

Jonah's Paradox

Jonah 3:1-10

Sunday, June 16, 2024

Even if you're not a Stevie Wonder fan, you may be familiar with some of his greatest hits, songs like *Superstition*, *You Are the Sunshine of My Life*, *Sir Duke*, and the Mowtown classic, *Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)*. One of my favorites is the 1973 single *Higher Ground*. I don't consider Stevie Wonder a source for Christian theology, but the lyrics to *Higher Ground* have a bit of a spiritual flavor to them. Listen to the chorus:

*I'm so darn glad He let me try it again
'Cause my last time on earth, I lived a whole world of sin.
I'm so glad that I know more than I knew then.
Gonna keep on tryin'
'Til I reach my highest ground.*

It's a song about second chances. It's about getting a do-over. It alludes to turning away from a life of sin and moving in the right direction. The lyrics suggest that ultimately any second chance one might receive comes from a sovereign God.

Little did he know that just three days after that song was released he would be involved in a near-fatal car accident. In a 2015 *New York Times* interview, Stevie Wonder said, "For me, I wrote 'Higher Ground' even before the accident... But something must have been telling me that something was going to happen to make me aware of a lot of things and to get myself together. This is like my second chance for life, to do something or to do more, and to value the fact that I am alive."¹

When was the last time that you got a second chance? Has there been a time in your life that you wish you could have a do-over? Assuming that you know more now than you did then, if you had the chance to try it again, what would you do differently?

We've been looking at the Book of Jonah, one of the twelve books of the Old Testament we call The Minor Prophets.² As we dig into Jonah 3 today, we'll start by looking at verses 1-2:

"Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you"" (Jonah 3:1-2, NIV).

Those words should sound familiar. Look back to the opening lines of Chapter 1:

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<https://americansongwriter.com/the-spiritual-meaning-behind-higher-ground-by-stevie-wonder/>

² As Pastor Jerry mentioned two Sundays ago, these books of the Bible are called minor not because they are less important, but because they are shorter in length. In fact, unlike our recent series through Romans that spanned months, we'll cover all of Jonah in just four weeks.

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me”” (1:1-2).

The passages aren't identical, but the author wants us to see a connection. In Jonah 3 “the word of the LORD came to Jonah a *second* time” (3:1). God gave Jonah a second chance. Jonah was granted a do-over.

Let's quickly review the story so far. In Chapter 1, Jonah, the rebellious prophet found himself on board a ship that he hoped would take him as far from God's presence and prophetic assignment as possible. Of course, there is no fleeing from the presence of God. Rather, God halts Jonah's running by hurling a huge storm at him. Jonah's countermove was to hurl *himself* into the sea, partly to spare the lives of his shipmates, but mostly to continue his rebellious running from the LORD.

In Chapter 2, we find Jonah the prophet praying in the belly of a great fish. God provided the fish to save Jonah's life. However, as Pastor Douglas showed us last Sunday, Jonah's prayer was a sorry attempt at showing genuine sorrow for his sin.

That brings us to Jonah 3. After being vomited up by the great fish onto dry land, the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time. Jonah was granted a do-over.

“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh” (3:1-3a).

As we work through Jonah 3 together we'll look at this passage from two perspectives. We'll consider Jonah's mission and Nineveh's response from a human perspective. What does the text teach us about human nature? What can we learn from Jonah and the Ninevites?

But Jonah 3 provides us with another perspective. We'll also see things from God's point of view. In other words, the purpose of Jonah 3 (and for that matter, that of the entire book) is to teach us something about our human nature and something about the character of God.

In verse 3 we're told that Jonah obeyed God's command to go and proclaim the LORD's message to the city of Nineveh. Before we learn about his visit in verse 4, there's an aside made in verse 3. The author notes that,

“Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it” (v. 3b).

God said something similar about Nineveh back in verse 2. He called it “the great city of Nineveh” (v. 2). There are two ways to understand what's being said here. The first

is the most obvious: if Nineveh required a minimum of three days to visit, we know it was a rather large city. We might say the same about visiting New York City, Paris, or London today. This accurately describes Nineveh from an earthly perspective.

The author wants us also to see Nineveh from a *heavenly* perspective. A more wooden translation of the phrase “Nineveh was a very large city” could also be rendered from the original Hebrew as “Nineveh was a great city to God” (3:3b, ESV fn. 1).

There’s a double meaning here. Nineveh was great in size but it also mattered *greatly* to God. From God’s perspective, this large city of wicked sinners was still a place filled with men and women who were made in his image. Keep that in mind as we continue to work through this book.

In verse 4 we get to Jonah’s prophecy, the only word of prophecy in this book.

“Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (v. 4).

It doesn’t mention *how* Nineveh would be overthrown, but the warning is clear. The LORD announced through his prophet that the wicked city of Nineveh was the subject of God’s righteous judgment.

But there’s another double meaning in the text. The word translated as *overthrow* can, on the one hand, mean *to overturn*. For example, in Genesis 19, the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were *overthrown* or *overturned* as an act of God’s judgment.

But the word *overthrow* can also mean *to turn something around*. Jonah’s prophecy can mean “Forty more days and Nineveh will be *overturned*,” or “Forty more days and Nineveh will be *turned around*.” It’s not just a warning of God’s judgment, it’s also an invitation for Nineveh to respond.

What do these verses teach us about ourselves and what do they teach us about the character of God? If you’re taking notes, you may want to write this down:

God is patient even though we deserve his punishment.

Let’s unpack the first part of that statement. **God is patient.** This attribute of God’s character shows up throughout Scripture. In the next chapter, Jonah says of God,

“You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love” (4:2).

Jonah was alluding to one of the most famous biblical descriptions of God’s character. Exodus 34:6 says, that the LORD

“passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exo. 34:6, NIV).

God is described as being *slow to anger*. Other translations render that term as *longsuffering*. That God is patient, longsuffering, and slow to anger is tied to the fact that God is a God of love. Scripture declares that God is love (1 Jn 4:8). God’s patience is evidence of his great love.

We see God’s patience on display in Jonah 3. The LORD is patient with Jonah. God grants the rebellious prophet a do-over. That the word of the LORD should even come to Jonah a second time is an example of God’s patience.

God’s patience is also displayed in the warning given to the Ninevites. God gave them a 40-day grace period to turn things around. They were given 40 days to do something about their wickedness.

When we look at Jonah’s story from God’s perspective, we see that God is patient. And when we consider our own stories from God’s perspective, we need to recognize the presence of God’s patience.

Perhaps you can think of a time in your life when you had nothing to do with God. Maybe you weren’t as wicked as a Ninevite, but Jesus wasn’t the Lord of your life. Or maybe, even though you professed faith in Jesus, your lifestyle, thought life, or behavior contradicted your claim. Perhaps you’re currently in a season of disobedience to Christ and like Jonah, you’re running away from the Lord. If this describes you, I hope you won’t stay there. But in all of these examples, you need to recognize the presence of God’s patience.

Some of you may not be ready to put your faith in Christ. You might not see the need or see the relevance of Christianity. Some of you might think God wants nothing to do with you because of who you are or what you’ve done. Hear this promise from Scripture: God is patient. The Bible says,

“The Lord...is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9, NIV).

That New Testament verse from 2 Peter reveals there is a purpose behind God’s patience. Let’s see how that purpose plays out in the next part of the story.

In Jonah 3:5-9 we read,

“The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah’s warning reached the king

of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish””

Jonah’s warning yielded immediate results. Verse 5 says,

“The Ninevites believed God” (v. 5a).

God drew a line in the sand, set the countdown clock to 40 days, and put the ball in Nineveh’s court. But Nineveh didn’t need 40 days. Jonah no more than finished his first day of preaching and “the Ninevites believed God” (v. 5a).

Here’s the biblical principle we can glean from this part of the story:

God’s patience gives people ample time for repentance.

We saw this in the previous chapter as God demonstrated his patience with Jonah by providing the great fish. We will have to wait until Chapter 4 to see what impact Jonah’s 3-day timeout had on him. Nevertheless, God was patient with Jonah.

Unlike Jonah, the people of Nineveh wasted no time in responding to God’s warning. In verse 5 and following, the text describes the outward expression of Nineveh’s inward repentance. Their cultural practices of fasting, dressing in sackcloth, and sitting in ashes might seem strange to us. But when we look closer at what these things illustrate, we’ll see it’s the attitude of repentance that still speaks to us today.

What do we mean by the word *repentance*? To repent means to turn around. To repent means to stop traveling in the wrong direction, turn around, and start moving in the right direction.

We saw an example of *unrepentance* in Jonah 1. What Jonah should have done, both physically and spiritually, was to stop fleeing from the presence of the LORD, turn around, and run in the direction of obedience to God.

Ironically, while Jonah modeled unrepentance, the Ninevites modeled genuine repentance in Chapter 3. In their repentance, the Ninevites demonstrated honesty, humility, and hope.

They were honest about their sin. They confessed their evil ways and violent behavior. They called sin what it is and admitted they deserved God's judgment. Second, they demonstrated humility, not just in their practices, but by repenting of their self-righteousness. Third, in their repentance, the Ninevites found hope.

When verse 5 says that they "believed God," it means more than that they finally got their theology right. Believing God means trusting God. It means trusting in his provision of grace and accepting his offer of forgiveness.

The Ninevites' response illustrates that **God's patience gives people ample time for repentance.**

Jonah 3 is an amazing demonstration of God's patience. What's more amazing is that **God is patient even though we deserve his punishment.**

People often bristle against the thought of a God who punishes sinners. We may grant that Jonah deserved to die for his disobedience. It might seem reasonable that the wicked Ninevites also deserved God's judgment. But what about us? Do we deserve God's punishment?

Again, the answer may be a matter of perspective. From a human perspective, when I compare my sin with my neighbor's, I may conclude that while I'm no angel, I'm at least not as bad as the next guy. Truly wicked people deserve God's judgment and there is always someone more wicked than me.

On one occasion, Jesus dealt with this question in a parable. Luke 18 records Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted"" (Luke 18:10-14, NIV).

In Jesus's parable, the Pharisee looked at things from a human perspective, but the tax collector saw things from God's point of view.

What we're left with is a bit of a paradox. Philosophers love to talk about paradoxes.³ A paradox can be defined as “a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.”⁴

On the one hand, Jonah 3 teaches us that God is patient with sinners. As I said earlier, God's patience flows from the essential attribute of his love. God is not only loving, he is love. God is patient because God is love. As the old hymn puts it,

*The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell.*

*O love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure the saints' and angels' song!*

And yet, we also know that God is holy. God cannot allow sin and rebellion to go unpunished. If God were to do so, he would be unjust. Scripture calls God's holy hatred of sin and his anger toward sinners God's wrath.

How do we reconcile God's patient love with God's holy wrath? Are these two attributes of God contradictory? Is this a theological paradox? Is there a logically consistent answer to Jonah's paradox?

Look with me at the final verse of Jonah 3. Verse 10 says,

“When God saw what [the Ninevites] did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened” (3:10).

We can summarize verse 10 by saying *when Nineveh repented, God relented*. God did not punish the Ninevites for their sin as he warned through Jonah. Nineveh repented and God relented. But verse 10 raises an important question. On what basis did God relent? If God is holy and his justice demands that sin be punished, then on what basis did God declare the Ninevites to be not guilty and no longer under his wrath?

Perhaps God saw that the Ninevites were really, really sorry. Maybe God relented based on their contrition.

³ Students in an Intro to Philosophy course may learn about the classic Liar's Paradox. Imagine you and a friend are having a conversation and your friend says to you, “The statement I am making right now is a lie.” But if he is telling a lie, his claim “The statement I am making right now is a lie” would, in fact, be the truth. But if it's true that he's telling a lie, that means his claim “The statement I am making right now is a lie” is itself a lie. That's the Liar's Paradox.

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox>

“O God, look how sorry we are for our sins. We’re fasting! We’re sitting in ashes! We’re wearing sackcloth and even dressing our livestock in sackcloth to prove how sorry we are!”

Remorse over sin is a good place to start, but can contrition alone cover sin’s penalty? Does saying “I’m sorry” solve our sin problem?

Maybe God relented because he saw how the Ninevites changed their behavior. Notice in verse 8 that the king of Nineveh decreed that every citizen of Nineveh must “give up their evil ways and their violence” (3:8). Perhaps in addition to being sorry for their sin God saw that they were committed to better behavior.

“O God, we promise to do better! From now on, we promise to do what is good! We promise to make things right!”

We should expect a change of behavior to follow genuine repentance. There are many examples in Scripture of men and women whose righteous behavior showed evidence of a transformed heart. And there are many examples of others whose evil behavior revealed no change at all. But can righteous behavior really make us right with God? Does turning over a new leaf overturn God’s wrath?

When Nineveh repented, on what basis did God relent? It wasn’t because they were sorry. It wasn’t because they changed their ways. Nineveh’s hope for salvation rested entirely on God’s provision of grace.

Notice the king’s words in verse 9 where he says,

“Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (3:9).

Even this pagan king knew that if Nineveh was to be spared from judgment it would require an act of grace from a loving but just God. As the Reformers have famously said, it was by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone that anyone is saved.

Jonah’s paradox points us to Jesus. How do we reconcile God’s patient love with God’s holy wrath? At the cross, the paradox of God’s patience and punishment meet.

I’ll invite our worship team to come and prepare to lead us in our closing song. We’ll close by singing a song called *O Come to the Altar*. Many of you will recognize it, but it may be new for others. It’s a song about God’s great love for us.

But it’s also a song about God’s wrath poured out as a punishment for our sins. You won’t find the word *wrath* anywhere in this song, but I promise you the concept is there. Right after the lyric inviting us to come to the altar where the Father’s arms are open wide, the next line declares,

“Forgiveness was bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.”

Jesus didn't just go to the cross to show us the extent of his love. He went to the cross to bear the terrible wrath of God that you and I deserve for our sins.

1 John 2:2 says of Jesus,

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2, NIV).

He is the atoning sacrifice, the propitiation, the one who bore our sins and died in our place. Jonah's paradox points us to Jesus. **At the cross, the paradox of God's patience and punishment meet.**

Let's stand together and sing.