

Fact Sheet for **“Knowing God Better”**  
**Jonah 3**

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We know God only because He has made Himself known to us in nature (Psalm 19:1), in Scripture (1 Peter 1:15-16), and in Jesus Christ (John 14:9). Jonah 3 is a chapter of the Bible that shows us several qualities of the God we worship. And the more we get to know God the better we are able to serve Him and live for Him.

**<sup>3:1</sup> ¶ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."**

The first time was in Jonah 1:1-2.

Nineveh was well known for the brutal atrocities it inflicted on its war captives. This would have been only a portion of their evil that had come up before God. Nineveh was also known for its idolatry. God was insistent that Jonah cry out against the city with the message that God Himself told Jonah to preach. At first Jonah had willfully tried to keep from doing this, only to have God land him in the belly of a great fish. Now God repeated His charge to Jonah. And this time Jonah obeyed, at least outwardly. God wasn't going to let Jonah get away with not going to Nineveh and preaching against it. God was sovereign in His charge to Jonah and powerful enough to bring Jonah to obedience. God had a plan for the people of Nineveh, and He would see that plan through.

**<sup>3</sup> 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.**

Nineveh was built by Nimrod (Genesis 10:11-12). In Jonah's day it was surrounded by an inner wall (50 ft. wide and 100 ft. high, about 8 miles in circumference), and an outer wall that encompassed fields and smaller towns.

**<sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"**

This 40 day deadline was not from Jonah. It was from God. Here's an interesting question. Why would God give a deadline for the overthrow of Nineveh? Was it *only* so that the people who believed Jonah could leave before that deadline? Was it *only* so that people could, after Nineveh was overthrown, see that God both had a plan and saw it through? Or was God's primary intent that the people of Nineveh would repent of their evil? Jonah knew that this was God's intent and that they would be able to avoid God's judgment, but Jonah was not happy about it (4:2). Did God know that the people of Nineveh would repent? Yes. We will see more about this later.

**<sup>5</sup> 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.**

**<sup>6</sup> ¶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."**

Earlier Jonah had repented (Jonah 2), now the Ninevites repented. They hoped that Jonah's God would turn from His anger and spare them.

Was their repentance genuine or superficial? Another way to put it is, "Did their repentance lead to saving faith in the God of Israel?" If their repentance was genuine it would be difficult to explain why the Assyrians continued their violence and why they soon destroyed Israel 37 years later. It makes much better sense that their repentance was superficial, like that of Ahab, an evil and unsaved king of Israel (1 Kings 21:21-29). God gave Ahab, an unsaved and evil king, a temporary respite from judgment because he humbled himself. Likewise God relented of the disaster that he had said He would do to Nineveh.

**<sup>10</sup> ¶ 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.**

Did God know beforehand that the people of Nineveh would repent? If God *did know beforehand* that the people of Nineveh would repent, at least superficially, then God used the threat of overthrow to achieve His intended result all along. The statement that He relented from the promised disaster would be from their human perspective. Psalm 139:4 is one verse among many that speak of God's omniscience.

If however you understand that God *did not know beforehand* that the people of Nineveh would repent, then you open up a can of worms. The NLT, a bit more of a paraphrase, could *possibly* be seen as allowing for this view. There is a children's book titled "Because a Little Bug went ka-CHOO!" In that book a little bug's sneeze set a whole series of events into motion, including a pail landing on a farmer's head. That series of events eventually ended with a helicopter picking up a sail boat and bring it to the middle of a circus parade. In a similar vein *if* Jonah 3:10 indicates that God did *not* know beforehand that the people of Nineveh would repent, *then* that initiates a whole series of difficulties. (1) God's omniscience would not include the future decisions of people. (2) God could never have been sure about what John the Baptist would do when Gabriel spoke to his father Zechariah in the temple. (3) God could never give long-term specific prophecy with 100% accuracy. Therefore books like Isaiah and Daniel would have to be seen as being edited after the prophesied events took place (something for which there is absolutely no evidence). (4) The Bible could then not be trusted. Taken to its logical conclusion everything we believe about salvation by faith in Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life would be questionable.

Here is a statement in our Declaration of Faith. "God's foreknowledge is exhaustive and not dependent on human decisions and actions." And here are a few verses that speak of God's omniscience – Psalm 139:16; John 6:64; Romans 8:29-30.

When Jonah 3:10 notes that God relented from the overthrow of Nineveh that must be seen from a human perspective, not God's. His purpose all along was that they should repent.

What has this chapter taught us about God? (1) He is sovereign over the affairs of people. (2) He will see His plans through. (3) He is gracious and merciful. (4) He is absolutely omniscient. Take some time and think about these four things and how they relate to your life.