

I heard about a guy out in Texas who invited a lot of bachelors out to his ranch for a BBQ. When he got them all together, he stood up before them and said, "Look over the edge at that little lake on my ranch. I've filled it with alligators." He said, "If there is anyone willing to get in there with those gators and go from this end of the lake to the other side, I'll give you one of three things. I'll give you a 500-acre ranch, or a million dollars in cash, or the hand of my daughter in marriage. Whichever one you want." He had no sooner said it than "splash," somebody went into that lake. The rancher looked over the edge and there was a guy in that lake that didn't even take his shoes off – still wearing his three-piece suit on. He was flying across that lake as fast as humanly possible. Water was splashing and alligators were snapping and thrashing trying to chase him down, but he made it all the way to the other side. He climbed out of the lake soaking wet, but without a scratch on him. He was completely exhausted, trying to get his breath. The rich Texan went over to him and this is what he said, "Son, I meant this as a practical joke. I didn't really mean for anyone to swim that lake. But you did it and I'm as good as my word. Which one do you want, the 500-acre ranch, the one million dollars in cash, or my daughter's hand in marriage?" The young man looked at the rich Texan and said, "I don't want none of them. I just want to get my hands on the guy that pushed me in the water! That's what I want!"

Irrespective how the man got in the water, there's no doubt that he was more than highly motivated to get across to the other side, and I suspect Jonah felt a little like that man tossed into the water.

If you recall, the last time we saw Jonah he was covered in clam chowder, shrimp cocktail, and tuna tar tare after being projectile vomited onto shore by that great fish, which prompts the question: **Did anybody on the beach see the fish vomit Jonah onto shore?** If so, I suspect that word of this unbelievable incident spread rather quickly and proceeded Jonah long before he got to his next destination. And to add to the credibility of this incident, some scholars think that he may have looked like an albino because the fish's stomach acids and gastric juices may have bleached his skin so that he had a distinctly white, almost ghostly appearance. That may have removed any doubt that this had happened to him. Whatever the case may be, bleached or not, Jonah must have been a sight for sore eyes, and that's where we left off last week.

So, let's move on to **Chapter 3**, beginning with **verse 1**.

¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am

going to tell you.”³ **So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk.**

Only by the grace of God, Jonah is given a second chance and commanded to go once again to Nineveh – to a people that Jonah hated, **but did you notice that God’s second command to Jonah was little different from the command given to him the first time in Chapter 1:2?** Instead of telling Jonah to “*cry against*” Nineveh – this time God simply tells Jonah to go there and wait for further instructions of what to say. It would seem that God is going to lead Jonah one step at a time so he doesn’t get all worked up again, and this time Jonah heads in the right direction towards Nineveh. And, depending on where Jonah was vomited up on the Mediterranean coast, it would still have required a very long trek to the east, some 400 to 500 miles to Nineveh, maybe a month or more to travel.

We are told in **verse 3** that Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. The city of Nineveh was about 3 miles long and 1½ miles wide; however, if you included the suburbs of Nineveh, it would have taken three days to walk around it. So, considering its sizeable geographic boundary – Nineveh was considered a great city.

We are told in **verse 4**,

Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

So, Jonah walked through the city of Nineveh for the day – I’m guessing to see for himself how wicked these people were. We are not told if he had talked to people, or if he was questioned as to who he was and why he was there. If he did have an albino appearance, we are not told if he had gathered a crowd as he walked around that day. We just don’t know, but there came a point during the day where he cried out this message – “**Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.**” That’s it. That’s his message to these people. “*You people are toast in 40 days.*”

I don’t know about you, but this message by Jonah is a “head scratcher” for me.

- **Was this the whole message? Is this all that God wanted Jonah to say? Did he just walk around the city repeating “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown”?** Is that it?
- Maybe Jonah did say more, but this was the major point of his message, so this was the only portion recorded in the book. **Is that what happened?**

- Maybe there was more that God wanted Jonah to say, but Jonah only did just enough, which would say something about Jonah's attitude. *"Well God, I warned them. I did my part."* If this was the case, I think this shows that Jonah hadn't really changed his attitude towards the Ninevites – he's just going through the motions, but his heart was not in it. I believe this was the case, and I will show you why in a moment.

So, Jonah gave this short doom and gloom message and look what happened.

⁵ Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

Just like the pagan sailors in Chapter 1, the people who did not know God turned to Him. This might be one of the most understated verses in all of the Bible to describe the supernatural working of God in the lives of people. Obviously, more information would have been helpful to us, but this is all we have in the Bible.

I read several possible explanations as to why the people of Nineveh were so moved to believe in God, and there was one explanation that really got my attention. The people of Nineveh worshipped "*Nanshe*", the fish goddess of fresh water, and they also worshipped the fish god "*Dagon*", who had the head of a fish and the body of a man. So, fish were of particular importance to the Ninevites even though they were some 500 miles from the coast. If Jonah was seen being vomited onto shore by the fish and the account reached the Ninevites or Jonah had been asked by the people to tell his story and he explained how he survived in the belly of a fish, the Ninevites may have concluded that Jonah's God was more powerful than their fish gods. Oddly enough, Jonah's fish story may have opened the door for God's message.

Wouldn't that be another ironic twist in this story? Think about it for a moment. What if God used the consequences of Jonah's rebellion and disobedience to reach the wicked people of Nineveh – the very people that Jonah hated? What an irony that would be!

If you noticed, Jonah did not need to tell them about their sin. Jonah could have spelled it out, he could have filled in the details – for they were a wicked people, but it seems that no one needed any explanation or clarification. They were obviously aware of their wickedness and had no doubt that they deserved divine judgment. They made no excuses or tried to justify their sin as we so often do.

So, there was a real revival going on here, and this revival seems to have begun from “the bottom up,” rather than being imposed from “the top down.” The people, we are told, believed in God. They called a fast and mourned as if mourning for the dead. They took off their normal clothes and put on sackcloth – a thick coarse cloth, normally made from goat’s hair. Wearing it displayed a rejection of comfort and pleasure. Their response was unanimous, from the lower to the upper classes. A revival in broke out in Nineveh, but the revival didn’t stop there.

⁶ When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. ⁷ He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. ⁸ But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.

By the time word reached the king, the city was already in full-blown repentance. Since the king also believed Jonah’s warning, he made every effort to assure total compliance. He began by personally repenting. The king then made a proclamation which required all of Nineveh to fast, and to abstain from drinking water. Both men and animals were to be covered with sackcloth, and all the people were to call upon God and to abstain from their wicked ways and their violence. They didn’t want to take any chances.

The word “*repentance*” is not used, but this is what it looks like. If repentance is anything, it is not business as usual. When repentance comes, something has to change – something has to be different.

A man was praying with his pastor at the altar. He prayed a prayer the pastor had heard many times before. “Lord, take the cobwebs out of my life.” Just as he said this, the pastor interrupted, “Kill the spider, Lord.”

When we truly turn to God, we have a change of heart, we agree with God, and we turn away from the things that displease Him. That’s repentance.

Then the king of Nineveh says something in **verse 9** that I find very interesting.

Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.”

There is something I want to point out here and its somewhat subtle. Here the king starts his sentence with these words, “**Who knows.**”

Who knows? Did the king not know? Was he not told that God would withhold judgment if they repented? **Who knows?** Who did know? Jonah knew, but it seems that Jonah did not tell them. But in spite of Jonah’s failure to communicate, the people repented anyway and believed in God.

¹⁰ When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

God took note of Nineveh’s repentance. He took note that they had a genuine change of heart and their deeds had changed – they had **turned from their wicked way**. And as a result, God relented from the calamity which He had threatened.

We serve a God of second chances. This story should be encouraging to us when we think about other people in our lives – people we have been praying for. We serve a God of second chances who pursues and rescues people. **From a human perspective, how could one man claiming to be a prophet of God confront thousands of people with a very short doom and gloom message? How could a Jew, who represented the one true God ever get these wicked people to believe what he had to say?** Jonah couldn’t – but God could. It is God who takes the initiative, it is God who convicts the heart, and it is God who draws people unto Himself – it’s something only God can do. The results always belong to God.

We serve a God of second chances, and this is important for you and me as well. Of all the people to use as His instrument to bring about this repentance by the Ninevites, God chose to use the worst evangelist available – Jonah. He gave a second chance to Jonah – a rebellious man of God who did not have a heart for people who did not know God. And although his heart was not in it, Jonah reluctantly obeyed God anyway and God used him.

Likewise, as followers of Jesus, we are not called to be successful – we are called to be obedient. We are to be obedient – simply leaving the results of our obedience in the hands of our God who can do wonders. And just like Jonah, God has graciously chosen to use you and me to share His message to others.

I became a believer in 1980, and sometime around 1982, I was approached by my Sunday School teacher after class. He asked if I wanted to join him and some other men from the church in an exciting ministry. I jumped at the chance not

really knowing what I was getting myself into. What I got myself into was prison ministry. A group of us men from the church were to join other men with the Bill Glass Prison Ministry to share the gospel to inmates in prison several weeks later.

The day came when we arrived at the Walls Unit in Huntsville Texas. It was an ominous old brick prison that was situated in the middle of the city, and it was the same place where executions were carried out in Texas. It was a scary place as I had never been in a prison before. I had seen prison movies before, but it's not the same.

We made our way through the various entry check points, being patted down, and removing anything that could be taken from us or used as a weapon. Finally, all of us were herded out onto the prison yard.

On the prison yard, there were inmates gathered all around staring at us from a distance, they apparently didn't know who we were – and in my paranoid mind, they were all staring at me. It was nerve-racking, but my friends from church were nearby and I took some comfort in that. Then it went from nervousness to terror.

I don't know what happened, but I was apparently so focused on looking at the inmates looking at me, I hadn't realized that my friends, who had been standing behind me, my crutches so to speak, were now gone. I turned around and they were nowhere to be seen. Poof – gone! I was terrified.

On the outside, I was trying to look kinda tough because I didn't want anyone to take advantage of me – but on the inside, I was in the fetal position sucking my thumb like a baby. It was terrible. I didn't know what I was doing, and all I had in my hand was a few Bible tracts, and in my crazy paranoid mind, they all had shanks.

*Then the praying really kicked in. I'm telling God that He made a horrible mistake by allowing me to be there. **What in the world was He thinking?** “God, I have nothing in common with these people. I'm not like these people. **Why did You bring me to this place?** Beam up me, Lord!”*

So, there I stand, talking with God like a wild man, paralyzed in fear. I knew I had to do something, so I asked God for help.

It's hard to explain what happened next. Even though there were a 100 or so inmates on the prison yard at that time, for some reason only two men really stood out to me. There was a white man and a black man standing at the far end of the

prison yard talking to each other. It was as if everyone else just faded out of the picture so to speak – it's hard to explain, so I worked up my nerve and started to walk towards them.

I am really nervous, and I am rehearsing in my mind how to start a conversation with these two men. *Should I introduce myself first? How do I do that? Do I call myself Robert or do I use Bob? What do I ask them?* My mind is racing a mile a minute over something so simple saying "hello." Like Jonah, I was making it harder than it had to be.

I also had a major concern – *I had nothing in common with these people. Nothing! How can I bridge this wide gap between us so we can at least relate to one another? How can I relate to them and them to me?* That was extremely important to me and I just saw no way to do this – in my mind, we were just too far apart, but I kept walking towards those two men anyway despite my concerns.

When I reached them, I identified myself and asked them their names and where they were from. One man told me his name and said he was from Milwaukee, WI. The other man told me his name and said he was from Corpus Christi, TX.

At that time in my life, I was serving in the Coast Guard. During my fairly short career at that point, I had only been stationed in two duty assignments. My first duty station was the Coast Guard Ice Breaker Westwind in Milwaukee, WA, and my current duty station was Coast Guard Air Station Corpus Christi, TX. I even knew where these two guys lived. It was amazing – we actually had a lot in common – more than I had ever imagined or hoped for.

I pulled out my Bible tract and shared the gospel with them. Both men prayed to receive Jesus right there on the prison yard. Then these two got a crazy idea. They wanted me to follow them into the belly of the prison. I was excited for them, but not that excited. I just wasn't ready for that, so I asked the two men to have their friends come out to the prison yard to meet me – and they did. I think I had a line of about 15 men standing in single-file waiting to hear me read a Bible tract. It was amazing to see these men accept Jesus into their lives.

I spent the weekend in the prison, and eventually was one of a few men who went down to the "hole" to visit those who were segregated from the rest of the prison population. My time at the Walls was one of the greatest spiritual moments of my entire life.

God knew exactly what He was doing and how He would choose to use me. He had it all planned out. **Did I feel like I was in a lake full of gators?** You bet I did, but like Jonah, God put me in a position where I had no other choice but to trust and obey Him. And it was only then, that I got to see our God of second chances at work and be blessed beyond all measure.

If God tells you to go, even to your Nineveh – then go. *“But Lord, I can’t.”* And He responds, *“I know you can’t, but I can. Just obey Me in this and you will see what I can do through you.”*

Source Material:

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Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe
The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Walvoord & Zuck
Enduring Word – David Guzik