

Jonah Chapter 3

Overtured!

INTRODUCTION

Today's discussion has a lot of explanations which may get in the way of a good discussion where you can all actually be real with each other! You might prefer to skim or read through page one before you start. Then your group might start on page 2 and focus on the big *personal* questions there. Don't skip on that part!

ONLY FIVE WORDS

Jonah 2:10. The LORD commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

AN UNIMPORTANT SIDE NOTE: Some believe this book is a parable (I was taught that it was at Seminary). Others say it's not a parable and offer a bunch of semi-scientific explanations to prove that a fish can swallow a human. To me both approaches waste time because we need to get to the point. The Jewish rabbis taught that this fish was specially created by God from the beginning for one special role. That actually makes sense! I came to believe in miracles because I came to believe first in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If that one miracle happened then that opens up the possibility of other miracles.

Jonah 3:1-4. 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. Now Nineveh was a very great city - a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

"The kings of Assyria tormented the world. They boasted that there was no room left for the corpses of their wars; how unsparing a destroyer was their goddess Ishtar; how they threw away the bodies of soldiers like dirt; how they made pyramids of human heads; how they burned cities; how they filled lands with death and devastation; how they reddened broad deserts with carnage of warriors; how they scattered whole countries with the corpses of their defenders as with chaff; how they impaled 'heaps of men' on stakes, and strewed the mountains and choked rivers with dead bones; how they cut off the hands of kings and nailed them on the walls, and left their bodies to rot with bears and dogs on the entrance gates of cities; how they employed nations of captives in making brick in chains; how they cut down warriors like weeds, or massacred them like wild animals, and covered pillars with the flayed skins of rival kings." Farrar, Minor Prophets, p. 148

- **Imagine how Jonah felt approaching this city?**
- **Who or what are the 'Assyrians' in your life?**

It takes three days to work your way in and up. But Jonah "*began to go into the city... on the first day*". Jonah didn't really care. All he could spare was one sentence – in Hebrew it is only five words (yet forty days Nineveh will-be-destroyed). The absolute minimum - perhaps his heart is still hard?

- **What happens when we regard God's call in terms of the absolute minimum?**

OVERTURNED - THREE BIG QUESTIONS

Jonah 3:5-10. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news 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. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast 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." When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

Is this familiar story? A great civilization suddenly faces a great threat - change or death will come. A change starts from the bottom. Life begins to be overturned, a revolution is starting. Everyone ceases normal activity. They stop their shopping, their working, their rushing. They stop dressing so fancy, slow down and all pause in prayer. In the face of this great threat, they all stop thinking of themselves, and pause in prayer. Even their leader declares a pause to economic activity. Their society will be transformed - if this overturning is about humility and grace. What happens next?

- **What is being overturned in our 40 days of lockdown?**
- **What needs to be overturned?**
- **What can grow out of this overturned soil?**

A FINAL THOUGHT ABOUT TURNING

In 1526AD Martin Luther said that the great miracle in the book of Jonah was not the fish. It was that Jonah's pathetic sermon turned around a whole city! It started from the bottom up. The people of Nineveh did the hardest thing. They admitted they were wrong. The Bible calls this 'repentance'. In Hebrew the word for repentance is SHOOV and it means to TURN. Repentance means to turn simultaneously AWAY from something and TO something. In repenting we receive grace. We discover a new freedom and love. It's life changing!

God is compassionate and willing to forgive - even to the worst people in the capital of the most evil empire on earth – God offers grace. The most radical part of this book may just be that not only are the people described as "turning" (repenting), but God is also described with a word that also means "repent". Verse 10 says "God relented/repented" for their sake - God changed for their sake!

- **What does repentance mean to you?**