

Jonah 3: The God of 2nd Chances

Why didn't God cut loose on Ninevah like He declared?

Jonathan Edwards lived from 1703-1758. By any reasonable estimation, he had been endowed with a most brilliant mind, perhaps the greatest pure thinker America has ever produced. A dad to 13 children, a dedicated pastor, and for a short time, the president of the College of New Jersey which would become Princeton University.

To many, Edwards is best known for a sermon he delivered on a warm summer Sunday, July 8, 1741. Not a flashy preacher, using no gestures, standing virtually motionless, he read his sermon word for word in a low, somewhat monotonous voice. But on that Sunday in Enfield CT, Jonathan Edwards delivered "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

His text came from Deuteronomy 32:35, "Their foot shall slide in due time." Edwards began by explaining what that Old Testament verse meant for unbelieving Israelites who lived 1,400 years before Christ. He then followed by declaring that nothing kept wicked men out of hell for a single moment except for the arbitrary pleasure of God. **Many**, he continued, no doubt sat in the congregation in ease, but Satan stood ready to seize them. When God permitted, their souls would be turned into fiery ovens and furnaces of brimstone. Nothing but the pleasure of God currently protected them from sudden, irretrievable death.

His conclusion climaxed with a very direct application!

There is hell's wide gaping mouth open; you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of. There is nothing between you and hell but the air...you hang there by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and every moment ready to burn it asunder. You have nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing you have ever done, nothing you can do.

It would be a wonder, if some that are now present should not be in hell in a very short time. And it would be no wonder if some persons, that now sit here, in some seats of this meeting house, in health, quiet and secure, should be there before tomorrow morning.ⁱ

That sermon sparked the fuel for a revival, not only in the Connecticut church, but all up and down the eastern coast of the American colonies, known yet today as "The Great Awakening."

Yet, if you're like many moderns, that kind of sermon vivifying the anger and wrath of God

may not land well. Perhaps a moment ago, you thought to cover your children's ears. A public middle-school teacher once corrected me, "David, God is LOVE." We feel much more at ease with a God who will ultimately save everyone—that His kindness will eclipse His justice, conquer it, extinguish it. Puritans like Jonathan Edwards (we're quite confident) had it wrong; God's mercy will simply make everyone happy and safe in the end.

The truth is that so often, we don't like warnings, especially those which demand a real change. I surveyed an array of internet pieces the other day:

- Why people ignore hurricane warnings
- Why we keep ignoring climate change warnings
- People who ignore warning labels
- Many Americans ignore U.S. travel alerts
- Ten warning signs women ignore while dating
- Obesity health warnings increasingly ignored by Americans

Keith Schneider, in a piece entitled "Warnings—They are So Easy to Ignore," put it like this:

*In my work as [a] senior editor and chief correspondent, I've reported on the results of this human foolishness. How human beings react to warnings is a study in conflicting responses defined principally by **how easy it is to respond**.*

*We **respond with alarm** at potential risks. That's because it doesn't take much **to react**. But warnings that are scientifically based and require responses that change behaviors are much less acceptable to human psyches. We've all built lives that we're determined not to adjust very much. We like our homes, our places, our things, our lifestyles. We've invested emotionally and financially in securing our lives so we don't have to change. We're content to live [without changing] with the hazards.ⁱⁱ*

To be sure, we get bombarded by warnings, and we are more likely to merely react than really change. But, here's one of the most important ideas you and I might ever embrace. Legitimate

**Warnings give us a 2nd chance at life,
especially when they come from the heart
of a 2nd chance God.**

Here are the questions that arise from the 3rd chapter of Jonah's account:

*What should we expect when God issues a warning?
And, what does God expect?*

Answer:

**When God warns, we should expect truthful clarity.
When God warns, He expects
(& responds to) genuine change.**



First – When God warns, we should expect truthful clarity

Jonah 3:1 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!”

The God of 2nd chances gave his prophet a 2nd chance. The command is similar, but shorter.

This time the Lord replaces “for their evil has come up before Me” (1:2) to “call out against it the message that I tell you” (3:2). And this time, Jonah responds obediently, and begins his 600 mile journey.

But as he goes, he does so with the understanding that his God regards Ninevah as “an exceedingly great city.”

- Over 3,000 years old, it likely was originally built by Nimrod (cf. Genesis 10:11)
- As it grew in strength, it housed the great kings of Assyria
- Three rivers formed the perimeter of Ninevah (on the NW by the Khosr, on the west by the Tigris, on the SW by the Gazr Su and the Upper, or Great Zab) and on the 4th side by mountains.
- The name Ninevah was used in two senses: first, as one particular city, but second, for a complex of 4 large primeval cities (including Ninevah).ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, it was an ancient “metropolex” stretching 30-56 miles across.^{iv}
- It housed worship centers, palaces, where over 120,000 lived with hundreds of thousands traveled through there, engaging in business, trade, recreation (e.g., relaxing with their families in city parks).

Jonah’s assignment was no small job. A Hebrew prophet, in enemy territory, he was to pass through Nineveh’s impressive gates inside its massive walls, and walk up and down the city streets, passing rows of houses, through markets and temple courts, crying out an 8 word sermon: ***Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown.***

What did this cry mean? The punch of the proclamation is the Hebrew word “overthrown.” It means “to turn the tables,” “to be reversed in the opposite direction,” or “to absolutely devastate.” In the past few years, we’ve seen what that means (massive flooding, brutal tornadoes, wind-whipped western wildfires that leave absolutely nothing but charred remains). The most vivid Biblical illustration? When God “had his limit” with the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah, on a given day, He reduced two major cities (habitations and inhabitants) to nothing but ashes.



Genesis 19:24-26 Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

27-29 And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and he looked and, behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace. So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow

when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived.^v

So what then was Jonah's piercing cry? God's limit with Assyria had been reached.

Somewhere in the next 40 days, the God of heaven and earth will completely desolate your homes, your families, your herds, your businesses, your crops, your culture...your metroplex of godless life.

He has done it before; He intends to do it again...right here. 40 days. That's it. Any questions?

We have, I believe, lost today a TRUE sense of God's awesome power. Too easily passing off God's unfettered ability to invade and rearrange our environment. But...every now and then, God reminds us that the power we see in the world and universe He's created is HIS power.

On May 18, 1980, Washington State's Mount St. Helens exploded. With the power of 500 nuclear bombs, it catapulted 1,300 feet of its symmetrical cone into the atmosphere. White-hot ash shot up 12 miles. Millions of tall timber fell over like pick-up sticks. \$22 million in crop loss. 5,900 miles of roads under ask. 20 miles of the Columbia River clogged with logs. 40 miles away, Portland's harbor choked with volcanic mud.

At the moment of the explosion, David Crockett (28) a photographer for KOMO-TV in Seattle, stood on a logging road at the base of the mountain. A huge roar, a wall of mud rushing toward him, he was temporarily spared by the terrain which divided the flood around him. Crockett frantically sought for a way out. Moving along the road, speaking into his camera, he recorded, "I am walking toward the only light that I can see. I can hear the mountain rumble. At this very moment, I have to say **Honest to God I believe I am dead.** *The ash is in my eyes, burns my eyes! Oh dear God, this is hell! It's very, very hard to breath and very dark. If only I could breathe! I will try the radio. Mayday! Mayday! Ash is coming down on me heavily. It's either dark or I am dead. God, I want to live.*^{vi}

Another witness, out on a fishing trip, put it this way: *To understand how big, how incredible it really was, you had to see it for yourself. You had to be there when the sun died at noon, and the dark, dark rain began to fall.*^{vii}

When God warns, He doesn't bluff. When He warns, expect truthful clarity. Jonah couldn't have been clearer – The God whose power openly explodes around creation was on the verge of obliterating a magnificent city, brimming with culture, politics, education, people & families...and sin.

**Second – When God warns, He expects
(& responds to) genuine change.**

Jonah 3:5 And the people of Nineveh believed God (i.e., Elohim). 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 (Elohim) may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

Verse 5 tells us “the people of Ninevah believed God” (i.e., Elohim). Meaning? They believed as true the objective warning. First, that a terribly powerful God existed. Second, that He is righteous and came to His limit with their wickedness. And third, that Elohim was going to rightfully unleash previously unsuspected judgment. Hebrews 12:31 says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.” Somehow, in the depths of their souls, moms and dads and teenagers and the elderly all alike came to unquestionably believe Jonah’s cryptic warning.

However, Tim Keller rightly makes an important observation:

*While it says they “believed God,” there is no indication that the Ninevites came into a covenant relationship with the God of Israel. The word the Ninevites use is “God,” the generic word **Elohim**, rather than the personal covenant name, **Yahweh**, [the name] the Lord uses with His people Israel. There is no mention of Nineveh forsaking their gods and idols; they did not offer sacrifices to the Lord...which is why almost all commentators agree that Jonah did not successfully convert the Ninevites.^{viii}*

The king of Nineveh understood God to be saying that each citizen must “forsake his evil way and the violence that he plans toward others” (3:8). Violence is the arbitrary infringement of human rights. Assyrian imperialism, cruelty and social injustice were condemned [by Isaiah and Nahum]. It wasn’t merely that the Assyrians as a nation were oppressing other nations; individual were violent toward one another, poisoning social relationships. The wealthy enslaved the poor while the poor struck back through crime, and the middle-class people cheated one another. It may be that the repentance “from the greatest of them to the least” (3:5) shows the beginning of a reconciliation of various strata of society.^{ix}

^{3:10} 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.

**When God warns, we should expect truthful clarity.
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This God – this one true God – even though the response and repentance was partial, even though it did not result in the full experience of coming into a covenant relationship with Yahweh, this powerful

God graciously, mercifully relented from the disaster “he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (3:10). When God warns, we should expect direct, truthful clarity. And when God warns, He expects a response of genuine, no-excuses, no hedging change.

RESPONDING TO THIS TRUTH

May I ask all of this in this room, and all of you who may be listening to my voice now (or later), four questions? One of these may apply to you.

#1 **FOOLISHNESS QUESTION:** Is there any warning from God that you and I are ignoring?

If so, you are likely in your own “40 day timeframe of grace.” The lesson of this chapter for you is not to miss the opportunity to listen, and respond.

#2 **REPENTANCE QUESTION:** Is there any change that God’s Spirit is calling for in your life?

God had a specific issue with Nineveh, and made it known to the king. The people needed to turn from evil ways, from planned sin and violence toward other people.

#3 **COURAGE QUESTION:** Is God calling you to have the courage to challenge the sinful complacency of someone you know?

To do so requires the leading and filling of God’s Spirit. You should have a calling from the Lord to speak to someone about ignoring God’s warnings. But you and I should not retreat in fear from it either. Being honest and direct with someone about sinful complacency can be one of the most important ministries you can have with someone, and the vehicle for God responding with mercy.

#4 **STOPPING SHORT QUESTION:** Is there anyone here who may believe God is powerful, but you have never taken the step of establishing a humble, faith and worship relationship, with the God who is personal, who wants to establish His covenant with you through His son, the Lord Jesus Christ?

It’s not enough simply to believe God is powerful. He calls you to believe that He is also personal, and sent his Son to die for you/your sin so that you might be completely forgiven, and step into an eternity of relationship and joy with Him. Will you not stop short? Will you not, today, choose to believe in the Jesus Christ as your Savior, and begin following Him alone as your Lord? He has no eagerness to see you spend eternity in hell; He has every passion to invite you into heaven.

ⁱ Henry Bamford Parkes, *Jonathan Edwards, the Fiery Puritan* (Minton, Balch & Company; First Edition, 1930), 20.

ⁱⁱ Keith Schneider, "Warnings—They Are So Easy To Ignore," <https://www.circleofblue.org/2014/world/warnings-easy-ignore/>

ⁱⁱⁱ according to C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes-Volume X Minor Prophets*, pp.389-391)

^{iv} According to the ESV Study Bible, note on Jonah 3:3b, p.1689.

^v Note God's promise in Deuteronomy 29 about what would happen to Israel's sons who "turned away from the Lord to go and serve other gods."

Deut 29:23 the whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in his anger and wrath—²⁴ all the nations will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?'²⁵ Then people will say, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt,²⁶ and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them.²⁷ Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book,²⁸ and the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day.'

^{vi} *Time*, June 2, 1980, p.26.

^{vii} *Sports Illustrated*, July 14, 1980, p.85.

^{viii} Tim Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, 87-88.

^{ix} Keller, 89.