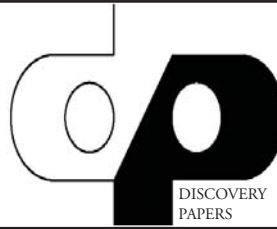


GREAT TO GOD

SERIES: GOD OF A SECOND CHANCE



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Jonah 3

3rd Message

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What are the spiritual prospects for the Silicon Valley?

The valley, in part because its residents are largely uninterested in the gospel, is an attractive target for church plants. With so many people here who are perishing, there's plenty of room for more churches. Indeed, our own Juan Valencia is preparing to plant a church in East Palo Alto, with the blessing, support, and prayers of our elders. Also, as many of you know, we've been participating in a newly formed, loosely based organization of church, business, and non-profit leaders called Transforming the Bay with Christ. A subset of that organization, Transform the Peninsula with Christ, is meeting Friday to consider what we, as followers of Jesus from different churches, can do together here for the sake of the gospel.

Is God doing something here? He did something quite improbable in Nineveh, a city which was likewise uninterested in him. Could something like what happened in Nineveh happen here? And, what's our part? Is there something that we should do?

What did Jonah, a prophet of Israel, do in Nineveh? When Jonah first heard the word of the Lord commanding him to preach in Nineveh, he sought to distance himself both from the Lord and what the Lord commanded him to do. He boarded a ship heading in the opposite direction of Nineveh, but the Lord sent a great storm. The sailors on the ship threw Jonah overboard, but the Lord sent a great fish. Instead of devouring Jonah, the fish saved him. In the belly of the fish for three days, Jonah gave thanks to the Lord, who then commanded the fish to spit him up onto dry land. Now what?

Jonah calls out

Jonah 3:1-5:

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.” ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And 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.

Verse 1 is a virtual repeat of Jonah 1:1, except that the words *the second time* come after the name of Jonah instead of the words *the son of Amittai*. It's as if Jonah the son of Amittai has now become “Jonah The Second Time.” Jonah 3:2 also starts out like Jonah 1:2. The Lord is giving Jonah a second chance to obey the command that he received at the beginning of the book. However, instead of commanding Jonah to call out “against” Nineveh, the Lord this time literally commands Jonah to call out “to” Nineveh (although the English Standard Version translates the two prepositions identically). The first command was to convey an oracle of judgment “against” Nineveh, but is the second command any different? When you preach “to” an audience, you can still preach “against” it. But the new preposition conveys more ambiguity.

Moreover, in the first command, the reason for preaching against Nineveh was that its evil had come up before the Lord. Now, the Lord gives no reason for going, though this time he promises to provide the content for the oracle, whether it's an oracle of judgment, salvation, or both. Presumably, the evil of Nineveh still qualifies as a reason for going to Nineveh, but is it no longer front and center?

When the Lord first commanded Jonah in the first chapter to “arise,” he rose all right; he just *rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord*. The narrator brings us to the edge of our seats as we wonder what Jonah will do this time when he rises. The tension is resolved immediately: instead of rising to flee from the presence of the Lord, Jonah goes to Nineveh *according to the word of the Lord*. Still, we wonder: what will he preach in Nineveh? Do the subtle changes in wording at the outset of Jonah 3 convey hope for Nineveh?

Earlier, Jonah refused his commission, but the narrator didn't tell us why. He told us why the Lord commanded Jonah to preach against Nineveh (*their evil has come up*

before me), but he didn't tell us why Jonah refused to do so. This time, Jonah submits to the word of the Lord, but we don't know why. We'd like to think that Jonah obeys because he's learned his lessons, because he's thankful to the Lord for rescuing him from his sin, because he trusts the Lord in a new way.

Some pulpits in Silesia and Bohemia of Eastern Europe used to be made in the shape of an upright whale. The preacher had to go through the belly of the whale and emerge through the open mouth to deliver the sermon. I have not been able to determine exactly why the pulpits were designed this way, but I'd like to think that they served to remind the preachers that they had been shaped by trials and saved by God. However, the narrator doesn't let us see into Jonah's heart, at least not yet, so that we can see whether his time in the belly of the fish has changed him.

Instead, the narrator gives us more information about Nineveh. Each time when the Lord commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, he identified it as a *great* city. Great in what way? Literally, the narrator this time describes Nineveh as a *great city to God*. Does God have some purpose for Nineveh other than condemnation? It has more than 120,000 persons who, lacking God's word, *do not know their right hand from their left*, who cannot distinguish between good and evil (Jonah 4:11). Jonah has set off for the *great city to God*, to go into Nineveh, which was a three days' journey in breadth. Earlier, he went into the fish, the *great* fish, and spent three days inside of it. Jonah survived the great fish; will he survive the great city, despite its wickedness?

Nineveh repents

Sometime within the first day of his arrival in Nineveh, Jonah calls out, evidently with the message that the Lord had given him: *Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* The number forty was often used in the Scriptures of a period of testing. Is Nineveh being tested or condemned? The word "overthrown" would seem to imply condemnation and destruction, but the Hebrew word can also be translated "turned around." Is Nineveh destined for condemnation or salvation?

Instead of killing Jonah, as we might have expected, the people of Nineveh believe God en masse, from the nobles to the peasants. By rejecting earthly pleasures and instead fasting and putting on sackcloth, they indicate the seriousness of their repentance. The response of Nineveh is unprecedented in the annals of the Hebrew Scriptures. The people of Nineveh are the only foreigners depicted as fasting for penance in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Then again, after Jonah spoke of the Lord to the sailors, they believed that both the storm and the calming of the storm were attributable to the Lord, and they *feared the Lord exceedingly*, though we don't know whether they abandoned their gods when they worshiped the Lord (Jonah 1:9–10, 16).

But why do the people of Nineveh believe God? Jonah, as far as we know, said nothing about God, much less Yahweh, the God of Israel; he only said that Nineveh would be overthrown. And what "god" do they believe? The word translated "God" was also used for any of the gods in which the other nations believed. We can assume that the people of Nineveh interpreted Jonah's message as some sort of prophetic message, but they may have been responding to it by believing one of their own gods.

Everyone repents, from the least to the greatest, but we haven't yet heard anything about the greatest of the great: the king.

The king repents

Jonah 3:6–9:

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

What *word* reaches the king? Presumably, he hears that his people are responding to the message of this foreign prophet, who conveys the word of the Lord, even if Jonah doesn't claim to be doing so. Like Jonah before him, the king rises in response—but for what reason? Jonah, commanded to *arise* and go to Nineveh, first rose to run in the opposite direction before rising in submission. Jonah, a prophet of Israel, had to hear the word of the Lord twice, directly, before he submitted to it. We might expect the king to rise from his throne to order the execution of the foreign prophet and anyone who believes him. Instead, the pagan king of a pagan nation, in contrast to Jonah, hears the word of the Lord third-hand, not from the Lord and not from the prophet

but from his people, and he rises in submission. He humbles himself by getting off his throne; taking off his royal robe; covering himself in sackcloth, like his people; and sitting not on a throne but in ashes, symbolizing repentance.

Instead of issuing a proclamation condemning the prophet and those who believe his word, the king commands repentance throughout the land. The people were already fasting, but now the king orders more of the same—only more so. As if refraining from eating weren't enough, the king decrees that no one should even *taste anything*. As if refraining from tasting anything weren't enough, the king decrees that no one should even drink anything. As if it weren't enough for people to refrain from eating and tasting and drinking, the king applies the measures even to livestock. The king even orders sackcloth for the beasts!

When the sailors, in distress, urged Jonah to call out to his God, he didn't do so—or at least he isn't reported as doing so (Jonah 1:6). Only after the pagan sailors called out to the Lord and after Jonah was cast into the sea did he, in distress, *call out* to the Lord (Jonah 2:1). Now the pagan king, with much less provocation, orders his people not just to call out to God but to call out *mightily*. He doesn't necessarily call out to the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel, but neither does he necessarily know enough to do so.

The king not only orders signs of repentance, he also orders the actual repentance to which the signs point: turning away from evil and violence.

If the people of Nineveh turn from their evil ways, the king hopes that God, or whatever god he believes is responsible, will *turn* from his anger so that they may not *perish*. His hope is not without precedent. Earlier, when the pagan sailors were about to *perish* because of the judgment of the Lord, they prayed to the Lord (and threw Jonah into the sea!), and the storm ceased (Jonah 1:6, 14–15). Moreover, the Lord, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, 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* (Jeremiah 18:7–8). Furthermore, the prophetic word left open the possibility, however faint, that Nineveh could be *turned around*. Indeed, as the king himself says, *Who knows?*

Well, how does God respond?

God relents

Jonah 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.

What does God do? The narrator calls him *God*, but it's clear in this case that he's referring to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Just as the Lord heard the voice of Jonah from the sea, he sees the people's acts of repentance and, true to Jeremiah 18:7–8, he spares Nineveh. He had spared the sailors. He had spared Jonah. Now he spares Nineveh. How about that!

Mission accomplished, right? God gets Jonah to do what he wants; Jonah arises, goes to Nineveh, and preaches there—and Nineveh repents. End of story, right? Uh, wrong. There's another chapter. God's work isn't through. Oh, it's through in Nineveh, at least in the book of Jonah. God has more work to do not in Nineveh but in Jonah's heart. Does he have more work to do in our hearts?

Great to God

Nineveh was “great to God”: important to him. How about the Silicon Valley, where we live? It is the technological capital of the world. Many herald the greatness of the innovations, the greatness of the companies, and the greatness of the people responsible for them. The stories of Bill and Dave, who started Hewlett-Packard; the so-called Traitorous Eight, who started Fairchild Semiconductor and, later, dozens of other companies; and the two Steves, who started Apple, are not just the stuff of the Computer History Museum in Mountain View; they're the stuff of motion picture studios in Hollywood.

But the valley is great in another, far more important way. It is, in actuality, far greater than most people realize. How so? The Silicon Valley is “great to God.” Why? Mostly, it is great to God because people live here, all kinds of people, *from the greatest of them to the least of them*, from the richest and most noticed to the poorest and least noticed, from Larry Page and Mark Zuckerberg and Marissa Mayer to those who would covet jobs cleaning the toilets of the companies these executives run.

Most of those who live here, however, are oblivious to this aspect of the valley's greatness. Compared to the rest of the country, the percentage of those who identify

themselves as followers of Jesus here is minuscule. The Valley has way more than 120,000 persons who, lacking God's word, *do not know their right hand from their left*, who cannot distinguish between good and evil. The valley's residents, then, are like the residents of Nineveh in this respect: they don't believe in the God of the Scriptures.

What does the Valley need?

What then does the Silicon Valley need? It needs God, though of course it does not know it needs him. Some of the elders and pastors of our church gathered several days ago to fast, pray, and read Scripture aloud together. Because we were fasting, I was prompted to read Jonah 3, inasmuch as it features a story that involves fasting. As we continued to read Scripture and pray, two of the participants, prompted by the reading of Jonah 3, pondered the possibilities of—and even prayed for—a Nineveh-like awakening here.

Great renewal movements are underway in many cities in the United States, emphasizing not simply the words that the gospel calls for but the deeds that the gospel calls for also. Many exciting things are happening along these lines in the Silicon Valley, not least through Transforming the Bay with Christ. Many exciting things are happening in this church, and we've tried to make you aware of opportunities to get involved in God's mission to the world.

Could something like what happened in Nineveh happen here? If so, how might it happen? In light of Jonah 3, we look for parallels with Nineveh. How did it happen in Nineveh? It happened because the residents of the city became aware, through a representative of God who delivered God's message, that the judgment of God was upon them because of their evil ways. Therefore, having become aware, they turned from their evil ways. They repented—en masse.

I dare say that if the Silicon Valley is to see anything like what happened in Nineveh, its people must in some way become aware that their ways are evil. Evil? Clearly the valley is not evil in the way Nineveh was evil; it is not evil in the way the Islamic State is evil. Still, from a biblical perspective, its ways are evil nonetheless. Second, it must become aware that the judgment of God is upon it because of its evil ways.

Theologian and historian Richard Lovelace, who has studied revivals both in the Scriptures and in the rest of history, calls "awareness of the depth of sin" a "precondition for spiritual renewal."¹ You don't need a

bridge unless you have a gulf, and if you only have a gully, you can get across it all by yourself. If the people in the Valley became aware that there's a gulf between them and God because of the enormity of their sin, then they may come to realize that they need Christ. But really, who thinks there's a gulf anymore?

A God who winks

The Enlightenment, beginning in the latter part of the seventeenth century, touted the essential goodness of humanity. God was increasingly thought to be distant and entirely benevolent, not at all disappointed with, let alone angry with, humans. By the end of the nineteenth century, consciousness of sin had mostly eroded, along with awareness of God, even in the church. Which brings us to today, when talk of human depravity is essentially irrelevant, even laughable, and God, if he is thought to exist at all, is believed to wink at human shortcomings. Lovelace speaks of the effects of this "deception":

It is partially responsible not only for the general spiritual collapse of the church . . . but also for a great deal of apologetic weakness; for in a world in which the sovereign and holy God regularly employs plagues, famines, wars, disease and death as instruments to punish sin and bring mankind to repentance, the idolatrous image of God as pure benevolence cannot really be believed, let alone feared and worshiped in the manner prescribed by both the Old and New Testaments

The tension between God's holy righteousness and his compassionate mercy cannot be legitimately resolved by remolding his character into an image of pure benevolence as the church did in the nineteenth century. There is only one way that this contradiction can be removed: through the cross of Christ which reveals the severity of God's anger against sin and the depth of his compassion in paying its penalty through the vicarious sacrifice of his Son. In systems which resolve this tension by softening the character of God, Christ and his work become an addendum, and the spiritual darkness becomes complete because the true God has been abandoned for the worship of a magnified image of human tolerance.

Persons come to Christ initially for a variety of reasons, some of which are eccentric to their principal need for redemption: loneliness, a sense of meaninglessness in the godless life, suffering,

*fear and so on. Only those are lastingly converted, however, whose eventual motivation is to turn from their sin to God and receive the answer to sin in the work of Jesus Christ.*²

What is sin?

What then, is sin, particularly as it manifests itself here in the Silicon Valley? Lovelace again:

In its biblical definition, sin cannot be limited to isolated instances or patterns of wrongdoing; it is something much more akin to the psychological term complex: an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behavior deeply rooted in our alienation from God. Sin originated in the darkening of the human mind and heart as man turned from the truth about God to embrace a lie about him and consequently a whole universe of lies about his creation. Sinful thoughts, words and deeds flow forth from this darkened heart automatically and compulsively, as water from a polluted fountain . . .

*The human heart is now a reservoir of unconscious disordered motivation and response, of which unrenewed persons are unaware if left to themselves, for the “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).*³

Sinners in the hands of an angry God

If such a description of the human heart were to be embraced on a large scale in the Silicon Valley, if the people here became aware of the depth of sin, then a precondition for spiritual renewal would be met. Then what?

Then men and women of the Silicon Valley might feel the need—perhaps the desperate need—to do what Jesus urged men and women of Galilee to do with his first words in the gospel of Mark: *repent and believe in the gospel* (Mark 1:15). Note: Jesus does not simply urge people to believe; he also urges them to repent, to abandon other beliefs and ways. In fact, he urges them to repent before they believe. Likewise, Peter, told the men and women of Jerusalem, *Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*, and he urged them, *Save yourselves from this crooked generation* (Acts 2:38, 40). Likewise, Paul told the men of Athens, *The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from*

the dead (Acts 17:30–31). The words of Jesus, Peter, and Paul were not all that different from the words of Jonah, who told the men and women of Nineveh that God’s judgment was upon it.

Such words were not all that different from those of Jonathan Edwards, whose famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” on July 8, 1741, in Enfield, Connecticut, helped spur the greatest revival in North American history, the so-called “Great Awakening.” He told sinners that God was holding them over the pit of hell “much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire.” Edwards was interrupted throughout his sermon by people moaning and crying out, like the Philippian jailer, *What must I do to be saved?* (Acts 16:30)

What must we do?

So, should I start preaching like Edwards, and should all of you go walk through Silicon Valley, like Jonah, and proclaim that God’s judgment is upon it? I want to answer no, but before I do, I would observe that Jonah called out with the message that God gave him to deliver. No doubt, his message was received because it was God’s message, not his. If the word of the Lord came to us, as it came to Jonah, I hope that we would be obedient and say whatever it is that God gives us to say. Nevertheless, I assume that our message, should God give us a particular message, would be different from those delivered by Jonah and Jonathan Edwards. Our time and place are different from the Nineveh of Jonah’s day and the New England of Edwards’ day. And perhaps the word of the Lord will come to us, as it came to Jonah, for Jesus told his disciples not to concern themselves with what to say when they were arrested, *for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour* (Matthew 10:19).

Quite frankly, I don’t know what we should do. Therefore, I suggest we pray. Especially when we don’t know what to do, we should pray.

The Transforming the Bay with Christ gathering at our church in September featured inspiring presentations by Pat Gelsinger, CEO of VMware; John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church; Chip Ingram, pastor of New Venture Church; and Kevin Palau, president of the Luis Palau Association. What inspired me most, however, was that while a few hundred of us gathered in the auditorium, a smaller group met in Room A15 and prayed for the duration of the two-hour meeting.

So, we pray.

A prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would make us aware of the depth of our own sin, this organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs, and behavior deeply rooted in alienation from you. May we see you, high and lifted up, the train of your robe filling the temple, and may we hear the seraph cry out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And may we say, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man or woman of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Yet may we also see one of the seraphim flying to us, and may we feel the touch of the burning coal from the altar on our lips, and may we hear him say, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for. We pray not only that you would make us aware of the enormity of our sin but also of the enormity of the sacrifice of your Son for us so that you would make us increasingly thankful, and that we will be prepared to do whatever you ask of us, so that we would say, like Isaiah of old, "Here I am! Send me." The gulf is great, your grace greater still. Father, most people where we live are unaware of the depth of their sin and of the need for a Savior. In this light, first of all we confess our own apathy toward this state of affairs. People all around us are perishing, and we care more for ourselves and for protecting and nurturing our own advancement, whatever form such advancement may take. We care little for the gospel, except insofar as it benefits us, and we care much for ourselves. Forgive us, Father.

We confess, Father, that we don't even care enough to pray. So please, make us care enough to pray. And as we pray, break our hearts for the people all around us, who need Jesus so desperately and don't even know that they need him in the least.

We ask, Father, that you would make the people in the Silicon Valley aware of their sin, aware of the depth of their sin. Make them aware of the sin that lurks within, the ugly network of attitudes, beliefs, and behavior deeply rooted in alienation from you. By your Holy Spirit, convict them of sin and righteousness and judgment. Open their eyes so that they may see the terrifying gulf that separates

them, in their sin, from you, in your holiness. We know, Father, that you are not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance, that you desire all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Please, Father, open their eyes to see the awesome bridge that spans the gulf, the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior, that grants to all who believe in him forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We ask that the men, women, and children of the Silicon Valley, from the greatest of them to the least of them, will call out mightily to you and turn from their evil ways. May they even come to us, asking, "What must I do to be saved?" We ask that the Silicon Valley will not be overthrown but turned around.

We ask, Father, that you would make us ready—ready to do whatever you ask of us. If there is something that we should do—actions we should take, people we should approach, words we should say—please show us. Grant us, as you granted Jonah, a word from you that we may speak it. In that hour, give us what we are to say. We confess, Father, that we fear being perceived as fools or worse, as crackpots. Whatever you give us to share, give us the courage to share it.

In the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, amen.

What are the spiritual prospects for the Silicon Valley? Could a Nineveh-like awakening happen here? In the words of the king of Nineveh, *Who knows?*

Perhaps you're reading this, and reading about what happened in Nineveh, and reading the words of Jesus, Peter, and Paul, makes you ask, *What must I do to be saved?* If so, here's the answer, straight from the mouth of Jesus: *repent and believe in the gospel*, the good news that God has defeated evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and grants to all who believe forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

(Endnotes)

¹Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 75.

²Lovelace, 84–85, 97–98.

³Lovelace, 88–89.