Jonah 3 — Grace for Nineveh: Obedience, Witness, and Revival

Teaching Outline — A Study of Jonah 3
Passage: Jonah 3 | **Suggested teaching time:** 45 minutes

Lesson objective

- Class will recognize:
  - God uses the **obedient proclamation of His Word**
  - To call sinners to **repentance**
- Class will be encouraged to participate faithfully in:
  - Personal witness
  - Active gospel outreach

Introduction (5 min)

- "And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah **the second time**" (3:1)
  - God's "second time" reveals restoring [BLANK: grace]
  - God didn't lower His standard
  - Didn't pretend Jonah hadn't run
  - Restored and recommissioned His servant
- **Read Jonah 3**
- Assignment is again Nineveh
  - Major Assyrian center on the Tigris, east of Israel
  - "An exceeding great city of three days' journey" (v. 3)
    - Probably the broader city region, or time to traverse its key districts
    - Need not mean the walled center alone took three days to cross
  - Scripture's point: Nineveh was
    - Large
    - Influential
    - Morally accountable to God

- The historical moment
  - Assyria rising, but had known instability in the 8th century B.C.
  - A foreign prophet warning of imminent overthrow would get attention
  - **Don’t make politics the cause of revival**
    - Cause (v. 5): “So the people of Nineveh believed God”
  - God’s [BLANK: Word] is the instrument; God grants the response

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Background (5 min)

- Assyria was neither unknown nor harmless to Israel
  - Powerful people; armies feared for cruelty and conquest
  - Explains why Jonah’s commission was hard
    - Israelite prophet sent to warn Gentiles Israel feared and resented
- God’s concern isn’t confined by national borders
  - Creator has authority over every city, ruler, people
- Guards against a shallow view of grace
  - Grace doesn’t call evil harmless
    - Nineveh’s violence was real
    - God’s warning was morally serious
  - Grace…
    - **Sends a warning** — because judgment is real
    - **Provides time** — because God is merciful
    - **Receives** those who truly turn
  - Watch for both divine holiness and divine compassion
    - Neither cancels the other

Exposition: The renewed commission and obedient message (7 min)

- **v. 2** — “Arise, go unto Nineveh… preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee”
  - God defines both the **place** and the **message**
  - Biblical witness ≠ inventing a popular message
    - = Faithfully delivering what God has said

- **v. 3** — This time Jonah obeys
  - “So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD”
  - Jonah went according to the [BLANK: word] of the LORD
  - Same man who arose to flee now arises to go
  - Restoration should lead to renewed obedience
- **v. 4** — The message: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown”
  - “Overthrown” can describe destruction (as with Sodom)
  - Clearly communicates impending judgment
  - Not a soft appeal
    - Names accountability before a holy God
  - Faithful gospel witness includes:
    - Bad news of sin and judgment
    - Good news: Christ died and rose so sinners may be forgiven
- Did Jonah preach only five words?
  - Don’t assume so
    - v. 2: he preached the message God gave
    - v. 5: the people believed God
  - Book records a sharp summary
  - Certain: God’s warning reached the city and exposed its need to turn

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Exposition: Nineveh’s response: repentance (9 min)

- **v. 5** — “So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth”
  - The people of Nineveh believed [BLANK: God]
  - Belief comes first in the sentence
  - Fasting and sackcloth = visible humility
    - Not payments that earned mercy
- **v. 6** — The king’s response
  - Rises from throne
  - Lays aside his robe
  - Covers himself with sackcloth
  - Sits in ashes
  - Greatest human authority acknowledges a greater King

- **v. 8** — The king's decree
  - Fasting
  - Earnest prayer
  - Turn "every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands"
- What repentance means
  - Change of mind about sin → change of direction
  - **Not** merely:
    - Fear of consequences
    - Tears
    - Public religion
  - Nineveh turned from evil and violence
  - Good works didn't save them
    - Changed conduct = evidence their belief and humility were real
  - True [BLANK: repentance] results in a changed direction from sin
- **v. 9** — "Who can tell if God will turn and repent… that we perish not?"
  - Doesn't demand mercy — appeals to it humbly
  - Posture of a sinner before a holy God

Exposition: God's response and the timing of judgment (6 min)

God "repented" (v. 10)

- God saw "their works, that they turned from their evil way"
- "God repented of the evil… and he did it not"
  - "Evil" = calamity, disaster — not moral wrong by God
  - God does not sin
  - He responds to repentance as He revealed He would (cf. Jer 18:7–8)

The second commission: undeserved restoration

- Opening words set the tone of the whole mission
- God didn't recall Jonah because he'd proven reliable
  - He'd just run the opposite way
  - Endangered a ship

    - Needed extraordinary rescue
- Second commission = undeserved kindness
    - God can restore a servant who failed
- Restoration ≠ casual denial of sin
    - Jonah was confronted, humbled, brought back to obedience
    - Failure didn't have the final word — grace did
- For believers in visible or hidden disobedience
    - Sin has consequences; repentance must be real
    - But usefulness to God isn't permanently over
        - Lord disciplines in order to restore
        - Can use one broken by sin and taught to depend on mercy
    - Never treat grace as permission to rebel
    - Never treat a repentant person as beyond restoration

A specific command and message

- Arise, go, preach the message He gives
- Jonah doesn't design a strategy to suit himself
    - Sent to a particular people with a particular word
- Ministry begins with **listening to God**
- Christian message ≠ our opinions about life
    - = Good news revealed in Scripture about:
        - Sin
        - Judgment
        - Christ
        - Repentance
        - Faith
        - New life
- Messenger may need wisdom in tone, setting, explanation
    - No authority to edit God's truth

Quiet, significant obedience (v. 3)

- Arose and went according to the word
    - No argument recorded
    - No conditions attached

- Repentance in practice = a changed direction
  - Sorrow isn't enough if we keep walking the old path
  - Before: arose to flee → Now: arises to go
- When God exposes disobedience, ask:
  - What does obedience look like **today**?
  - Not merely how bad I feel about yesterday

The warning is mercy (v. 4)

- Fixed period before overthrow — solemn
- Warning = mercy: tells the truth before judgment falls
- People prefer soothing over confronting
  - A warning that conceals danger isn't love
  - Illustration: physician who won't name a deadly disease isn't compassionate
- Witness must speak honestly about sin and judgment
  - Without delighting in condemnation
  - Without harshness
  - Because we stand only by mercy

Judgment and grace together

- Judgment isn't the only note
  - God who warns has made salvation available through His Son
- The cross shows:
  - How serious sin is
  - How deep God's love is
- Christ bore the penalty so those who trust Him are forgiven
- Leave out judgment → cross becomes unnecessary
- Leave out grace → warning becomes hopeless
- Faithful witness holds both

Nineveh believed God — first

- They did **not**:
  - Demand more signs
  - Negotiate terms
  - Excuse their violence

- Received the warning as God's word
- Fasting and sackcloth
  - Public signs of humility and grief
  - Didn't earn mercy — no act puts God in our debt
  - Showed they understood their need
- Repentance = inward turning of heart, normally visible in changed conduct

The king: prayer and conduct together

- Descends from throne, removes robe, takes a mourner's place
- Position can't shelter anyone from judgment
  - Kings, workers, children, strangers all answer to their Maker
- Decree addresses both:
  - Cry mightily to God
  - Turn from evil and violence
- Prayer that won't leave known sin = empty speech
- Reform that won't seek God = mere self-improvement
- Repentance = dependence on God **and** departure from sin

Two errors to avoid

1. Making Nineveh a formula to purchase forgiveness
   - Not saved by enough tears, fasting, or dramatic change
   - Salvation is by grace
2. Claiming faith while protecting sin faith should confront
   - Repentance ≠ sinless perfection
     - = A new direction
     - Still needs daily grace
     - No longer makes peace with the sin turned from

The king's humble question (v. 9)

- Doesn't command God to spare the city
  - Mercy belongs to God
- Corrects talk as if God owes us blessing
  - God is never indebted to a sinner
  - Every good gift is mercy

- Yet God’s character gives real hope
  - Not reluctant to forgive those who turn
  - Mercy isn’t uncertain because He’s changeable
    - Freely given because He’s gracious

Reading “God repented” carefully (v. 10)

- Does **not** mean God:
  - Discovered an error
  - Sinned
  - Changed from bad to good character
- Scripture describes God’s dealings in terms we understand
- The announced judgment was a true warning
- Nineveh’s repentance was a real change in the situation
- Withholding disaster fits His righteous character
  - Principle later stated in Jeremiah
    - When a warned nation turns, God may withhold judgment

Urgency, not speculation

- Not called to:
  - Predict national events
  - Announce calamities as certain punishments
- Called to recognize:
  - God is morally serious
  - Nations and individuals are accountable
  - Repentance matters
- The church:
  - Speaks God’s revealed Word
  - Prays for rulers and neighbors
  - Lives as a faithful witness
- God alone knows His full purposes in history

Nineveh’s later fall: repentance can’t be inherited

- Jonah 3’s mercy didn’t make later generations immune
  - A century later, Assyria again known for evil — judged

- Doesn’t mean the earlier repentance was false
- One generation’s response doesn’t guarantee the next
  - Each person and generation must answer God’s Word
- God’s patience is long — never indifference
- For churches and families
  - Don’t live on the memory of past faithfulness
  - Be grateful for heritage, revival, past obedience
    - But no one is saved by an ancestor’s faith
  - Need ongoing:
    - Repentance
    - Faith
    - Submission to Christ
  - Past testimony is precious — not a substitute for obedience today

The cost to Jonah — and the test for us

- Jonah’s feelings revealed fully in ch. 4, but we can sympathize now
  - Nineveh = not a comfortable audience
  - People he had every earthly reason to avoid
- Test: Will Jonah accept God’s right to show mercy to people he doesn’t love?
- Test reaches us
  - Willing to speak of Christ to people like us
  - Yet quietly decide someone is beyond concern:
    - Difficult or hostile
    - Wealthy or poor
    - Politically opposed
    - Morally broken
  - God’s mercy corrects our boundaries

The church’s mission: the pattern applies

- Church isn’t Jonah; no believer has his prophetic office
  - Don’t claim direct revelations
  - Don’t pronounce a city’s destruction timetable
- But Christ commands disciple-making among all nations

- The basic pattern:
  - **Go** rather than wait for people to come
  - **Speak God's truth** rather than personal advice
  - **Call for repentance and faith** rather than self-help
  - **Leave results to God** rather than measuring only by immediate response

Faithfulness is ours; the response is God's

- If conversion depended on eloquence:
  - Despair when people reject
  - Pride when someone responds
- Response belongs to God; our responsibility is faithfulness
- Not an excuse for carelessness
  - Listen well
  - Speak clearly
  - Answer honestly
  - Show genuine love
- No technique can open a heart
  - Pray before speaking
  - Ask God to make Christ clear
  - Trust Him with the outcome

Personal witness: ordinary faithfulness

- Pray by name for a neighbor, relative, colleague, or classmate
- Look for natural chances to ask about beliefs or burdens
- Tell briefly what Christ has done for you
- Then explain the gospel — not vague religious sentiment
- Invite them to:
  - Read a Gospel with you
  - Attend a service
  - Continue the conversation
- Don't pressure or manipulate
- Be patient, truthful, ready to return to the subject — because you care

The church's wider mission

- Pray for and support cross-cultural gospel workers
- Welcome those God brings near
- Teach children and new believers the whole counsel of God
- Resist changing the message to seem acceptable
- Love doesn't erase truth; truth doesn't excuse lovelessness
- In Christ, forgiveness for every kind of sinner — news worth speaking

One concrete step *(repeated in Closing)*

- Choose one act of obedience, e.g.:
  - Start a regular prayer list
  - Reconcile a relationship that blocks your witness
  - Invite someone to read Scripture
  - Give more deliberately to gospel work
- Small enough to do, clear enough to measure
- Ask the Lord to make you faithful
  - He alone gives life, but uses His people carrying His Word

Remember… *(repeated in Closing)*

- Fear says the audience is too hostile → **remember Nineveh**
- Shame says past failure ended your usefulness → **remember Jonah's second commission**
- Impatience says no one will listen → **remember God grants the response**
- Our task:
  - Not to force results
  - Not to hide the truth
  - To obey Christ, confident in His mercy and authority

Nahum and the timing of judgment

- Nineveh's reprieve was real
  - Not an unconditional promise against future judgment
- ~A century later, Nahum preached against renewed violence and idolatry
- Nineveh fell in 612 B.C.
- God spared a repentant generation; judged a later, hardened one
- God's delayed judgment displays His [BLANK: patience], not indifference

- Timing frames Jonah's pain
  - Jonah ministered **before** Assyria conquered northern Israel (722 B.C.)
  - Preaching mercy to a feared enemy could feel like helping Israel's future oppressor
  - God alone sees nations and centuries perfectly
    - Commanded the warning then
    - His later judgment of Assyria was righteous too

Application (5 min)

- Church isn't called to duplicate Jonah's exact assignment
  - Jonah was sent before Christ's church began
  - Israel and the Church remain distinct in God's program
- But Christ commissioned His church to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20)
- The principle applies — we must:
  - Go
  - Speak God's truth
  - Call people to repent and believe
  - Leave results with God
  - The Church must speak God's [BLANK: truth], then leave the results with Him
- What evangelism is **not**
  - Winning an argument
  - Manipulating an emotional response
  - Waiting until we feel impressive
- What evangelism **is**
  - Lovingly and faithfully bearing witness to Christ
- Practical steps
  - Pray for one person by name
  - Seek a chance to share why you trust Jesus
  - Invite someone to read a Gospel or attend church
  - Support missionaries
- Obedience is our responsibility; [BLANK: conversion] is God's work
- Christ is greater than Jonah *(repeated at start of "Christ and the gospel")*
  - Jonah reluctantly carried judgment to Gentiles

    - Jesus willingly came to seek and save the lost
        - Bore judgment at the cross
        - Rose again
        - Sends us with forgiveness in His name

> **Closing:** God uses His **Word** through obedient witnesses to call sinners to **repentance**. Let us neither soften His truth nor limit His mercy.

Christ and the gospel (3 min)

- Jesus Christ is greater than Jonah
    - Jonah: reluctant, message of judgment to Gentiles
    - Jesus: willingly came to seek and save the lost
        - Bore judgment at the cross
        - Rose again
        - Sends us with the message of forgiveness in His name
- Two reminders from Nineveh
    - The **warning** → sin is serious; God judges righteously
    - The **mercy** → no sinner is beyond God's grace
- The gospel
    - All have sinned
    - Can't repair standing with God by:
        - Fasting
        - Reforming habits
        - Religious works
    - Christ died for our sins and rose again
    - God calls us to turn from sin and trust His Son
    - Genuine faith produces a changed life
        - Changed behavior = **fruit** of salvation, not its purchase price
- Speak it:
    - Plainly
    - Warmly
    - Without deciding in advance who will respond

Discussion (3 min)

1. What does “the second time” reveal about God’s dealings with Jonah?
2. What elements of real repentance appear in verses 5–9?
3. Why does Nineveh’s later fall matter for interpreting chapter 3?
4. What is one practical step toward active witness you can take this week?

Closing (2 min)

- **Restate:** God uses His Word through obedient witnesses to call sinners to repentance
  - Neither soften His truth nor limit His mercy
  - Ask God to:
    - Identify one person to pray for
    - Give a faithful opportunity to speak of Christ this week
- Lack of immediate response ≠ failure
  - Jonah’s results were extraordinary; most witness is quieter
  - Sow and water faithfully; God gives the increase
  - A hearer today may:
    - Think it over
    - Ask questions later
    - Remember Scripture in a future crisis
  - Keep praying, loving, speaking truth with humility
- One concrete act of obedience before the week ends
  - Prayer list
  - Reconcile a relationship that blocks witness
  - Invite someone to read Scripture
  - Give more deliberately to gospel work
  - Make it clear enough to do; ask the Lord to make you faithful
  - He alone gives life, but uses His people carrying His Word
- Remember…
  - Audience too hostile? → Nineveh
  - Past failure? → Jonah’s second commission
  - No one will listen? → God grants the response
  - Not forcing results, not hiding truth — obeying Christ with confidence

- Prayer: Jonah’s renewed obedience + growing love for people needing saving grace
- Tone as well as content
  - Don’t speak of judgment with superiority
    - We aren’t naturally better than those who need to hear
    - Forgiven sinners pointing to a merciful Savior
  - Compassion mustn’t turn the gospel into vague encouragement
    - People need reconciliation with God through Christ, not just reassurance
  - Clear truth and sincere love belong together
- Pray for freedom from two silencing motives
  - **Fear** — don’t want rejection
  - **Resentment** — secretly don’t want certain people to receive mercy
  - Jonah’s mission confronts both
  - God is worthy of obedience
  - Every person bears His image and needs His grace
  - Let that shape:
    - Your prayers
    - Your speech
    - Your willingness to go where Christ sends