

God’s purposes are higher than yours, so you do not know what will happen when God rebukes and people repent, but you do know that God is righteous and merciful; therefore you must trust that God will work all things for good according to his higher purposes.

Introduction – [Story of my grandfather jumping into the pool in his business suit.] This account is “giantesque.” This does not mean that the events are historically exaggerated in the story. Rather, we are to marvel at the largeness (or great importance) of the city of Nineveh, the overwhelming response to Jonah’s brief sermon, and the surpassing mercy of God on the repentant Ninevites.

I. When God Rebukes

A. He seeks the lost (Nineveh) (vv. 3-4)

God loved the great city of Nineveh. It was an “exceedingly” great city—literally “a great city to God” (see ESV fn.). This is astounding considering that the one pagan city God chose to seek was Nineveh. God loved the people and culture of Nineveh enough to send one of Israel’s prophets to warn them of his imminent judgment should they not stop their violence and repent of their evil ways. God sent the perfect messenger, a broken evangelist seemingly back from the dead, to ignite revival.

B. He guides the found (Jonah) (vv. 1-2)

1. God is so gracious to Jonah. He has saved him from the storm, from the sea, and from the belly of the great fish. Yet God condescended to speak to Jonah by calling him a second time. God has great love and patience with his disobedient, obstinate, protesting, and wayward people.
2. This time Jonah obeyed God, but he still hated Nineveh. Has he learned his lesson? Yes and no. Yes, because he learned it is better to obey God than run from him. No, because he still did not have God’s heart of compassion for pagan Gentiles. But when God showed mercy to the Ninevites he humbled this angry and zealously patriotic prophet.

C. He confronts his own (Israel). Jonah personifies God’s people.

1. Notice that Jonah the prophet is the only Israelite character in the entire book. But in this story Jonah is not unlike Israel; Jonah represents Israel. Therefore Jonah’s sins are Israel’s sins. Jonah’s heart attitude toward pagans is Israel’s attitude.
2. How the city of Nineveh must have shamed the nation of Israel by their repentance! History records that only decades later Israel was “shamed” (conquered) by the powerful Assyrian empire which God ordained as a punishment for Israel’s unrepentant response to his prophets. Similarly in the days of Jesus the people of Israel were “shamed” by the men of Nineveh. Nineveh’s repentance served as a historical indictment against hard-heartedness in Jesus’ day—and still serves this purpose today!

II. When People Repent

A. It is swift (vv. 5-9). Repentance does not delay. To delay is to bleed the life from conviction.

Remarkably the people of Nineveh believed God! Jonah’s recounting to Nineveh of his watery “trial by ordeal” served as an alarming testimony of the spiritual danger when one disregards God’s call. Remember that it is the LORD who sovereignly purposed that they should repent, and thereby ordained those naturalistic disasters to prepare the people’s hearts for Jonah’s message. When he heard Jonah’s message, the king arose from his throne to remove his royal clothes (literally his “glory”), covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in a heap of ashes.

B. It is sincere (vv. 5b-8a). Repentance does not flatter, belittle, ignore, or kill the messenger.

1. Not half-hearted. Nineveh took Jonah's message of doom seriously, and they repented with all due seriousness. Their hearts were broken with conviction of sin, and so they sought to turn from their evil with all their hearts.
2. Not with half-effort. The king of Nineveh issued a royal decree to enforce the fast. He decreed that men and beasts should wear sackcloth (the clothing of mourning and repentance of sin) and call out *with strength* to God for mercy.
3. Not with hypocrisy. Religious hypocrisy portrays, insincerely and under false pretense, that one is right with God. Nineveh concentrated on their own sin and need for repentance, such that only their city's status before the LORD mattered at this point (2 Cor 7:9-11a).

C. It is specific (v. 8b). Repentance is not vague or impersonal.

Fasting, wearing sackcloth, and sitting in ashes were accompanied by repentance of particular sin and especially the violence of which they were guilty. What were the sins of Nineveh? The prophet Nahum confronted the city with the sins of "plotting evil against the LORD, cruelty and plundering in war, prostitution, witchcraft and commercial exploitation" (Nah 1:11; 2:12-13; 3:1, 4-7, 16, 19).

III. When God Relents

A. He acts sovereignly (vv. 4, 9-10). The king is free to forgive or not.

Jonah's threat that Nineveh will be "overthrown" is the same word used to threaten Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:21, 25, 29). God is free to judge, destroy, or be gracious because he is the ruler of all. When God relents he exercises his royal prerogative. No one else can do so (Rom 9:14-18).

B. He knows omnisciently (v. 10). Nothing surprises God, including uncoerced human actions.

1. God's thoughts and workings are analogical to ours. Didactic portions of Scripture teach that God does not change his mind or his plans like we do (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:28-29).
2. God is the Lord of history. He declares the end from the beginning by providentially directing everything and everyone from beginning to end (Isa 46:8-11). God does not change his plan (contra the heresy of "open theism"). God sometimes wills his plans to be contingent upon human response (Gen 18:23-26; Ex 32:14; Jer 18:7-10; Am 7:3-6). Yet God never loses control.
3. God ordains the means and the end. The people of Nineveh acted freely and were responsible to repent of their own sinful ways, yet God ordained the result for his glory. God even uses scandalous sin for his higher purposes. (Gen 50:20; Acts 2:22-23).

C. He loves mercifully (vv. 3b, 10; 4:2, 11). His loving pity overwhelms his righteous anger.

God in the OT is not (as some contend) a nationalistic god. He loves the nations and desires that they turn from their sinful purposes to find salvation in his higher purposes. From the beginning, God's purpose was to bless his children to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3).

Conclusion – The people of Nineveh responded to the "sign of Jonah" (his preaching coupled with his rescue from the great fish's belly after 3 days and nights). This was the "sign" given to the generation of Jews alive during the time of Jesus. The "sign of Jesus" (his preaching of the gospel and his death, burial, and resurrection) is also the sign for unbelievers today. Jesus is the "greater Jonah." While Jonah reluctantly preached to a city full of sinners against his will, Jesus willingly preached the gospel of God and freely gave his own life for many. Jesus Christ, as he bled and died, took upon himself the evil of man's sin. He died so that even self-righteous, complacent, religious people might be forgiven. Such a great salvation makes both your evil and imperfect goodness pale in comparison to God's immense forgiveness. This is God's higher purpose: that your heart might be like God's.