



THE GOD WHO TURNS

What is the biggest decision you have ever had to make? If you think about it, every day of our lives is a series of decisions or turning points – some small, some not so:

- To tidy my bedroom, or not?
- To get on with my homework, or not?
- To order a curry, or not (that is a silly question!)?
- To apply for this job, or not?
- To go out with this person, or not?
- To try for another child, or not?
- To take early retirement, or not?
- To fall asleep during this sermon, or not?

In Jonah 3 we're introduced to a series of big decisions. What do they teach us about God's heart for a lost world? Let's take a look ...

Jonah 3

Nineveh was the largest city in the ancient world, with a population of over 100,000 people. It was so big (30 miles across) it would take you 3 whole days to walk from one side to the other, and its walls were so thick (50 feet) you could ride 6 chariots abreast along its ramparts. It had the tallest

temple-towers or ziggurats in the Middle East at that time, and eventually it became home to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (so not in Babylon after all). It was also the capital of an empire that bullied everyone from Egypt and Turkey all the way to central Iran.

The Assyrians thought, "We're the centre of the cosmos."

And then Jonah turns up, having walked 1000 miles, hair frazzled, skin caked in salt and baked by the sun, and smelling like a fishmonger's (and the people of Nineveh may have seen this as a sign in itself. They believed their civilization was given to them by 7 sages, half-men / half-fish, who emerged from the sea, a bit like ... Jonah). And Jonah walks through the city, shouting, "40 more days, and Nineveh will be destroyed!" No attempts to build relationships, no inviting people to an Alpha Course or suchlike. Not even "turn or burn!" Just "*B-U-R-N!*" (A reminder that God can use even the lousiest of messengers – so be encouraged.)

But here's the thing:

It *wasn't* destroyed.

The Assyrians took Jonah's message to heart, from the highest to the lowest. Even the animals were clothed in sackcloth! And God gave the Assyrians a stay of execution. Which means that Jonah got it wrong, right? Not exactly. You see, in Hebrew the word for "destroyed" here, *haphak*, literally means 'overturned', 'flipped over', 'tipped upside-down.' The word can be interpreted in 2 very different ways – destruction, or transformation. Now obviously Jonah had destruction in mind. But God? He was giving them a choice. Destruction, or transformation.

And the Assyrians chose ... transformation.

Now the choice God gives to the Assyrians He gives to all of us – the whole world. He says to every single one of us, "Turn to Me, and live for Me and others, before it's too late." And there's a word that's used in vs8-9 to get this thought across: the word *shuv* (that's 'shoov', not 'shove!'). It means 'to turn'; 'revolve'; 'change direction.' Now if you're thinking, "Well, I've already done that: I'm already a Christian," understand that this *shuv* thing applies to all of us. Everyone in this chapter has to turn, in some way: everyone has a decision to make.

What do I mean? Well, who turns last in this chapter?

1) God turns. We're told at the end of this chapter that "*Yahveh* repented over the evil (or trouble) that He had declared." I.e. God changes His mind (or appears to) and shows mercy and compassion to the people of Assyria. But it doesn't happen in isolation – it's part of a chain-reaction, a process. Why does God turn? Because ...

2) Nineveh turns. We're told that the King of Nineveh issued a decree that the whole city should turn from its sin, in a change of attitude – and action (interestingly, one of the few times that Assyria was at peace with her neighbours was during the reign of King Ashurdanil – at the time of Jonah). And why do they turn? Because ...

3) Jonah turns. At the beginning of the book, Jonah turns from Nineveh (where *God* wanted him to go) to Tarshish (where *he* wanted to go). In this chapter, Jonah turns from Tarshish (where *he* wanted to go) to Nineveh (where *God* wanted him to go). I.e. he relents and says 'yes' to God. But why does Jonah turn? Because ...

4) God turns. It sounds like circular reasoning, but the process began because God spoke to Jonah in the first place. God appears to respond to the decisions we make, but in reality, He has already determined what He is going to do, from start to finish. Yes, He still gives us a choice in the matter, but the driver isn't hate. It's *love*.

So, God turns to people when people turn to Him, and people turn to God when we turn to them, and we turn to them because ... God has turned to them. The Apostle Paul makes a similar point in Romans 10:14-15.

Think of it like a Mexican Wave. When it comes to mission, we *all* have some turning to do. A part to play.

The Revolution Now Begin ...

So, what are we to do with this? There are actually 2 messages here, depending on where you're coming from:

- **If you're a not-yet Christian**, Jesus calls you to make the ultimate decision: to turn to Him. And it's a life-or-death situation, just as it was in Nineveh. As Jesus said, "Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). To reject Jesus is to reject life – and that is a self-destructive act.
- **If you're an already-Christian**, then God calls you to make the second ultimate decision: to turn to *them*. What God said to Jonah Jesus says to all of us: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). It might mean choosing to drop God into a conversation; or choosing to invite a friend to an MFC event; or choosing to spend time with a person when it would be far easier not to. But again, you have to *choose* to do it.

Either way, the point is this: God calls us all to do what He does – to play our part in a revolution. Because He is the God who *turns* – and He calls everyone to turn with Him.

Will *you*?