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| A picture containing object, thing, clock  Description generated with very high confidence | How to Overthrow Nineveh |
| MATT BLACK, Wed, Aug 16, 2017 |
| [livinghopechurch.net](http://www.livinghopechurch.net/) | Jonah 3:1-10, “Into the Storm” series |

Introduction: Open your Bible to Jonah. We are continuing a series in Jonah called “Into the Storm.” Tonight’s study is entitled: “How to Overthrow Your Nineveh.”

How does one man, without military or political power – without power over the learning institutions or philosophical empowerment walk into the greatest city in the ancient world of the time and overthrow it?

We might ask ourselves today, how do we change and transform our culture? How can we who are so small overcome the secular humanism and hostile atheism and hedonism of our culture? God gives us the answer in Jonah 3.

**Holy Scripture**

**Jonah 3:1-5**, “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 Massive, Indestructible City of Nineveh**

It’s ironic, is it not, that the book of Jonah is about Nineveh, which is the capital of Assyria, which is Iraq. In that day, the capital of Iraq was Nineveh, and it was the greatest city the world had yet seen. There’s that one little verse there we read that probably means in order to walk through the city, it **took three days**. The Bible gave Nineveh the *diameter*of a three-day journey, where one day equals about 20 miles – and so, a city **60 miles in diameter**, which is about the size of Chicago and all the suburbs – what we call Chicagoland. It was an impregnable fortress. Military might, economic might, cultural might.

Nobody in their right mind would even think of besieging the city, let alone trying to capture the city, because you couldn’t even get an army around it. Who had an army that could stretch around the circumference of this city? But the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, and God decides, not just to besiege the city, but to sack it with an army of one.

**How Did Jonah Bring a Secret Siege to Nineveh?**

How did God do it? He did it by taking one person (one man, Jonah, in this case) and turning him into a city-changer, into a world-changer. By turning Jonah into a city-changer and a world-changer, he then was able to sack the greatest city in the history of the world up to that time. That’s what God did through Jonah.

Dorothy Sayers, a great Christian writer, in her 1941 book *The Mind of the Maker* said (paraphrasing) – the sin of our times now is not power-hungry **materialism** (what **liberals** warn about), and it’s not a permissive spirit of **lawlessness** (what **conservatives** warn about), but rather the sin that believes in nothing. That’s the problem. The sin of the ages is the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, and therefore enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive, because there is nothing for which it will die.

What she’s saying is the sin of the age is that there is nothing bigger than my own needs or interests, for which I will not only live, but certainly, for which I will die. There is nothing worth dying for, nothing. The polls will tell you that’s what people believe.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There are four things God brought to bear on Jonah that made him into an army of one, and here’s what they are:

God’s unrelenting grace

God’s calling

God’s strategy

God’s power

1. Be transformed by God’s **grace** (3:1).

God’s persistent grace can transform you if you let it.

**God’s Grace is Unrelenting**

God is the God of second chances! God comes back to Jonah and says, “I’m ready to send you to Nineveh.” It says there, in verse 1, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, “Go …” Now that doesn’t make any sense. Jonah has let God down. Do you take an officer who has just been court-martialed and immediately give him the command in the most crucial battle of the war? I mean these heroic quests ought to be for the cream of the crop, for the people who had the highest grade point, for the guy who whipped everybody else in the tryouts. You don’t give it to Jonah, but God does. In fact, God has this funny habit of doing that.[[2]](#footnote-2) God loves to use people who have been greatly humbled through deep suffering.

Jonah was in the belly of a fish. His hard heart had been somewhat softened. He’s ready to go, and God says for the second time, “Go…” s

**The Jonah Principle**

Consider Peter. His track record is awful. Who would put this guy in charge of laying the foundation for New Testament Christianity? This is what Tim Keller calls “the Jonah principle.” It’s life out of death. It’s that failures make you useful.

See, Jesus actually literally talks about **the Jonah principle**. The Pharisees come to Jesus and they say, “If you’re the Messiah, do a great miracle” (Mt 12:38). Jesus certainly could do that if he wants, but this is what he says in Matthew 12. He says, “The only sign you will receive is the sign of Jonah. As Jonah was in the belly of the deep for three days, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth” (Mt 12:39-40, paraphrase).

What does that mean? Why doesn’t he do a miracle? The answer is, Jesus says, “You will know who I am by my weakness, not by my strength,” or, as one writer put it, “It’s out of Christ’s weakness that the sufficiency of his saving power will be born. It is out of his death that men will receive life.”[[3]](#footnote-3) John 12:24, “… unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” That’s not just true for Jesus. It’s not just true for John. It’s true for all of us. It’s failure and suffering that makes you useful. God works it like that.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**A Bullseye on Your Back**

It’s a sobering thing to say to God, “I’m ready for service,” and the first thing God usually does is he puts you into boot camp, and the boot camp is invariably (look at the Bible) trouble. Suffering makes you a servant. You can even see it at the human level. Take a look at what happens. Who is changing society to help the handicapped? It’s the parents of handicapped children, or the handicapped themselves. Who is changing the society to finally crack down on drunken drivers? It’s the relatives of people who were killed by drunken drivers.

**Be Careful to Go!**

If you have gone through failures, if you are now going through a failure or through some kind of suffering, don’t think this will automatically turn you into an army of one. Somebody says here, “I’m going through suffering right now, and it’s driving me into myself. It’s ruining me.” Only if you let it. Don’t waste your sorrows. It can make you an army of one. Let it drive you out into compassion, servanthood, and humility, not drive you in into bitterness and self-pity. That’s up to you. God’s persistent grace will transform you if you let it. He continually loves you, helps you, comes back to you, and uses you out of your failure and suffering.

1. Be transformed by God’s **calling** (3:2-3).

God’s calling can transform you if you let it. “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” (**Jonah 3:1-3**).

Whatever it took to get him there, Jonah “arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord” (vs. 3). Jonah is finally listening.

**God’s Calling means Your obedience**

Hear this: God’s calling is a spiritual tornado. That means he never sucks you in without spinning you out. Never.

God says “go” to his children and they obey. If they refuse, then comes chastening. Then we have to go back to point number 1. We need a fish or a whale of some kind. We need to be swallowed by some monstrous situation.

But you come out of the fish and you want to obey. The main thing God needs is your obedience. He doesn’t need your gift of gab. He doesn’t need your theological education or your people skills. He needs you to obey his call. Go!

**If You’ve Been Hurt, You are Called to Heal**

Some of you have been blistered and broken by life. Look at Genesis 12, the calling of Abraham, and you’ll see it’s a paradigm. God calls to Abraham and he says two things. He says, “I will bless you so you may be a **blessing**. Get you out of your country.”

God says, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:2).

He says, “Go to the Promised Land. Leave your family. Leave your land.

Hear this: God never blesses you except to make you a blessing. He never heals you except to make you a healer, ever.

The only way you can be that blessing and be a healer is if you get out. Get out of what? For Abraham, it was to get out of his country, get out of his family, and get out of his culture, but the principle is he got out of his **comfort and security zone**. He got out of the familiar. He was called to do things that are scary, things that make you vulnerable.

**God is Calling You to Commitment and Sacrifice**

Some of you are afraid of that. “If I sign up for this ministry, if I get involved with this person’s life who looks like a basket case, it might take [gasp!] commitment! That person will then have a piece of me. Yes. That ministry will have a piece of me. Yes. They could call on me when I want to go out of town.

**Obey God’s Calling**

You need to obey God’s calling and get out of where you are. Go. Your “going” may be a phone call. For most of us, the go is walking across our neighborhood or even across the church auditorium and asking another family to come over to your home.

**Jonah’s Calling was Unbelievably Difficult**

The Assyrians were notoriously without mercy. The prophet Hosea was a younger contemporary of Jonah, and his prophecies had begun to warn Israel that unless they repented, they would be conquered by the Assyrians.

Not only that, the Assyrians’ cruelty was incomprehensible, killing women, children and innocents along with the cruelest tortures ever devised.

**Who are the Ninevites Today that God is Saving?**

Who are the untouchables today that God wants to save? God has a heart to reach those raised in extremist Muslim nations. Are you afraid of that? God has a heart to reach the mentally ill. Who are the untouchables today?

God saves people with criminal records all the time. I think of John Newton the slave trader, who today would be a convicted murderer 1000 times over for what he did. He kidnapped thousands of people from what is today the West African nations of Ghana, Congo, the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Angola.

Often God wants to save not just regular sinners, but severe sinners. And we naturally have the suspicion that Jonah had.

**Jesus Heeded the Father’s Call**

Our Lord Jesus Christ humbled himself, and what happened? God highly exalted him. We need to follow his calling. To gain our life we have to lose it. The smaller we become in our own eyes, the more useful we become in God’s plan.

**What is Your Calling?**

What are you living for? Here’s the application to our hearts. It’s very easy, even though you say, “I’m a Christian,” and even though you say you’re living for God, day in and day out, to actually live for nothing more than your schedule, your career, your love, and your goals. What are you living for? Can you say, “Here are the places in which God has made me uncomfortable.

Here’s where I’m moving out of the familiar. Here’s where I am giving of myself, whether it’s financially, whether it’s emotionally.

God sent Jesus into this world not to serve himself, but to serve others and lay down his life as a sacrifice for many. That has to be us.

1. Be transformed by God’s **strategy** (3:4).

“Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (**Jonah 3:4**).

Jonah’s message wasn’t “God loves you and has a great plan for your life.” His message was “Repent, Yahweh will no longer tolerate your sin.”

And Jonah we know didn’t want to preach this message because he understood God’s heart of love and mercy. Jonah didn’t agree with the strategy to go to the rough city people. I’m sure he’d have been much more comfortable with the ignorant country people.

**Multi-cultural Population Centers**

God’s strategy is to reach the multi-cultural population centers. He wants you to get out of your comfort zone and see the power of the Gospel.

God’s strategy can transform you if you let it. He wants to change your heart regarding our own “Sin City.” There’s all kinds of things there that are an offense to us and to the Gospel, but the Gospel is powerful. Do you believe it? We sophisticated humans have the temptation just to neglect these sinners and let them perish. God has a great love for them.

God sent Paul into the city. All of the Roman Empire was changed by a bunch of slaves and street people. How could that have happened? How did Christians actually, literally take over the Roman Empire? It’s because Paul did all of his mission in the city.

The city (and suburbs) is the place where everything starts and moves out into society. Immigrants come here before they move out into the society. People go to work and school here before they move out into society. Ideas in the culture, media, and the news start here and they move out into society. This is the heart. If you want medicine in the whole body quickly, you inject it into the **heart**. You don’t inject it into one of the veins.

By AD 300, half of the urban populations of the Roman Empire were Christian. The rest of the country, the rest of the Empire, was all pagan. In fact, the word *pagan* comes from the word *paganus*, which means a countryman. The country-dwellers were the pagans, literally, and the urban-dwellers were the Christians. Because of that, Christianity won the Roman Empire. “Whatever has the city by the throat has the culture by the throat.” (Tim Keller)

Cities are places where there are more people than plants. Since God loves people far more than plants, he loves cities far more than anywhere else, and he says so at the end, the last verse of the whole book. The key, the point of the book is, “Shall I not have compassion on that great city?”

**Go to the Unreached**

We need to get out there and not stay in our comfort zone. We need to go to the people we might be afraid to talk to.

1. Be transformed by God’s **power** (3:5-10).

“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. 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 3:5-10**).

The power of God makes you into an army. Literally, it says when the king of Nineveh heard the news he repented. He called and he made this decree. In the Hebrew, it literally says, “When the word touched even the king …” (**vs. 6**) he turned to his subjects and said, “Let’s turn from our evil ways and our violence” (**8b**).

Every urban planter, every sociologist, every politician, every counselor, and every social worker wants this to happen. “If only the people of the city would turn from their evil ways and their violence, so we’d be done with the oppression, crime, racism, and all of the problems of the city.” How did Jonah get it? Jonah got it (get this) through repentance. He led the people to repentance.

**The Gospel is the Only Solution**

What will transform the racists in Charlottesville? What is the solution? The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the antedote to racism, for his nation, his people are from every “tribe, language, nation and family” group.

**Wales Revival**

When the Word of God went sweeping through Wales in the early 1900s, and a tremendous revival, and a fifth of all of the country was converted and came into the church, there were tremendous labor union problems that were happening inside the mines. When the revival came, they were wiped away, because on company time, the managers started to sponsor Bible studies, and the people, the miners, were part of the Bible studies. They began to bring back all the things they had been stealing.

Do you know how all mines had one shed where the company kept its tools, and you used the tools? Miners had been stealing them for years. During the revival, they had to build five new sheds at most mines just to put back all the tools the miners started bringing back!

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, if you are not a world-changer, if you’re doing nothing much more than just being absorbed in your own problems.

Somebody here says, *I’m too scarred*. God will use your scars.

Somebody says here, “I’m not articulate. I don’t know what to say. It’s easy for you to say. You’re articulate. You’re well-trained.” Look at Jonah! Jonah changed the city. Did you see what he said? He got up and said, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” Do you call that a good message? He didn’t even tell them to repent! He didn’t even tell them there was possibility of escape. That was a lousy job, and God changed the whole country through him.

You can do better than him! Look what it cost Jesus Christ to be an ambassador for you. What will it cost you to be an ambassador for him?

1. Keller, T. J. (2013). The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ferguson, *Man Overboard* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1981), 70–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Keller. Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)