of atonement for our sin through the sacrifice of His Son, Christ our Savior! Again, we see the sovereignty of God displayed as He deals with mankind. What a gracious and merciful God we serve!

Conclusion: For me, this third chapter is the heart of the book of Jonah. While Jonah’s deliverance from the whale’s belly is certainly miraculous, God’s dealings with sinful man is most miraculous. I am thankful for His abundant grace, offered freely to the undeserving. What a challenge we find regarding our own relationship with Christ. I am certain we all could improve our prayer life and intimacy with the Lord. If you are yet unsaved, you have heard of the grace of God that brings salvation. Why not do as the Ninevites and respond to His grace?