

The Book of Jonah

The Reluctant Prophet

Study 3 – A remarkable turn around

Introduction

In narrative terms, Jonah chapter 3 brings us to the climax of the story. The conflict in the story brought about by Jonah's initial refusal to obey the LORD's commission has at last been resolved, albeit in a surprising way. The reluctant but now repentant prophet is once again instructed by the LORD to "go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim the message" which the LORD Himself will give to Jonah. There is a moment of tension as the reader wonders whether Jonah's repentance has indeed been heartfelt and whether he will in fact "make good what (he) has vowed" (2:9). But all uncertainties are quickly removed as we read "Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh" (3:3).

The scene now shifts to Nineveh itself. We are told that Nineveh was a very important (3:3 *cf* 'great city' – 1:2; 3:2) and, by implication, a large city, requiring a four-day visit, if such a visit was to be successful (3:3). The first surprise in the narrative thus comes in verses 4 & 5 where we are told that on the very first day of his mission, all the Ninevites, "from the greatest to the least" (3:5) responded to his words of impending judgement with real and visible contrition and mourning. Nor did this act of universal repentance by-pass the king, for we read in verses 6-9 that when he heard the content of Jonah's message – "forty days and Nineveh will be overturned" (3:4), he himself ordered that the already begun repentance be extended and intensified in the hope that God "may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger" (3:9). In all, a remarkable turn-around in a hitherto wicked and arrogant city, one which raises searching questions about how such a speedy and positive response to Jonah's message could be achieved.

It is in this regard that the final surprise in the chapter is to be understood, for we read that no sooner had the city turned from its self-confessed "evil ways and violence" (3:8) than God, seeing what they did, "had compassion upon them and did not bring upon them the destruction he has threatened" (3:10). This amazing grace of God to repentant sinners is a key lesson within the book and one which as we shall see in our final study truly challenges our own lack of concern for the great though lost cities of the world.

Read Jonah 3:1 – 10

Apply



In what way has this passage challenged your thinking about

a. our message for a lost world?

b. God's attitude to sin and sinners?



In what way has this passage spoken to your heart and your personal walk with the Lord?



What needs to change in your daily life as a result of this passage, especially in regard to prayer and evangelism?