

All of chapter 2 was praise to Yahweh for Jonah's "salvation" and his remembrance of what happened to him after being thrown from the boat during the storm. Jonah had a remarkable journey to this point, he has "come to his senses" and has repented. He has vowed that he will do what God wants him to do. God directs the specially prepared fish to "vomit" Jonah back to dry land. Essentially, we are right back at the beginning of God's directive to Jonah in the first place. He is to go to Nineveh and preach to them. This time he will respond obediently. But Jonah is not at all happy about this, and certainly not prepared for what happens in Nineveh.



Jonah 3:1-2

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."

- We have no idea exactly WHERE the fish deposited Jonah. There has been much speculation about this, including back at Joppa (his initial departure point), or even much further north in order to facilitate his long journey to Nineveh. We are assuming, of course, that the fish would have to deposit Jonah along a water coastline somewhere, and not further inland. However, nothing is impossible to God! Perhaps the fish had a huge "vomit range" and Jonah found himself just outside of Nineveh. That seems unlikely, though with God you can't rule out any possibilities! Chances are, however, that regardless of what part of any coastline the fish would have discharged Jonah, he still has a very long arduous journey ahead of him in order to travel to Nineveh. Some people even speculate it could have taken Jonah up to a month to make this journey, most likely with a traveling caravan.
- Regardless of Jonah's starting point on the trip to Nineveh, he is now essentially back where he started from, with God's directive to go to Nineveh and preach to them the message that God gave him.
- The entire adventure in the storm, the drowning, being swallowed by a huge fish, the visit to Sheol and everything else could have been avoided if Jonah had just obeyed God the first time. What a lesson for us.

- Notice that Yahweh has a special message he wants preached to the Ninevites, not one that Jonah might craft himself. Jonah probably wished he could preach his own message. He most likely had some choice words he would like to deliver to the Assyrians.



Jonah 3:3-4

New King James Version	Qodesh Cepheriym
³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. ⁴ And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"	³ So Yonah arose, and went unto Niyneveh, according to the word of YAH'HAVAH. Now Niyneveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey. ⁴ And Yonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days and Niyneveh shall be overthrown.

- Jonah obviously was not too happy about going to Nineveh, for many reasons we can easily understand. First, he didn't know what his enemies would do to him personally. Nineveh became the capital of the Assyrian empire, a nation and people known for their violence and cruelty to enemies. Assyria, an enemy of Israel, was becoming more and more powerful and aggressive. Jonah had good reason to fear these people, and traveling to this great city. There were a number of issues at stake, including his personal safety.
- Secondly, however, Jonah knew of the merciful forgiving nature of Yahweh. He most likely held the Assyrians in great disdain and fear, and did not want God to forgive them! He wanted them destroyed! He was afraid of what might happen – that the Assyrians would repent and God would forgive them. This would have been a great disaster in Jonah's eyes, thus the entire reason for trying to run from God's directive. Also, there is some speculation that Jonah feared that the Assyrians would replace the Israelites in God's covenant relationship. The prophet Hosea had prophesied that unless they repented, Israel would be conquered by the Assyrians. Jonah knew this, and feared that event.
- Despite knowing all this, Jonah has learned his lesson, having been suitably disciplined by Yahweh. He responded obediently this time and proceeded to Nineveh.
- **Nineveh was indeed a "great city"** especially in the ancient world. It was quite a large city, as evidenced by the reference to "three-day journey in extent." This is not the length of time for the journey TO Nineveh. It refers to how long it took to walk the diameter, completely across, the city. Some Greek historians indicated that a "day's journey" was about six miles, making Nineveh about 18 miles across, or almost 60 miles around. That is a large city. In the last verse of this book, God indicates there were at least 120,000 people there [there is speculation as to whether this number indicates children or adults as well – if it is just children, there would have been considerably more in total population].

- To give us an idea of how large this city was, **the modern city of Chicago, Illinois** (*the third most populous city in the US after Los Angeles and New York*) is a good comparison. If we assume that Nineveh was about 18 miles across, we can compute it's area at about 254 square miles. The area of Chicago is similar, slightly less, at 234 square miles. Nineveh was no small city!
- Jonah began preaching on his first day into the city. He didn't want to be here in the first place, but was obediently, and quickly, getting Yahweh's message to these people. The message God gave him to bring to the Assyrians in Nineveh was apparently the fact that their sins and rebellion against Him had pushed Him to a limit. **He was giving them only 40 days to repent, or be obliterated.** We know what Jonah was probably hoping for! Sort of makes us wonder how sincerely he preached this need for repentance. It doesn't matter. God was the one doing the work in their hearts, regardless of Jonah's bias.

Jonah 3:5-9

New King James Version	Qodesh Cepheriym
<i>⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?</i>	<i>⁵So the people of Niyneveh believer ELOHIYM, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. ⁶For word came unto the king of Niyneveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Niyneveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor block, taste anything: let them not feed, nor drink water: ⁸But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto ELOHIYM: yea, let them turn everyone from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who can tell if ELOHIYM will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?</i>

- The first part of verse 5, ***“So the people of Nineveh believed God...”*** is probably one of the most remarkable statements in scripture. We don't know how Jonah preached, where he preached, or exactly what he said, other than they had 40 days to repent or be destroyed. We would think Jonah would be either killed, or laughed at, by these pagan and violent Assyrians who probably did not understand, or even want to understand, Jonah's message. But God draws all people to Himself. His glory is seen in the creation, in the heavens, in every beautiful thing, and He prepares our hearts to receive Him. We still make the choice, however. The Ninevites could easily have run Jonah out of town, or boiled him in oil. But instead, they “believed God.” Notice it does not say they believed Jonah. They believed God. Somehow God was drawing these people, and He opened their eyes to see Him, and respond to Jonah's message.

- Some people speculate, and this is indeed how God works at times, that Yahweh had prepared these Assyrians for repentance through a series of recent disasters. God brought huge famines upon the Assyrians in both 765 and 759 BC. Shortly after the first famine, in 763 BC, a total eclipse occurred. This was something greatly misunderstood and feared by ancient peoples. The pagans worshipped many gods and would naturally seek to appease whatever god was apparently angry with them. They were not atheistic, but polytheistic. It is very likely God used these feared events to prepare the hearts of the Assyrians for Jonah's message. These dates are considered the recent past in Jonah's time and probably played a role in the Ninevites' repentance.
- Although we might be tempted to credit Jonah's powerful preaching for the repentance of the Assyrian people, we must understand that **this is a miracle. God did this**. In fact, many people choose not to accept the book of Jonah for this very reason. They cannot accept that an entire people, a people known for their violence and brutality, would come to repentance. This does seem a bit "extreme." However, nothing is impossible to God, and He uses this event to reveal His heart for all people, not just the Israelites. It also shows that God can forgive and deliver anyone from any sin. He is gracious and compassionate, yet just and righteous. As with the Assyrians, He also reaches His limits. Ample warning is always given, but in the end, if we humans do not repent, God does NOT relent. He wouldn't be God if He did. He always keeps His word. If the Assyrians had not repented, they would indeed have been destroyed. In fact, just about 150 years later, after the "oracle" of Nahum regarding Assyria, they were destroyed. Today Nineveh does not exist. It is a pile of ruins and rubble.
- Throughout this book **God is also chastising Jonah for his lack of concern for others**, those who don't know Yahweh. The Hebrew people had developed a bit of an "attitude" concerning "their" God. He was THEIRS, and they were the CHOSEN people. Although God had charged them with bringing the good news and the light of Yahweh to ALL peoples, they did not. Jonah seemingly didn't care one bit about the Assyrians, other than the fact they he wanted them gone. At the end of chapter 4 God teaches Jonah this lesson of compassion for the lost. It is something we must learn and embrace as well.
- **Sackcloth and ashes were a common demonstration of grief** and mourning both in Israel and other ancient cultures. We don't know if Jonah told them to do this, or God somehow put this on their hearts, but EVERYONE, from the king of the Assyrians (capital cities were also mini-kingdoms) on down to the "least" of them. This means EVERYONE. This is miraculous.
- This was **not just a physical demonstration in an attempt to appease God**. Repentance had to be real, felt in the heart which is known by God. He would not have relented had this repentance not been real. There is much speculation about whether or not this stunning turn-around was real. Some suggest it was not, especially since it wasn't long after this that Assyria finally overran and conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel, which is where Jonah was from. This destruction of Israel and the scattering of the Hebrews among the Gentile nations happened in 722 BC. This was only about one generation away from the ones who repented here. But we have seen in other places in scripture where one generation walks humbly and righteously with God, but they fail to pass on this knowledge and behavior to their children, resulting in the next generation's complete apostasy and disobedience (the entire book of Judges is about a Godly generation whose sons and daughters became extremely UNgodly).



- Notice that the king ordained that even the animals were to fast and wear sackcloth. He was fooling around here. It was common in pagan cultures to utilize animals in worship. Man and animals are part of God’s creation. Somehow even the pagans understood this. Although there is debate about whether animals can consciously sin before God, this king wasn’t taking any chances. Even the animals were to be denied food and any comforts. Everything and Everyone was to focus on calling out to God, to seek His mercy and hopefully make Him relent regarding their impending destruction.
- **This king** (some speculate either Adad-nirari III [810-783 BC] or most likely Assur-dan III [772-755 BC]), **understood what repentance was about**. It was not just going through a series of motions (*the sackcloth and ashes and prayers to God*), but about truly repenting of their evil ways. This involves the heart. These people had to understand that their ways were wrong, and did not please God. They then had to turn from those ways, from that evil. This is what repentance means. It is not just being sorry (sorrowful), but turning around and living a different way. This king ordered his people to turn from their wicked ways. We must also understand exactly what repentance is. It is not just mourning over our sins, it is turning from them as well. It is likely God had Jonah tell them what their sins were, so they would understand what God wanted.
- Jonah had just repented in the belly of the fish. He was sorry for his disobedience to God, and he repented and obeyed – somewhat reluctantly it seems. **Jonah still struggled with his old attitudes**, as we will see in chapter 4. He had not yet fully accepted the heart of Yahweh in regard to these people.
- It is obvious by the king’s proclamation that he and his people fully understood Jonah’s message. They knew if they did not do all that Jonah (and God) directed them, they would indeed be destroyed. They put their hope in the seemingly remote chance that God would hear them and forgive them, and thereby spare their lives.

Jonah 3:10

New King James Version	Qodesh Cepheriym
<i>Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.</i>	And ELOHIYM saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and ELOHIYM repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

- God is always standing by, ready to forgive those who come before Him in sincere repentance. He knows the human heart, better than we know our own. He knows if we are sincere, and if we are not.
- The word used for **“works”** here literally means **actions, behavior, the way we do things**. Repentance is not just a matter of lip service; that is, saying we are sorry and praying to God. It must be accompanied by action, or lack of action (or different actions) if previous actions were sinful. God observed the actions of the Ninevites. They had indeed given up their previously evil ways.
- This verse brings up a constant commentary and speculation about **what it means for God to “relent” or “repent”** (this word is translated variously by scripture versions). The actual word in Hebrew is *nacham*, which literally means to pity, be sorry (in a favorable sense).

- Interestingly, it is the **same word used in Genesis 6:6, where God is described as being “sorry” because He had made man.** It doesn’t necessary mean He wishes He hadn’t done it. It means He was grieved by mankind’s actions and hearts. Here in Jonah, God is touched by the genuine sorrow expressed by the Ninevites for their sins, and because of that, He has already decided to spare them.

- **COMMENTARY:** (J. Vernon McGee – long but worth reading for better understanding of what it means for God to “relent”) **“What does it mean when Scripture says that God repented? Does God repent? The word *repentance* as it is used in both the Old and New Testaments primarily means “a change of mind.” ... The question arises then: *Does God change His mind?***

One of the attributes of God is that He is immutable, which means that He never changes. There is no reason for God to change. He knows the end from the beginning. ...But Scripture does say that God repents. ... There are expressions used in the Word of God called anthropomorphic terms; that is, there are certain attributes of man which are ascribed to God. In the Bible certain physical and psychological attributes of man are attributed to God [for the sake of understanding]. [such as God’s eyes, arms, hand, etc.]

The Scriptures also attribute certain psychological attributes of man to God. For example, the *anger* of the Lord. Does God get angry? He surely does.

Here in Jonah God *repents*. To repent means to change your mind; that is what it means when it applies to me. ... I did something wrong, and I now see that it was wrong. I turn from it, and I go to God and ask forgiveness for it.... But does God repent like that? Does He change His mind? Does He say, “My, I made a mistake there; I shouldn’t destroy Nineveh”? No. We need to see that the city of Nineveh had two options ... They could reject God’s message, ... and if they did, they would be destroyed—God’s never changed that. Or they could accept God’s message, ... and God would deliver and save them. God is immutable—He never changes. When His Word is rejected, when people turn from Him, they are lost. But when they turn to Him, He will always save them, regardless of who they are.

Therefore, *who* changed? Did God change? No, but it looked as if He did. .. Did God break His Word? No. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The city had two options. If they had not accepted His Word, they would have been destroyed. But they *did* accept God’s message, they believed God, and they turned from their wickedness. God didn’t change; He will always save people when they turn to Him. Although it looked as if God changed, it was really the city of Nineveh that changed, ...”

- It is interesting to note that Jonah is preaching to a Gentile nation, an enemy of Israel, and they not only heard his message, but did as God wanted. They fully repented and changed their ways. Granted, it didn’t last long. However, in this moment it was genuine. It is ironic that this Hebrew prophet was useful to bring salvation to an enemy (whom he did NOT want saved!), **when he could not effect the repentance of his own people in his own nation.** This event happened at a time in Israel’s history when she was affluent and seemingly doing well. But the heart of Israel was black, becoming more idolatrous by the day. Just about 35 years later God allowed them to be destroyed by the very Assyrians that Jonah is told to save. Israel did not pay any attention to the many messages God sent to her through various prophets, including Jonah. God is showing here, in this event, what happens when a people DO hear and DO repent. Israel paid a huge price for lack of hearing, and lack of repentance. And Assyria paid that price about 150 years after Jonah preached to Nineveh. Both nations were destroyed.