



Jonah 3:1-10 (ESV)

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth.

⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The People of Nineveh Repent

⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Jonah 3:1-10 (HCSB)

Jonah's Preaching

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the LORD's command.

Now Nineveh was an extremely large city, a three-day walk. ⁴ Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, “In 40 days Nineveh will be demolished!” ⁵ The men of Nineveh believed in God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least.

⁶ When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he issued a decree in Nineveh:

By order of the king and his nobles: No man or beast, herd or flock, is to taste anything at all.

They must not eat or drink water.

⁸ *Furthermore, both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth,
and everyone must call out earnestly to God.*

Each must turn from his evil ways and from the violence he is doing.

⁹ *Who knows? God may turn and relent;*

He may turn from His burning anger so that we will not perish.

¹⁰ Then God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster He had threatened to do to them. And He did not do it.

Jonah 3

3:1-3a *Jonah's Recommissioning and Compliance.* The fourth episode parallels the first ([1:1-3](#)) and focuses on the second question raised at the beginning of the story: "What will happen to the Ninevites?" (see note on [1:1-3](#)).

3:1-2 **The second time** underscores God's determination to get his message to the Ninevites and to use Jonah in the process. **The message that I tell you** replaces "for their evil has come up before me" ([1:2](#)).

3:3a **Jonah went to Nineveh** instead of fleeing to Tarshish. He complies with God's will, but whether this compliance is from the heart remains to be seen.

3:3b-10 *Jonah and the Pagan Ninevites.* The fifth episode parallels the second ([1:4-16](#)) and focuses on how responsive the pagan Ninevites—like the pagan sailors—are to God's word. The structure follows the pattern of corporate repentance found elsewhere in the OT (cf. [1 Sam. 7:3-14](#); [Joel 1-2](#)): (1) message of divine judgment ([Jonah 3:3a-5](#)); (2) account of human repenting ([vv. 6-9](#)); and (3) record of divine relenting ([v. 10](#)).

3:3b **an exceedingly great city** (cf. ESV footnote, "a great city to God"; see [1:2](#); [3:2](#)). Nineveh is *important* to God and will be the recipient of his *great* compassion. **three days' journey in breadth** (cf. ESV footnote, "a visit was a three days' journey"). In Jonah's day neither the circumference nor the diameter of the walled city of **Nineveh** (see [plan](#)) was a three-day walk. The phrase may refer to the time it would take Jonah to walk throughout the city, preaching his message. (Nineveh could also refer to the much larger administrative area including the city and the outlying villages, which was 30-56 miles/48-90 km across.)

3:4 **Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!** "Overthrown" is the same verb used for God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah ([Gen. 19:21, 25, 29](#)). Although the threat sounds unconditional, a condition was implied: If people repent, God will relent (see [Jer. 18:7-8](#)). Jonah knows this condition is included (see [Jonah 4:2](#)), and the king of Nineveh will hope that it is (see [3:9](#)).

3:5 **Believed** is the first word in the Hebrew text of the sentence, and the grammar underscores the immediacy of Nineveh's repentance. To **fast** and wear **sackcloth** were ancient demonstrations of mourning ([Neh. 9:1](#); [Est. 4:3](#); [Dan. 9:3](#)).

3:6 The **word that reached the king of Nineveh** was the "word" of the Lord (see [1:1](#); [3:1](#), [3](#)). The "king of Nineveh" was probably not the king of Assyria, since Nineveh was not an Assyrian capital in Jonah's day; he may have been a provincial governor who ruled from Nineveh.

3:7-8 **issued a proclamation.** It seems odd that the king would tell everyone to fast and put on sackcloth when they had already done so ([v. 5](#)). Therefore it is more likely that [v. 5](#) and [vv. 6-9](#) are in topical rather than chronological order. First the king issued the proclamation, and then the people carried it out (see a similar summons to repentance in [Joel 1:13-14](#)). By putting the people's response ahead of the king's proclamation, the author underscores the immediacy of the people's response and that they are

1. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *ESV Study Bible, The: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Jonah 3".

responding to Jonah's message, not just to the king's command. The Ninevites each **turn from his evil way**, whereas the Israelites did not (cf. [2 Kings 17:13-14](#)).

3:9 Who knows? expresses hope (see [2 Sam. 12:22](#)) that **God may turn and relent**—the exact hope of the prophet Joel for the people of Judah ([Joel 2:14](#)). **we may not perish**. This is the third time a pagan has been concerned that people not perish (see [Jonah 1:14](#) and note on [1:6](#)); ironically, Jonah has not expressed any such concern.

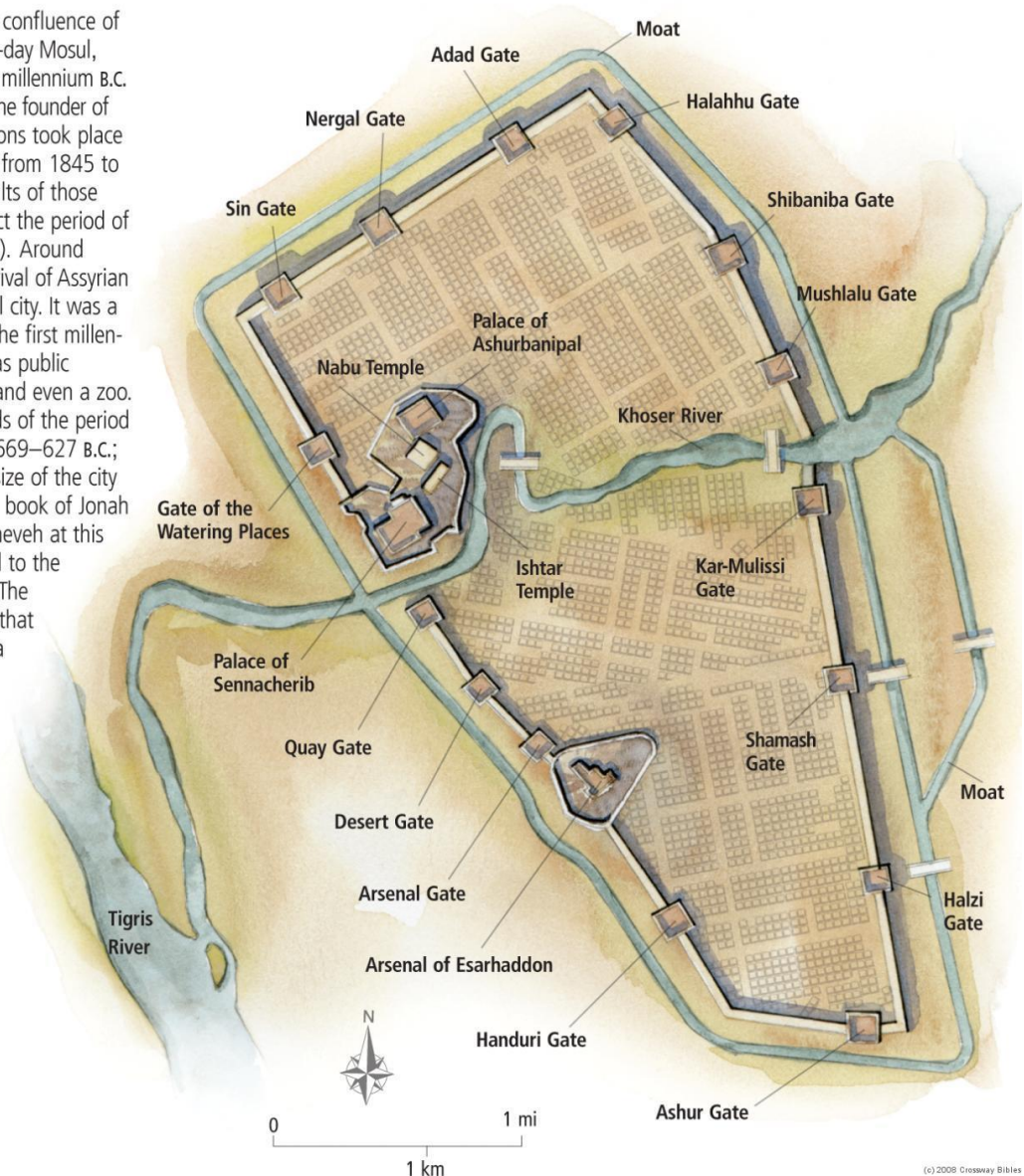
3:10 evil... disaster. Both terms translate Hebrew *ra'ah* (see note on [1:2](#)). The use of the same word underscores the close connection between human action and divine response. God did not carry out the threatened disaster because the Ninevites repented of their evil (see note on [3:4](#)). From a temporal perspective, God responds to human action; from an eternal perspective, God chooses the means (human repenting) as well as the end (divine relenting). The repentance of Gentiles contrasts with the repeated lack of repentance on the part of Israel (see note on [vv. 7-8](#)).

The City of Nineveh

Nineveh, which was situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Khoser rivers (modern-day Mosul, Iraq), was first settled in the seventh millennium B.C. According to the Bible, Nimrod was the founder of the city ([Gen. 10:11](#)). Major excavations took place under the direction of Henry Layard from 1845 to 1854. The diagram pictures the results of those excavations, especially as they reflect the period of the Assyrian Empire (1420–609 B.C.). Around 1000 B.C. there occurred a great revival of Assyrian power, and Nineveh became a royal city. It was a thriving city during the first half of the first millennium, and contained such luxuries as public squares, parks, botanical gardens, and even a zoo. One of the great archaeological finds of the period is the library of King Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.; called Osnappar in [Ezra 4:10](#)). The size of the city was approximately 1,850 acres. The book of Jonah reflects the flourishing nature of Nineveh at this time ([3:1–5](#)). Nineveh eventually fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C. The invading armies dammed the rivers that supplied water to the city, causing a flood that broke through one of the perimeter walls, giving the foreign armies access to the city.

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Holman Christian Standard Bible - Study Bible²

Jonah 3:1-10

3:1-3 Jonah went to Nineveh as God had commanded. Extremely large city (lit "a great city to God"; see textual footnote) may have a double meaning: great in size (where "God," Hb *elohim*, is used as a superlative for "extremely") and a city "important to God" even though inhabited by Gentiles. Three-day walk could refer to greater Nineveh that included the region around Nineveh proper, including modern Kuyunjik, Khorsabad, and Nimrud with a 60-mile perimeter. More likely, however, it refers to how long it took for Jonah to preach thoroughly throughout Nineveh itself, street corner by street corner. Forty often refers to a period of testing or judgment in the Bible ([Lk 4:2](#); [Heb 3:9](#)), serving here to give Nineveh time to repent.

3:4 Jonah preached only on the first day of his three-day task (see note at [3:1-3](#)), showing his half-hearted obedience. Demolished (Hb *haphak*) has a secondary meaning of "changed" which is not the sense Jonah meant, but ironically that is how the word of prophecy was actually fulfilled. Nineveh was not destroyed, but was instead changed.

3:5-8 After recounting that Nineveh repented and believed the deity whom Jonah represented ([v. 5](#) uses the impersonal term God, not the personal name Yahweh/Lord), the text then explains that this overwhelming response was a result of a royal decree. The king led by example. Sackcloth was worn during times of mourning and repentance, usually while sitting atop ashes ([Gen 37:34](#); [1Ki 21:27](#); [Mt 11:21](#)). Man or beast means even the animals fasted, bellowing miserably to heaven along with the people.

saq

| | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Hebrew Pronunciation | [SACK] |
| HCSB Translation | sack, sackcloth |
| Uses in Jonah | 3 |
| Uses in the OT | 48 |
| Focus passage | Jonah 3:5-6,8 |

Saq denotes *sack* (6x; [Gen 42:27](#)), entering English through Greek and Latin. *Saq* was *sackcloth* ([Isa 15:3](#)). The thick, rough, dark-colored material was goat hair ([Isa 50:3](#); [Rev 6:12](#)) or camel hair ([Mt 3:4](#)). It might provide blankets ([2Sam 21:10](#)). Akkadian, the Ninevite language, used the root similarly. Ninevites wore *sackcloth* to express repentance ([Jnh 3:8](#)), as did Israelites ([Neh 9:1](#)). *Sackcloth* was worn on the skin ([2Ki 6:30](#); [Job 16:15](#)) and involved self-humbling ([1Ki 21:27-29](#)). Mourning was the chief reason for wearing *sackcloth* ([Gen 37:34](#); [Joel 1:8](#)). Ammonites ([Jer 49:3](#)) and Arameans ([1Ki 20:32](#)) wore *sackcloth*. Prophets called for it communally in the face of judgment ([Jer 4:8](#)). People might tear regular clothes and fast ([Est 4:1,3](#)), covering themselves with dust (4x; [Jer 6:26](#)) or ashes (7x; [Jnh 3:6](#)), perhaps shaving or cutting themselves ([Jer 48:37](#)). *Sackcloth* could signal protest ([Est 4:1](#)).

3:9 Who knows indicates that Jonah had not explicitly stated that judgment against the city could be averted by repentance. The king of Nineveh took a shot in the dark.

3:10 Prophecies of doom are often conditional warnings that can be averted through repentance ([Jer 18:8-10](#)).

2. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., *HCSB Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Jonah 3".

NLT Life Application Study Bible³

Jonah 3:1-10

3:1, 2 Jonah had run away from God but was given a second chance to participate in God's work. You may feel as though you are disqualified from serving God because of past mistakes. But serving God is not an earned position. No one qualifies for God's service, but God still asks us to carry out his work. You may yet have another chance.

3:1, 2 Jonah was to preach only what God told him—a message of doom to one of the most powerful cities in the world. This was not the most desirable assignment, but those who bring God's word to others should not let social pressures or fear of people dictate their words. They are called to preach God's message and his truth, no matter how unpopular it may be.

3:3 Nineveh was a huge city. The Hebrew text makes no distinction between the city proper (the walls of which were only about eight miles in circumference, accommodating a population of about 175,000 persons) and the administrative district of Nineveh that was about 30 to 60 miles across.

3:4-9 God's word is for everyone. Despite the wickedness of the Ninevite people, they were open to God's message and repented immediately. If we simply proclaim God's message of salvation, we may be surprised at how many people will listen.

3:10 The pagan people of Nineveh believed Jonah's message and repented. What a miraculous effect God's words had on those evil people! Their repentance stood in stark contrast to Israel's stubbornness. The people of Israel had heard many messages from the prophets, but they had refused to repent. The people of Nineveh only needed to hear God's message once. Jesus said that at the judgment, the people of Nineveh will stand up to condemn the Israelites for their failure to repent ([Matthew 12:39-41](#)). It is not our hearing God's word that pleases him, but our responding obediently to it.

3:10 God responded in mercy by canceling his threatened destruction. God had said that any nation on which he had pronounced judgment would be saved if it repented ([Jeremiah 18:7, 8](#)). God forgave Nineveh, just as he had forgiven Jonah. The purpose of God's judgment is correction, not revenge. He is always ready to show compassion to anyone willing to seek him.

3. *Life Application Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1461-1462.

Study and Discussion Questions

***Questions for Ch 3 & 4*



Jonah Fulfills His Mission - [Jonah 3:1-4:11](#)

Topics: [Anger](#), [Attitude](#), [Believe](#), [Compassion](#), [Consequences](#), [Fasting](#), [Forgiveness](#), [God](#), [Instructions](#), [Judging Others](#), [Love](#), [Obedience](#), [People](#), [Prayer](#), [Protection](#), [Questions](#), [Repentance](#), [Resentment](#)

Open It

1. If you were offered a trip to the city of your choice anywhere in the world, what city would you choose? Why?
2. *When things don't go your way, how do you tend to respond?
3. What most easily moves you to compassion?

Explore It

4. What did God command Jonah to do? ([3:1-2](#))
5. How did Jonah respond to God's instructions? ([3:3](#))
6. What did Jonah tell the Ninevites? ([3:4](#))
7. How did the people respond to Jonah's message? ([3:5](#))
8. What did the king do? ([3:6](#))
9. What did the king decree? ([3:7-9](#))
10. What action did God take? ([3:10](#))
11. *How did Jonah respond to God's goodness to the Ninevites? ([4:1](#))
12. *What was the attitude of Jonah's prayer? ([4:2-3](#))
13. What did God say to Jonah? ([4:4](#))
14. What did the distraught prophet do? ([4:5](#))
15. How did God deal with Jonah? ([4:6-11](#))
16. *What did God want Jonah to understand? ([4:9-11](#))

Get It

17. When have you experienced a surprising, undeserved measure of God's mercy in your life?
18. Why do you think that fasting might be a useful part of repentance?
19. In your view, which culture, nation, or special interest group is undeserving of God's mercy?
20. *God was very gracious to Jonah, a pouting, reactive type. How does God deal with your prickly side?
21. How does the story of Jonah affect your view of cross-cultural ministry?
22. *Jonah wanted Nineveh, Israel's enemy, destroyed. When have you wanted revenge rather than restoration in a relationship?
23. What hard lesson have you had to learn from God?

Apply It

24. *What is one way you can extend God's love and mercy toward others, particularly those who don't deserve it?
25. How can you express thanks to the Lord this week for all the love and mercy He has given to you and others?