

Jonah 3:1-4

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The LORD commissions Jonah again to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeys the LORD. He goes through the city and proclaims a message of judgment to the Ninevites, as the LORD has commanded him.

The first time the LORD commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, he boarded a ship to Tarshish, a city in the complete opposite direction. The LORD disciplined him by sending a great storm on the sea, causing great fear among the sailors. When the sailors found out that Jonah was the cause for the storm, they reluctantly threw him into the sea, as per his recommendation. The LORD miraculously saved Jonah from drowning by allowing a great fish to swallow him. The prophet expressed his gratitude inside the fish, and the LORD commanded the fish to get him to shore safely (Jonah 1–2). After *Jonah's* rescue and restoration to dry land, *the word of the LORD came to him the second time.*

The phrase *word of the LORD* refers to His revelation (1 Kings 6:11; 16:1). In Bible times, God often revealed His will to some individuals who, in turn, were to communicate the divine message to others (Hosea 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1). In our passage, the individual chosen is *Jonah*, “the son of Amittai” (Jonah 1:1). God decided to use *Jonah* as His prophetic voice, despite his previous rebellion (Jonah 1:3). This action demonstrates that God’s will is greater than ours. Nobody can thwart God’s plan. The prophet Amos states this truth quite emphatically: “The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8). However, God has used a donkey to prophesy, and can use a rock as well (Numbers 22:28; Luke 19:40).

God’s second message to *Jonah* was like the first: *Arise, go to Nineveh the great city* (Jonah 1:2).

In the first part of the command, God employed two consecutive imperatives: *Arise, go!* In the Hebrew language, the verb *arise* [“qûm”] is often used as an introductory verb to indicate urgency. In such a case, the verb does not mean “to stand” or “to get up” as if someone were lying down or sitting down. Rather, it means to get ready to act (see Numbers 22:20–21; Judges 4:14; 1 Kings 17:9). The verb that follows the introductory verb specifies the kind of action that needs to take place. In our passage, that verb is to *go*. Thus, God asked *Jonah* again to *go* immediately *to Nineveh*.

The prophet received the same command because he failed to obey God the first time. When God initially told him to go to Nineveh, he took a ship in the opposite direction to Tarshish to escape his mission (Jonah 1:3). Now, *Jonah* was back to where he began. This is the way life sometimes works. Whenever we fail a test, we sometimes get an opportunity to retake it, and have another chance to receive a passing grade. *Jonah* was fortunate to receive another opportunity. That is not always the case. Will *Jonah* pass the test this time? He vowed he would follow God while in the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2:9) Will he now go to *Nineveh*?

The LORD went further to describe *Nineveh* as the *great city*. The *city* called *Nineveh* was the capital of the mighty empire of Assyria. It was on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. According to ancient Near Eastern standards, *Nineveh* was a fabulous and sizeable city. That explains why God described it as a *great city*. Today *Nineveh* is Tell Kuyunjik, located on the Tigris River some six hundred miles upriver from the Persian Gulf in northern Iraq, approximately 300 miles from Babylon (please see map in the Maps and Charts section in the side bar).

In the second part of the command, God told *Jonah* what to do upon reaching *Nineveh*: *Proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you*. At this point, there is a slight change between the first message and this one. On the first occasion, God told *Jonah* to *cry against Nineveh* (Jonah 1:2). Here, however, God told him to *proclaim* His message *to* it. Although the Hebrew verb “qāra” is the same in both instances, the change of preposition makes a difference in translation and meaning. This change allows more flexibility in God’s purposes, giving *Nineveh* a chance to repent to escape His judgment.

Jonah learned much when he was on the sea, when he almost lost his life. In his prayer of thanksgiving for his deliverance, he described how the waters imprisoned him to the point of death (Jonah 2). But God miraculously provided a great fish to swallow His prophet to preserve him from drowning. God also commanded the fish to vomit *Jonah* out onto dry land because His plan was for him to preach in *Nineveh*, not to die in the sea or remain in the belly of the fish. Thus, God gave the same message to *Jonah* again and told him to carry it to *Nineveh* immediately.

This time *Jonah* obeyed the voice of *the LORD*. He *arose and went to Nineveh*. After trying to escape his prophetic mission, *Jonah* learned his lesson. Now he responded differently. He did not rebel against God’s command, as he did in chapter 1. Rather, he acted *according to the word of the LORD*. That means that *Jonah* carefully followed what God told him to do. However, as we will find out, *Jonah* still hopes *Nineveh* will not repent. He avoided going the first time because he apparently wanted *Nineveh* to be destroyed (Jonah 4:1-2).

The narrator inserted a parenthetical note concerning *Nineveh* before telling us what *Jonah* did upon reaching the city. He said, *Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk*. The narrator once again emphasized the size of *Nineveh* with the repetition of the adjective *great* (3:2). He also provided more information for clarification, telling us that the *city* required *a three days’ walk*. That means that it would take *three days* for someone to travel through the *city* and its outskirts.

The narrator resumed his speech about *Jonah* and said he *began to go through the city one day’s walk, and he cried out*. This statement means that on the first day that *Jonah* entered the *city of Nineveh*, he began to proclaim the message that *the LORD* had given to him. The prophet did not delay his preaching until he had reached the very heart of the *city*. Rather, he began to *cry out* immediately after entering it. Interestingly, *Jonah* does not at any time seem to fear for his life.

The word translated *cried out* is “qāra” in Hebrew. It has already occurred several times throughout the narrative, requiring various translations. For instance, *the LORD* told *Jonah* to

“cry against” *Nineveh*, but *Jonah* ran away (1:1–3). The captain told *Jonah* to “call on” his god, but there is no indication *Jonah* did so (1:6). The sailors “called on” *the LORD* before throwing *Jonah* into the sea (1:14). Then, *Jonah* eventually “called” to *the LORD* out of his distress (2:3). After *Jonah*’s rebellion, *the LORD* commanded him the second time to “proclaim” his message to the Ninevites (3:2). Now, at last, *Jonah* began to carry out his prophetic mission: *he cried out and said, Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.*

The Hebrew verb translated as *overthrown* refers to an action that brings about a sudden change or a process that suddenly upsets a chain of events. It often means “to turn” or “to be turned.” For instance, the ancient Israelites used to turn flatbread when they baked them to make sure they did not burn (Hosea 7:8). The verb can also mean to overturn or to overthrow in contexts where it refers to a city. In such a case, it refers to destruction, as exemplified in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:25, 29).

Similarly, in the book of *Jonah*, the prophet used the verb to predict the destruction of *Nineveh*, which would occur in just *forty days*. The all-powerful God could have destroyed *Nineveh* within seconds. But He decided to send His prophet to the *city* to proclaim a message of judgment, and give *Nineveh* the opportunity to repent and be saved. Thus, the *forty days* were likely a window of opportunity for *Nineveh*. God’s purpose was to give the Ninevites some time to turn from their wicked ways to avoid His judgment. God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). He desires all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Biblical Text

¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,² “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.” ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk. ⁴ Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”