

# OpenTheo

## September 1st: Jonah 3 & Matthew 4

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Jonah preaches to Nineveh. Jesus in the wilderness.

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## Transcript

Jonah chapter 3. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you. 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.

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. 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 word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 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. 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.

Who knows, God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish. 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. In Jonah chapter 3 we have the second sending of Jonah, and now he goes directly to the city of Nineveh.

The call of chapter 3 verse 2 is virtually identical to that of chapter 1 verse 2, only slight variations, from cry out against to cry out to. Perhaps we should take Jonah's compliance on this occasion as a sign of his repentance, although what happens later in chapter 4 maybe suggests that the situation is more complicated. The Lord describes Nineveh as that great city.

We have already seen a great wind, a great fear, a great tempest, another great fear, and then a great fish, and later we will see a great evil and a great joy. In verse 3 the description of the city slightly varies from the description of the Lord in verse 2. It is described as a great city to or for God or the gods. The point here may be to emphasize its size, as Walter Wolfe suggests a comparison between this description of the city of Nineveh and the description of Nimrod in Genesis chapter 10 verse 9, where Nimrod was described as a mighty hunter before the Lord.

Fittingly, Nimrod is also the person who founded the city of Nineveh. Alternatively it may emphasize the city's importance to God or the gods. If the latter, then the presence of many shrines and temples within the city might be in view.

If the former, then perhaps it is designed to set Nineveh apart from other cities. Others have seen here a reference to God's possession of the city, the great city that belongs to God. God has rightful dominion over the city.

The description of the city as a journey or visit of three days seems quite hyperbolic. A single day of walking would probably take a person about 20 miles, and if they were walking for three days, 60 miles. It stretches credulity, especially when we have archaeological evidence to say that the city of Nineveh at that time would be anywhere remotely near 60 miles across.

Indeed, from what we know of its historical size, it seems likely you would have been able to walk all the way across it in a single afternoon. Others have suggested that this might refer to a walk around the periphery of the city, while less of an extreme claim. This still seems quite unrealistic.

Many scholars see this as a fantastical and hyperbolic detail that is suggestive of a sort of fairy tale account. Other commentators have suggested that what we have here is a metropolitan district, including a number of cities of which Nineveh was the chief. The whole area takes on the name of Nineveh and takes about three days to traverse.

A further possibility is raised by Donald Wiseman in a Tyndale Biblical Archaeology lecture from 1977. Douglas Stewart summarises this position. It is quite possible that the issue at hand is what Wiseman calls the ancient oriental practice of hospitality, whereby the first day is for arrival, the second for the primary purpose of the visit, and the third for return.

Wiseman outlines the relevant Mesopotamian evidence for political as well as prophetic visits of men from one city state entering another for specialist advice. He concludes, there is therefore no difficulty in a prophet being received by the leaders of the city, though he would probably have had to establish his bona fides first. Accordingly, Nineveh was undoubtedly a place Jonah, like any other emissary, had to enter and leave according to accepted protocol.

The story, of course, does not provide us with the details of how this was done, but we may assume that his first and third days involved meetings and explanations, perhaps even formal hearings. He may even have presented gifts to city officials upon his arrival, as was the custom in the case of official state visits, though his contacts may have been less formal and less high level. If Stewart and Wiseman are right, then the next verse suggests that he got his mission straight underway in the first day of his visit.

One of the important things that the three days journey would do is connect the city of Nineveh with the big fish of the preceding two chapters. Jonah's message is that within 40 days, Nineveh shall be overthrown. It is also possible to read this as will be transformed.

Whichever it is, the status quo in Nineveh cannot continue. The fact that the city receives such an announcement with an attached window of time holds out the real possibility that the city is being given time to repent. For why would God tell them any of this if there was no way positively for them to respond and to avert at least some of the crisis? In Jeremiah chapter 18 verses 7 to 10 the Lord had said, If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. The words of the Lord are relational. They challenge people to respond.

They are not just bare predictions of what will occur. The response of the people of Nineveh is a remarkable one. They call for a fast and put on sackcloth, every single one of them.

When the word reaches the king, he takes things even further. Presumably Jonah had not

met the king at this point, perhaps because he was just in the early stages of his visit. The king comes down from his throne, removes his royal robes, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes.

And although the people of Nineveh had already independently committed themselves to a fast, he issues a proclamation to back it up and extends it even further. In addition to a fast for all human beings, he includes every single animal. All cattle and all sheep must refrain from eating as well.

Not just human beings, but animals must be clothed in sackcloth. All of the people of Nineveh are instructed by the king to cry out to the Lord and to repent of their evil and of their violence. We might think back to the story of the flood here, to the violence and the corruption that was general and that led to the destruction of all human flesh.

We might also think to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the violence that went up to the Lord and led to him coming down to destroy the city. The question now is whether judgement will be able to be averted in this particular case. Verse 9 might be an amalgam of two different verses in the Old Testament.

Exodus chapter 32 verse 12, turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Moses intercession for the people after their sin with the golden calf. And then 2 Samuel chapter 12 verse 22, David's words.

He said, while the child was still alive I fasted and wept, for I said, who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live. On this occasion the city is indeed spared. The Lord relents of his anger and does not destroy the city as he said he would do.

Some commentators wonder whether part of Jonah's anger is that his prophecy did not come to pass, suggesting that he was a false prophet. This however does not seem to be the true reason. Far more significant perhaps is the fact that in sparing Nineveh, the Lord is sparing the ones who will destroy Israel in just a few decades time.

Perhaps Israel was supposed to learn from the example of the Ninevites who responded so readily to the message of Jonah. Prophets had been speaking to Israel for many years and yet they had not responded as they ought. We might think here of Jesus' statements in Luke chapter 11 verses 30 to 32.

I've already noticed some of the parallels to the events of the flood and also of Exodus chapter 32 with Israel's sin concerning the golden calf and Moses' intercession for the people. Those two accounts are already connected. And here we have a text that reflects upon the possibility of repentance in such a general judgement that is coming upon the people.

As in those two accounts there is a significant period of 40 days. The rain would come for

40 days and 40 nights upon the earth. Moses was upon the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights.

There will be a direct reference to a verse given in the context of the story of the golden calf in Jonah chapter 4. One of the more interesting features of this chapter is the reference to the animals who are brought into the picture in a surprising way. Just as we don't usually have stories of ships at sea as we do in chapter 1 of Jonah, there aren't many stories in the Old Testament where animals are so directly involved and there involvement here takes very surprising forms. They also have to refrain from eating.

They also have to wear sackcloth and ashes. They also have to cry out to God. In the reference to animals alongside human beings in the context of a general judgement we should naturally think of the story of the flood.

In many ways this is a reversal of the flood narrative. The evil and the violence of the city has gone up to the Lord. The city has been condemned to utter destruction and yet the Lord relents after the people repent.

A question to consider, what lessons might Israel have learned from the story of the Ninevites? Matthew chapter 4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting 40 days and 40 nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.

But he answered, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, He will command his angels concerning you.

And on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. Jesus said to him, Again it is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

And he said to him, All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me. Then Jesus said to him, Be gone, Satan! For it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve. Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light.

And for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned. From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. While walking by the sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

And he said to them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them.

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures and paralytics, and he healed them.

And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. In Matthew chapter 4 we read of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Each of the synoptics have an account of the temptations of Christ, but each introduce it differently.

In Matthew, Jesus is led up by the spirit into the wilderness. In Mark, Jesus is cast out by the spirit into the wilderness. And in Luke, Jesus being filled with the spirit is led in the spirit into the wilderness.

Now these are the same events, but they're being recounted in very different ways. And the differences between the ways that they are recounted suggest that there are different aspects of Old Testament narrative that are being brought to the forefront. Matthew wants us to hear particular echoes, Luke wants us to hear different ones.

And we should think about the Old Testament background that is being summoned here. There are several Old Testament stories that would seem to have some comparisons with this story of Jesus, his baptism and his temptation. You can think about Adam and Eve in the garden being tested in that context by the serpent.

Story of Israel in the wilderness, 40 years wandering in the wilderness. We might think of the story of David and Goliath. David is anointed and then in the next chapter he faces off against Goliath who has stood against Israel for 40 days.

His struggle with Saul as well has similarities. The story of Ezekiel might also come to mind. The heavens are opened in the 30th year when he's by the river Chebar with the captives and he sees visions of God.

Later on he's taken in the spirit to various locations, different extremities of the temple,

the high mountain and to the wilderness, the valley of dry bones. We might also think of the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the tree that is cut down, the great tree that's felled by the axe, the holy one coming down from heaven, driving him out from among men so that he dwells with the beasts. Now here the particular background that seems to be most emphasised is that of the Exodus.

Jesus is led up by the spirit and that's the language that's often used of the Exodus. Israel is led up out of Egypt by God in the pillar of cloud and fire. He's led into temptation and he's tested in the wilderness.

This is a similar thing again to Israel's experience where Israel was tested ten times or they tested God ten times in the wilderness. He's there for 40 days and nights. This is similar to Moses in Exodus chapter 34 verse 28 and in Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 9. The order of the temptations in Matthew differs from that in Luke.

In Luke the order is that of the turning the stone into bread followed by going up into the high mountain and seeing the kingdoms of the world, although it's not mentioned as a mountain in Luke. And then the third one is the pinnacle of the temple. And so the differences here are noteworthy.

The different order again helps to bring to mind different aspects of Old Testament background. In Matthew there's a temptation concerning forbidden food, a temptation to move beyond the protected realm and then a temptation to claim authority before its time. Maybe we compare this to the movement from seeing something as good for food, something as a delight to the eyes and then something as desirable to make one wise.

The devil uses the words of God to try and trip Christ up. The temptation that he is bringing to Christ is for Christ to abandon his mission and more particularly the way of the cross. The devil comes to him at his weakest point, at that point where he's hungry and where he feels weak and alone perhaps and at that point he's tested.

Satan is coming on the scene in person too. This is a preparation for a greater conflict of spiritual powers. He knows who Jesus is and his challenge is to Jesus' identity.

If you are the son of God, Jesus is a new king but he's also an Adamic figure. Adam was the son of God and Jesus is also a son of God like David and Solomon were described as the sons of God. The temptation in the garden was that if they eat of the tree they would be like God or the gods, knowing good and evil, that they would have this status.

Now Satan is offering a very similar temptation here, that if he wants to enjoy all these privileges of power and rule, all he needs to do is reach out and take what is perfectly within his grasp. Now there are three temptations. Jesus withdraws from his disciples three times in chapter 26 when he's being tested there.

Peter is tested three times and he fails three times. We should also note the recurrence

of these questions at the cross followed by the confirmation at the end, truly this was the son of God. Matthew structures his gospel carefully.

He wants us to recognise symmetries between different parts. So the questions are in chapter 26 verse 63, tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God and it's the choice to accept the cup or not, to bear witness to who he is or not. Then there is a temple reference, you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself.

If you are the son of God, come down from the cross. It's a similar thing, it brings to mind the temple and also that temptation to cast oneself down from the temple, to abandon the mission, to leave the people behind. And then the final temptation is echoed again, he saved others, he cannot save himself.

He is the king of Israel, let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God, let God deliver him now if he desires him, for he said I am the son of God. So he's tempted and tested in chapter 4 and then he's tested again at the cross.

Note that this is coming straight after the events of the baptism where the voice has come from heaven saying this is my beloved son, in him I am well pleased. Now he's being tested. If you are truly the son of God, if your father truly loves you, then do these things, then take this route.

Why would you have to go the way of the cross? Why would you have to take that difficult route where you could just claim all these things as your own? Note the fact that heavenly figures are testifying to Jesus' identity here. The father, the devil and then later on demons. Jesus' identity is at stake, the question of who he is and that's recognised by the centurion at the end who says truly this was the son of God.

But he's proved that through his suffering, through his faithfulness, through sticking to the course that his father set. His sonship is not seen in great acts of power but in a loving work of faithfulness to his father's mission. That is where his sonship is most clearly seen.

Jesus could perhaps be compared to Moses here. Moses was in the wilderness cut off from bread. The bread of Egypt, they had to leave behind the bread of Egypt not least through the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread but they also were cut off from the bread of the land.

They could not fully enter into that. They were weaned off these things and they had to eat manna for many years and he would hunger to enter into the land. There's also the temptation to move beyond the mission that God had prepared for him.

To go out ahead, to leave the wings of God. Now the word for the pinnacle of the temple is the wings of the temple. This is language that's taken from among other places Psalm 91.



The temptation in Moses' case was to go straight into the land rather than to wait for God to lead them to the land in due time. And finally Moses had to die. He could not enter into the land and so he was brought onto a high mountain and he saw the land from a distance but he had to die.

In the same way Christ has to die. Perhaps you can imagine Moses on that Nebo looking out of the land and just wanting to go ahead and enter into it. He had wandered for 80 years of his life and now the promised land is tantalisingly near to his grasp and he's told that he can't enter into it.

Jesus' response to the temptation to turn the stones into bread draws our mind back to Deuteronomy from which he quotes. In chapter 8 there is the quotation concerning the manna. He says, This weaning has to occur before they can enter into the land and they're told that in that land they will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper.

So they're going to come into a land from which stones they'll find life and strength and in which they'll eat bread abundantly but for the time being they're cut off from those things. Moses turns stone into water, striking the rock but then there's a further occasion where he strikes the rock when he should not have done and here he's judged. It's one of the reasons why he does not get to enter into the land.

Bread is promised but submission to God's will is primary and we can also think maybe of deeper themes. The dead stones of the law are turned into the bread of the word. Jesus has the words of life.

Had Jesus listened to the devil it would have been like fallen Adam eating from the tree of life, taking life but a life that's cut off from fellowship with God. The next temptation is to cast himself down from the wing of the temple. Again this refers back to Psalm 91 verse 4 and elsewhere.

The temple is sanctuary and refuge and the wing of it is God's wing that's placed over people. Jesus also talks about himself as a sanctuary later on, talking about gathering Jerusalem's children under his wings. And in Numbers chapter 14 the people try and escape God's wing.

They want to go on ahead of God. God has told them not to enter into the land as a result of their sin but they try and have this premature attempt to get into the land. And in Numbers 14 they're badly beaten as a result.

For Christ the temptation would be not to have to suffer the cross, not to have to take that route, to go away from the route that God had prepared for him, to go out from God's sheltering wings knowing that God will protect him. And the final temptation is the high mountain. Moses was brought up onto Mount Nebo in Deuteronomy 34 and here

Christ is brought up onto a high mountain.

Moses was shown the promised land, the land that he was leading the people to. Christ is shown all the kingdoms of the world, all the kingdoms that will be given to him. This is his promised land.

But as in the case of Moses, death must intervene before he gets there. Mountains are visionary points in places like Ezekiel and Revelation, also in the story of Abraham as he's placed on this mountain, told to look out over the land and says all of this will be yours. In the same way Christ stands on that mountain and he's told by the devil all of this can be yours.

All you have to do is bow down to me. You don't actually have to go through all this work of the cross. The three temptations for Moses then is a desire for bread on human terms, a temptation to abandon the people.

It's a further thing that we see in Christ's temptation to cast himself down from the temple. He could cast himself down. He could cast himself down from the cross.

He would be protected but he would be abandoning the people in that way. Moses has a similar temptation. God says to him, let me destroy this people and I'll make a great nation of you.

But yet Moses insists on staying faithful to the people, of not letting go of them. And in a similar way Jesus' refusal to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, from the wing of the temple, is a refusal to let the people go. And then finally there's that temptation to enter the land prematurely, to enter into the land without passing through death.

And Jesus' temptation is similar. Jesus' answers to the temptations are taken from scripture and they work back through Deuteronomy to the declaration of God, the Shema, in chapter 6. Richard Hayes has pointed this out, that they work back from chapter 8 and then back to the beginning of chapter 6. The angels minister to him much as they do in chapter 26 when he wrestles in agony in the garden of Gethsemane. After the temptations are over, the arrest of John the Baptist presents a time to transition back to Galilee.

Jesus leaves Nazareth for Capernaum. We see this in Luke chapter 4. In Luke chapter 4 Jesus speaks in the synagogue in Nazareth and was rejected and they try and cast him down and he goes his own way. And here he goes to Capernaum.

Matthew once again stresses that things are being fulfilled here. Isaiah chapter 9 verse 1 to 2 has a messianic prophecy. The first regions that were taken captive into Babylon are the first to see the light of the Messiah.

Galilee was an area with some Hellenistic cities, it was an important trade route and it was associated with Gentiles and it anticipates the later mission to the Gentiles. Bear in mind all the Gentile themes that we've seen up to this point and there's a message of repentance and the kingdom that's presented at this point. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

He then calls two sets of brothers Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John the sons of Zebedee. These are two paralleled accounts with both encounters playing much the same pattern out. The way that Jesus calls his disciples is similar to the call that we see in the case of Elisha by Elijah and the distinctive way he calls them is more like that of a prophet than a rabbi.

He calls them in their everyday livelihood and calls them to make a break from it and their symbolism here in 1st Kings chapter 19 verses 19 following we read Elisha's call. So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat who was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen in front of him and he was with the 12th. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him and he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said let me kiss my father and my mother and then I'll follow you and he said to him go back again for what have I done to you and he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people and they ate.

Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. In a similar way Jesus calls his disciples in the act of fishing and he calls them to make that movement from being fishers to being fishers of men. It's a calling into mission.

Elisha was called while he was with the 12 oxen, 12 oxen that represent Israel. Here the disciples are called while they are working in fishing and fishing in Jeremiah chapter 16 verse 16 is associated with judgment but it could also be associated with bringing things in from the Gentiles. Making them fishers of men is interesting because in the Old Testament the people are generally led by shepherds and now it's a focus upon the sea and fish.

This suggests again a movement out into the Gentile realm. Jesus' early mission is focused around the sea of Galilee. Now we could talk about the lake of Gennesaret but it's called the sea of Galilee and that is symbolically important.

Jesus' mission is going out to the Gentiles, to those who are outside and this movement into a sea-based mission from a mission based upon the land and pastoral ministry is an important part of this. Now Jesus probably already knew both sets of brothers. James and John putting together pieces from the gospels as we see the women at the cross and the way that they're described were probably Jesus' first cousins.

Peter and Andrew were likely people he knew too, people he'd be seeing on a fairly

regular basis, maybe some more distant relations or at least friends. Jesus is not speaking to complete strangers here. His mission involves going throughout Galilee at this point, going from place to place, teaching in synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.

This language of the gospel comes from Isaiah chapter 40, from Isaiah 52 and other places. It's the good news that God is king, that God is coming to reign, that God is returning to his people, that a new exodus is about to occur and he demonstrates the power of this kingdom through healing, through exorcism and through other great acts of power. And he's followed by large crowds from places that are not just within Jewish regions but gentile areas with significant Jewish populations too, places like Syria and Decapolis.

A question to consider, might there be any significance in the different acts that James and John and Simon and Andrew are doing when Jesus calls them?