

SERIES: The Battle of the Wills: A Study of the Book of Jonah

SERMON: *Mission Impossible?!¹*

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 3

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Have you ever noticed that sometimes kids are learning things in school that you need to learn as an adult? It seems this is always the case with one of my kids. Once my kids reach the second grade they are required to memorize this motto at school: *Obey all the way, right away, with a good attitude, every day.* I think the reason they are required to memorize this is because it doesn't come natural (at least not with my kids). Instead of obeying all the way kids are prone to obeying partially. When asked to clean their room kids stuff things under the bed and in the closet. Instead of obeying right away kids say, "I'll do it later." Do any of you have kids who obey with a good attitude every day? If you do, let's talk after service. Kids don't *obey all the way, right away, with a good attitude, every day* naturally. But neither do we. We struggle with obedience as well. That's one reason we have been studying the book of Jonah.

The book of Jonah is a story about competing wills; the battle between the will of God and the will of Jonah. Here are two things we have learned so far from chapters 1-2:

- To live life within the will of God one must respond obediently to the Word of God. (Ch. 1)
- To live life within the will of God one must respond authentically in conformity to the Word of God. (Ch. 2)

Jonah was not obedient to the Word of God. Instead Jonah ran from God. And Jonah did not respond authentically. Instead Jonah has tried to get God to see things his way. Jonah knows God's Word very well, but Jonah doesn't live God's Word very well. We have a lot in common with Jonah. We too know the Word of God well, but we don't always live out the Word of God in our lives. And we, like Jonah, are quite comfortable keeping the love of God to ourselves and not sharing it with others.

For the last two weeks I've been saying, "we don't do evangelism enough" but what an encouragement that in the last week I've heard numerous stories of how God is working through our people. This candle is lit this morning because I've heard of people like Matt Shoger who prayed with three boys to receive Christ at an FCA camp this week; and the news that Patsy May's 86-year old mother prayed to receive Christ; and that eight women received Christ through the ministry of Choices Medical Center in the last couple weeks; and that of one of my good friends is sharing the gospel with the contractor working on her house; and the story of two friends who have started an evangelistic Bible study on their block. God is working and we have an opportunity to participate in God's will. Be encouraged.

Here's my sermon in a sentence: ***To live within the will of God one must respond completely to the Word of God.***

¹ The titles of the series and sermon are used by permission of Dr. Dennis Magary, Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Language at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Most of the material in this sermon comes from and/or is influenced directly by Dr. Magary's Hebrew exegesis class which I took at TEDS during the summer of 2009 and from sermons Dr. Magary gave in July 2003.

We've been comparing Jonah to just about everything and everybody in this story so far. We've compared Jonah with the sailors and with the fish. And we've found everybody and everything responding more appropriately to God than Jonah. This morning we're going to compare Jonah with the Ninevites. In doing that we'll learn three things.

The first principle we learn is that *to respond completely we must fully obey. (1-4)*

If you will remember we left Jonah last week drenched in vomit after the fish hurled him to dry land. Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 made it clear he wanted to be back in Israel. Did God answer Jonah's prayer? Let's look at chapter 3 and see.

3:1-2 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."

God didn't answer Jonah's prayer to go back to Israel. God wants Jonah in Nineveh. Nothing has changed with God since chapter 1, the commands in chapter 1 and in chapter 3 are essentially the same: *Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.* God has simply "hit the reset button" in chapter 3. God hasn't changed his mind about Nineveh and God hasn't changed his mind about using Jonah to reach Nineveh. The question is, "has Jonah changed?" Jonah has been trying to get away from the will of God. But we are beginning to see that God has more ways of accomplishing his will than Jonah has of avoiding it.

A lot of people interpret the repetition of these commands as God giving Jonah a second chance. But as I've said the last two weeks, this book is not about 2nd chances. This book is about Nineveh getting a 1st chance.² And so God says again, *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against³ it the message that I tell you."*

How did Jonah do with his second call to *arise, go, and call out*? Let's look at the first part of verse 3. We've been using the ESV as a translation throughout this series and will continue to do so today. But on this verse I want to look at the NIV. Many of you are following along in the NIV, and it's quite different than the ESV in this verse.

3:3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh...

When we read the NIV here we breathe a sigh of relief. Finally, we see the Jonah we've all grown up knowing; the Jonah who went the wrong way in the beginning, but who eventually repents and obeys God. Jonah finally obeys, *according to the NIV*, but does he obey in reality? Generally speaking I like the NIV, but this translation in verse 3 is really misleading at best. The text doesn't say "obey!" The text says "arose and went." Look at the ESV here:

3:3 *So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD...*

² In verses 1-2 God is refocusing Jonah on the original mission; God's mission and God's will. Jonah has been focusing on himself. If you'll remember Jonah referred to himself with the 1st person personal pronoun 25 times in chapter 2. In 3:2 God says, *"call out against it the message that I tell you."* This is the first time the 1st person personal pronoun is used to refer to God in the entire book. This is a literary device used to show that there is a refocusing going on in chapter 3.

³ This is actually an example of the ESV getting it wrong, where the NIV gets it right. "Proclaim to it" is correct. The preposition changes from chapter 1 ("against") to chapter 3 ("to").

I would encourage you to write in your margin “arose and went,” next to the word “obey.”

The translators of the NIV are giving us their interpretation, not a translation. Their reason for doing this is logical: Since the literal command in verse 2 is “Arise, go,” they conclude that Jonah’s “arising” and “going” in verse 3 equals obedience. But did Jonah really obey? Well, yes and no. Jonah obeyed, but he didn’t obey fully.

I think now would be a good place to let you know that my conclusions about Jonah are not shared by all people. I’ve come to my conclusions through serious study and my conclusions are shared by some scholars, but there are respected scholars who would disagree with my conclusions. If you want to read a commentary that puts forward a much more sympathetic view of Jonah I would recommend Bruckner⁴ in the NIV Application Commentary series. You can find this commentary in our library.

With that being said let me show you the three reasons why I arrive at my conclusion that Jonah didn’t obey fully.

1) There are holes in Jonah’s “obedience.” (2-4)

Let’s look closely at verses 2-4. Notice, in verse 2 we find the three commands. In verses 3-4 we find the responses to these commands.

3:2-4 *"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!"*

Let’s see how well Jonah obeyed. In verse 2 Jonah is commanded to *arise*. In verse 3 Jonah *arose*. That’s obedience. In verse 2 Jonah is commanded to *go to Nineveh*. In verse 3 Jonah *went to Nineveh*. That’s obedience. And note that verse 3 also tells us that Jonah’s arising and going were *according to the word of the LORD*. So far, so good.

In verse 2 Jonah is commanded to *call out against* [Nineveh]. In verse 4 Jonah calls out. But in verse 2 Jonah is commanded specifically to call out against [Nineveh] *the message that I tell you*. Verse 4 gives us no indication that the message Jonah gave was the message given to him by God. Also notice that there is no mention in verse 4 that Jonah’s calling out was *according to the word of the LORD* like we were told concerning Jonah’s arising and going.

Jonah has finally obeyed, but it seems to me that he is not obeying fully. Jonah has called out and has given a message, but has he given the message the LORD gave him? I’ll answer this question later, but for now let’s look at the second reason I conclude that Jonah doesn’t obey fully.

2) Jonah only *began* to obey. (4a)

Look at the beginning of verse 4.

3:4a *Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.*

⁴ Bruckner, James K. *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text-- to Contemporary Life*. NIV application commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2004.

Verse 3 tells us that Nineveh was a three day's journey. But the narrator tells us in verse 4 that Jonah only went one day's journey into the city before he "called out." I think the writer is picking his words carefully to emphasize the partial obedience of Jonah here. Also notice the main verb here is actually "began." The writer could have said, "He went into the city," but it says, "He *began* to go." Everything in verse 4 is minimal. His journey into the city is minimal, and his message is also minimal. That brings me to my last reason why I feel that Jonah's obedience was only partial obedience.

3) Jonah's message was incomplete. (4b)

Look at the second half of verse 4. What is the gospel according to Jonah?

3:4b *And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

What?! Is this really the message that God gave to Jonah? The message doesn't even mention God. If this is the message from God is it the whole message? Did God only send Jonah to pull the pin and leave? Or is there more? Is there anything the Ninevites can do in response to this message? According to the message, they have 40 days, but Jonah doesn't tell them what to do during those 40 days; is there anything they can do?⁵

In the OT when a prophet brings a message of destruction there are normally two other components to that message. I believe Jonah is intentionally leaving out these two components in his message to the Ninevites. Let's look at a couple examples...

Jeremiah 18:7-8

*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.*

Joel 2:11b-13

*For **the day of the LORD** is great and very awesome; **who can endure it?** "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "**return to me** with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." **Return to the LORD** your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and **he relents over disaster**.*

There seems to be a three part message that is extended to Israel and to "the nations" throughout Scripture. Could it be God's message for the Ninevites was also a 3 part message? Maybe it would look something like this:

1. Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown
2. But if you repent
3. God will relent

It seems that Jonah knows this full message, but he chooses to not share it with the Ninevites. Look at Jonah 4:2 where we find him complaining to God:

⁵ Note that the king tells them what to do in verses 7-9.

4:2b *I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*

We know Jonah knew his Bible and Jonah knew this message. This message runs throughout the OT. But Jonah leaves this part of the message out.⁶ Jonah has obeyed God, but he doesn't obey fully.

We must obey God fully. There are many areas we could apply this, but let's continue to look at the topic of evangelism, that we've addressed over the last two weeks. Hopefully I've made it clear to you over the last two weeks that you need to share the love of Jesus with the people in your life if you're going to live in the will of God. But I haven't said much about what your message should be.

Jonah was guilty of giving an incomplete message. He focused on the wrath of God, but he neglected to tell the Ninevites how to respond and he neglected to tell them about the character of God; God is a God of love as well as a God of judgment.

I think we may be guilty of the opposite error in the 21st century. We focus on the love of God and the forgiveness he offers through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, but we don't spend enough time talking about sin and the eternal consequences of sin. All have sinned and fall short of God's holy standard (Rom 3:23) and the penalty for sin is eternal separation from God in hell (Rom 6:23). We don't hear too many sermons on hell anymore (it's too offensive to people – well our sin is offensive to God). If people are going to understand what forgiveness is, they need to first understand they need forgiveness. If we're going to share the good news we have to share the bad news as well.

I've done a lot of flying lately. But I have to confess I don't listen to the flight attendant's preflight safety speech. The flight attendant normally says, "Please direct your attention to the front of the cabin for a brief safety demonstration." And I promptly direct my attention back to the book I'm reading.

But what if my flight attendant was like Jonah? What if the first thing she said was, "yet 40 minutes and this plane shall be thrown into Lake Michigan." Do you think I would be ready to listen to the preflight safety speech? I would want to know what to do. And if the flight attendant failed to tell me what to do I would be angry; I would be scrambling to figure out what to do. I would be getting the safety card out of the seat pocket in front of me for sure.

We have to tell people what to do to be saved. Jonah didn't do that! But we also have to tell people the plane is going down. The safety speech has limited impact unless we really believe there is a possibility that the plane might crash. The good news has little impact if we don't understand the bad news.

⁶ This message is introduced explicitly in Exodus 34:6-7. One of the reasons he leaves it out is Jonah doesn't care about the Ninevites; we have seen throughout the book so far that Jonah doesn't care about what God cares about. Look at the second half of verse 3. The ESV says, "*Nineveh was an exceedingly great city...*" The ESV footnote says that in the Hebrew this should literally read, "*Nineveh was a great city to God.*" The NIV has translated this phrase "*Now Nineveh was a very important city.*" The NIV gets the interpretation right. It should probably read, "*Nineveh was a very important city to God.*" The point is this: Nineveh matters to God, but Nineveh doesn't matter to Jonah. If Nineveh really matters to God would he only give a message of destruction for them?

The gospel says Jesus died to pay for our sins and if we believe in Jesus we don't have to spend eternity separated from God; we'll spend eternity with God. But if someone doesn't believe that their sin is separating them from God the cross has no relevance to their life. If we really love people we need to let them know what Jesus has done for them, but we also need to let people know why Jesus is relevant to them – because the plane of their life is going down and they need rescued from imminent and eternal death! We need to give people a full message so they have the opportunity to give a full response.

We've seen how Jonah responds to God in verses 1-4. Now let's look at how the Ninevites respond to God.

The second principle we learn is that *to respond completely we must fully repent. (5-9)*

3:5 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.

Verse 5 is the result of Jonah's message?! But how could they believe? How did they even know what to do? They didn't have enough information. This is amazing. How in the world did they believe God if they didn't get God's message? All Jonah told them was that the plane was going down. They must have found the safety card somewhere. Verse 5 is a summary of what follows in verses 6-9; verses 6-9 give us the details. Let's look at the details to see if we can learn more.

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. 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.⁷ 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."

So, the word reached the king and he responded. Then he got the word out to the people who in turn responded as well. But how did the word reach the king? And what word reached the king? Did Jonah's message reach the king? Or did God's message reach the king? I don't know, but somehow the king receives enough information to give an appropriate response. Remember what we learned from chapter 1? The will of God will be accomplished in spite of human disobedience. That's what I think is going on here. The sailors didn't have much of a message either and they repented. That's why I've titled this sermon Mission Impossible?! On the one hand it seems impossible that these violent sinners could come to faith in God. But it seems especially impossible in light of the message Jonah gave them.

Let's look a little closer at the king's response to see how we need to respond.

3:6 The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose...

⁷ Just like the fish in 1:17, we see animals responding here. This is another contrast to Jonah.

There is our word “arise” again.⁸ It’s being used here to contrast the king to Jonah.

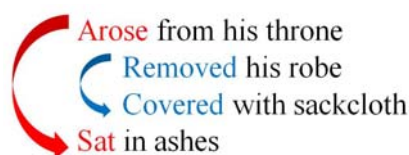
The Word of the LORD came to Jonah in 1:2, “Arise!” And in 1:3 he arose.⁹ He arose to flee from the presence of God; he arose to disobey God. Jonah’s disobedience was described by the author as a descent in 1:3-5 – Jonah “went down” to Joppa, he “went down” onto the boat, “went down” into the boat. And then we see that he “went down” to the bottom of the Mediterranean in 2:6. Jonah is supposed to be arising, but chapters 1-2 are a drawn out account of how Jonah is descending in disobedience to the LORD.

In 3:2 the Word of the LORD comes to Jonah a second time calling him to arise. In 3:3 he arises and obeys, even though it was only partial obedience. It has taken two chapters of drama before this happens. The Ninevites, on the other hand, are given 40 days to respond, but they respond immediately.

After the word of the LORD comes to the king we are told in 3:6 that he *arose*.¹⁰ Like Jonah the king arises to descend. But his descent is an appropriate response to the word of the LORD; he humbles himself and repents. He arose, removed his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes.¹¹

But there is more to this descent. Look closely at the word choice of the writer.

3:6 The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.



The words show the king repented fully. He arose from his throne and removed his robe. The king’s throne and robe represent his authority. The king is doing here what Jonah has yet to do – he’s relinquishing control. Then he covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. Sackcloth and ashes are symbols for humility. But that’s not all. Sackcloth and ashes are also symbols for mourning. The king is mourning for his sin and the sin of the nation.

But there is something else interesting about the choice of these four verbs. Notice the first and the last verbs correspond. The king rose from his throne, and he sat in ashes; he stood up in order to sit down. Notice also the correlation between the second and the third verbs. The king

⁸ I don’t know why some translations leave this word out, it seems so important. The NIV includes it here, but excludes it from its 5 other occurrences in the book (1:2, 3, 6; 3:1, 2).

⁹ The word of the Lord was actually followed by a string of 5 verbs. All 5 describe Jonah’s disobedient response to God’s Word.

¹⁰ After the word of the Lord comes to the king there are also a string of verbs that follow. But these verbs are describing his obedient response.

¹¹ Here is another contrast. In 1:6 the captain tells Jonah to arise and call out to his God for deliverance from death, but Jonah refuses. In 3:6 we see the king actually arising and telling the people to call out to God for deliverance from death, and they do (verses 8-9).

removed his robe and covered himself with sackcloth; he took something off in order to put something on.¹² The king is making a 180 degree turn. This is repentance.

His posture has changed; his position has changed. He has responded appropriately to the Word of God. He has relinquished control of his life, and has placed his life in the hands of God. His life has been changed in response to the word of God.

What about us? This is the kind of repentance that we need in our lives. When the king hears the Word of God it changes his life. How much more should the Word of God change the lives of those of us who know Jesus?¹³

We hear the word of God preached every week and hopefully read it every day. But is this word getting past our heads and into our hearts? Is it transforming our lives? When people see us do they see full obedience to the word or do they see partial obedience. Full, complete obedience lets people know that we are the objects of God's grace and that we trust him and that we take him at his word. Are we changed? Is the word getting in to our lives?

I think you all agree that we are called to be a witness. We can be a witness with our words, but we also need to be a witness with our lives. I'm not sure the world objects to the Bible on a merely intellectual level. I think their real objection is they don't believe it works; they don't see it changing those of us who do believe it. Perhaps they would believe the message if they saw it doing something in our lives. But what do they see? Maybe I can't speak for you, but generally, we live just like they do. We spend our money just like they do. We divorce at the same rate they do. We value the same things they value in the workplace – moving our way up, pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps. These are the things that are important to us. So when we say, "Jesus is our only hope" they are thinking "Are you kidding me? You're worse off than I am."

Is God changing your life? Is his word getting into you? And if not, why? Let's look at the third principle and maybe we will get some answers.

The third principle we learn is that *to respond completely we must fully trust in God's character. (9-10)*

The repentance that starts with the king is extended to all of Nineveh. He insists that the whole city call out to God and mourn for their sin. But what does the king hope will happen as a result of this repentance and mourning? Look with me at the last part of verse 8 and verse 9.

3:8b-9 *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."*

¹² This is a chiastic structure.

¹³ Look at Matthew 12:41 – here we find Jesus talking to the Pharisees. *The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.* The Pharisees were not responding to Jesus. The Ninevites responded to Jonah. How much more should the Pharisees respond to Jesus, who is much greater than Jonah? And how much more should we respond and be changed by Jesus, the very Word of God?

The king doesn't even know if this repentance will work. After all, nobody has told him. And so he cries out in desperation, "*Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.*"

Who knows? Who *knows*?! Well Jonah knows.
 Jonah knows, but he's not talking!
 Jonah knows, but he's not responding!
 Jonah knows, but he's not repenting!
 The king knows nothing, and he issues a proclamation.
 The king knows nothing, and he responds in humility.
 The king knows nothing, and he repents.

Jonah is supposed to be calling out to the Ninevites, but do you see what's happening here? This pagan king is fulfilling the role of a prophet. He's doing what Jonah is supposed to be doing. And people are listening because people want to know what to do. People want to know how to respond to God. But are we telling them or do they have to hear it somewhere else? The king knows nothing but look at how he responds. He's staking his whole life on the mercy of God. He is doing here what the sailors did in chapter 1; he realizes the desperation of his situation and puts his full confidence in the mercy of God. He puts his full trust in the character of God. And what is the result?

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.*

God didn't destroy Nineveh. And this is what we expect in this story because this is what God does when people repent. This is the character of God. The Ninevites turned from their evil ways and toward God, and so God turned away from his fierce anger.¹⁴

This is the Good News! This is the hope we have in Jesus Christ. We are sinners, who fail everyday. But Jesus paid the price for our sin. If we turn to Jesus in repentance then God turns from his wrath and turns towards us in love. And this is the message of hope we get to share with others!

One amazing thing in this book is that God actually uses Jonah. Jonah is unfaithful, Jonah does a lousy job of sharing the gospel, and Jonah is constantly fighting God, but God used Jonah to bring the sailors and the Ninevites to faith. I guess I'm encouraged by that. If God can use Jonah, God can use us. And if God is this patient with Jonah then surely he'll be patient with us.

I find it sad that Jonah is absent at the climax of both chapter 1 and 3 when the sailors and the Ninevites come to faith in God. God uses Jonah, but Jonah missed out on a fulfilling life by

¹⁴ I find it interesting that the text uses the same word for the repentance of the Ninevites as it does for the relenting of God. The word is turn. Some interpret this verse as an indication that God changes his mind (some translations like the NLT would agree), but I don't think that's what's going on here. If Jonah's message was God's message (destruction only) then I can see how you could come to that conclusion. But if God's message was the 3 part message that we see in the rest of the OT: 1) Disaster, 2) But if you repent, 3) God will relent, then God's "turning" is in keeping with his Word. If God acts according to his Word then he's not changing his mind.

choosing to not participate in what God was doing. I also find it sad that so many of us miss out on what God is doing around us.

God is working and he invites us to participate. But instead we don't obey *all the way, right away, with a good attitude, everyday*. Thankfully, God is patient with us. He's patient with us in our half-hearted devotion to him. And that's where I feel I am a lot of the time. I don't always respond to the Word of God. I've got one foot in the Word and one foot in the world. I don't respond completely, I don't repent completely. I'm half-hearted. Friends, God wants more for our lives. He wants us to put our full faith in him.

But we're not left on our own...

Jonah went down to Joppa. Jonah went down onto the boat. Jonah went down into the boat. Jonah went down into the bottom of the sea. Jonah descended in disobedience to God.

The king went down as well. He arose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. The king of Nineveh descended hoping he would be lifted up; he went down in humility.

The King of the universe descended as well. Jesus came down to lift us up in victory. We are descending like Jonah, but he has descended deeper than our sin. He wants us to live our lives for him and he is infinitely patient with us. He wants to transform us and he wants to use us to transform others. Will you respond to the will of God by participating fully and completely in his word? It's my prayer for this church that we would. Don't let God's word just hang out in your mind. Allow him to transform you. We are so much like Jonah, but God wants us to be just like Jesus. Give yourself to him completely.

Don't miss out by holding back!

References

Tucker, W. Dennis. *Jonah: a handbook on the Hebrew text*. Baylor handbook on the Hebrew Bible series. Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2006.