

## **Group Study Guide**

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God's Grace for Rebels and Religious Failures

### **Jonah 3**

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#### **Main Point**

Even after Jonah's rebellion, God gave him a second chance and even used him to lead an entire pagan city to repentance. He gave Jonah mercy and a mission.

#### **Getting Started**

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

*Have you ever wished for a second chance? Why?*

*What was the last really BIG decision you had to make? What were the stakes involved in this decision?*

*Has God ever asked you to do something that was too big and overwhelming for you to handle? What happened?*

Although God's word came to Jonah a second time, demonstrating God's forbearance and mercy, examples in Scripture show that not everyone has a second chance to do what God has commanded (cf. Gen. 3; Num. 20:12; 1 Kings 13:26). However, this text should bring thanksgiving to the heart of every believer who has been given another opportunity to do what God requires. This text, more than anything else, points to God's sovereignty and His insistence upon the accomplishment of His will.

#### **Observation**

Read Jonah 3:1-5.

*What must Jonah have been thinking as he entered the city? How did people respond to his message?*

*What was Jonah's message to Nineveh? Does he give the Ninevites an opportunity to repent?*

*Why did God give Nineveh 40 days? Why not destroy the city immediately?*

*What was the result of Jonah's obedience to God? What can we expect when we are obedient to God's call?*

The response of God's reluctant missionary in 3:3 is what it should have been in 1:3. Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh. God is good. He had extended His grace and mercy to His servant Jonah. He now would use His servant to extend His grace and mercy to the sinners of Nineveh. Both the messenger and his message would be evidence of God's love and compassion for people in need of His grace.

Read Jonah 3:6-10.

*What does “repentance” mean and involve? What is the relationship between repentance and salvation?*

*With whom in Nineveh did repentance begin? By what two actions did these Ninevites demonstrate their repentance?*

*What is significant about the actions the king takes to demonstrate repentance? Specifically, what does his act of sitting in ashes symbolize?*

*Why is humility an essential part of our spiritual lives?*

*How do you know when someone is genuinely sorry for something wrong he has done? In what ways do we publicly portray repentance and humility before God in our culture?*

In the Old Testament era, fasting and wearing sackcloth were signs of seeking God and repentance. Christians today often think of repentance as primarily an inward, personal action, and it is. The Bible, however, also stresses the need for external signs of the inward decision to repent. The king’s act of sitting in ashes symbolizes humility (see Job 2:8). Humbling ourselves is always a necessary step in a relationship with God.

*Does God change His mind? What does it mean that “God relented”? What does this mean for us?*

### **Application**

Identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

*Jonah was one flawed individual whose obedience God used to change a nation. What is God calling you to do? What is the next step of obedience?*

*What would change in your life if you made the decision daily to choose the cross over comfort, God’s mission over maintaining the status quo, and sacrifice over selfishness? What needs to happen to make this change?*

*If Jonah embodied the message he brought, how did Jesus Christ embody the message he brought? How can you embody that message this week?*

*How can our group pray for you this week?*

### **Prayer**

To close the group time, split up into smaller groups of 2-3 people, or into groups of men and women. Give the groups time to discuss each person’s prayer concerns, focusing specifically on areas where bolder faith and courage is needed. Encourage the groups to

pray for each person, asking God for the courage to take risks and a greater awareness of the need to be dependent on Him.

## **Commentary**

3:1 If we read the Book of Jonah in one sitting, these words will be familiar, for 3:1-2 is strikingly like 1:1-2. In a sense Jonah was back to where he began. However, the Jonah in chapter 3 is somewhat different from the person found in chapter 1. Much had happened, and many lessons were learned, but the process of discipleship obviously was not yet complete. The text simply points out that God spoke to Jonah again. There is no mention of reproach for the prophet's former disobedience. The Lord simply repeated his command. While Jonah had taken quite a detour since the first command, God's will remain steadfast.

3:2 Although the precise content of the message Jonah was commanded to preach to this Assyrian city is not yet mentioned, two things are made clear: where he should preach and the source of the message. Jonah was given specific "marching orders" about the destination. He also was reminded that the message would not come from him nor from anyone else, but only from the Lord. His job was to deliver the message, not to critique or revise it.

3:3 Clearly God cared deeply about the Ninevites, whom he had created in his image. Therefore, he sent this prophet with a message that would ultimately lead to their turning.

3:4 Jonah's arrival in Nineveh probably was dramatic. His clothing was no doubt different from the norm, his bearing gave evidence of a different lifestyle, and a possibly bleached skin color provided for much attention. The message from the Lord, imparted by Jonah, was a relatively short one. In the Hebrew, the message was only five words long. While it is not clear that this was all he had to say, the text does suggest that God's message was brief and that Jonah simply preached it repeatedly. If these words were the sum of the message, no reason for the destruction was given, nor was the manner of destruction described. There was not even an explicit call to repentance. Although Jonah apparently did not mention the possibility of deliverance in response to repentance, both he and his audience may have assumed it. At least his audience hoped for it. If this were not so, why had Jonah's deity given them forty days?

3:5 Jonah's message, heard by many and no doubt shared with others, spread to every part of the populace. Not only did they hear his message, they believed that it was a serious one. Thus, the residents of Nineveh sought to avert their destruction. Like the reaction of the sailors in 1:5, the Ninevites' reaction is conveyed by three verbs: "believed ... declared ... put on." These describe three stages of response: inward, articulated, then outward.

3:6 The turning of Nineveh began with the common people, not with royalty. The king rose from his throne, the seat of his royal power, and humbled himself with the common people. He laid aside his robe, which was a large and beautifully embroidered mantle. In its place, the king put on sackcloth as a sign of mourning, and he sat in ashes, a sign of deep humiliation. He who was the highest in the empire took the lowest position of abasement.

3:7-9 The previous verse shows the personal response of the ruler of Nineveh. This verse further details the official response. By the issuing of a proclamation the king added official sanction to that which already was underway. The decree called for four behavioral responses to Jonah's message: fasting, wearing sackcloth, pleading with God, and turning from evil and violence. The inclusion even of animals in this royally mandated fast is the act of a desperate monarch and a desperate people.

3:10 As the king and people of Nineveh had hoped, God relented. God pulled back his hand of judgment, though not forever. As prophesied by Nahum, Nineveh later experienced total destruction. The very thought of God "changing his mind" causes difficulty for some believers. In perfect consistency with his justice, righteousness, and mercy, he spared Nineveh. There is absolutely no contradiction here. God's character and his promises do not change. This passage speaks of the incredible mercy of God's heart, of his incredible love.