

Jonah: *The Nature of Repentance*
Jonah 3:4-10

As we continue on in the book of Jonah, we recently looked at the origin of Nineveh's repentance following the short sermon preached by the misfit prophet. Having heard Jonah proclaim, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown," we noted that the citizens of Nineveh were motivated to repent by the fear of God's judgment as well as the hope of God's unmerited mercy. We noted that the citizens were also motivated by the sign of Jonah, for they had likely heard that this was the prophet who had been thrown into the deep as a sacrifice and yet now had risen and come to their city with the proclamation of God's imminent justice.

This morning, we're going to look at the same passage of scripture, but our goal is to learn what we can regarding the nature of Nineveh's repentance and how God responds to the city's repentance. So, please stand and let us once again read Jonah 3:4-10.

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. ⁶The 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." ¹⁰When 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.

The message this morning will fall under four subheadings: 1) The Repentance of the People; 2) The Repentance of the King; 3) The Command to Turn; 4) God's Response to Nineveh's Repentance

I. The Repentance of the People

Before we get started, we need to remember a few things to appreciate what we are reading here in Jonah 3 and to grasp the radical importance of this story.

First of all, please remember that as far as the first ancient Jewish audience is concerned, there has never been a more violent, ruthless nation than the Assyrian Empire, and Nineveh was the leading city of Assyria. The modern comparison would be Berlin, Germany in 1941 at the height of the Nazi Regime—that's how universally accepted it was that Nineveh was the capital city of EVIL. We must also remember that the Assyrians were a constant threat to Israel, and they were considered the mortal enemies of Israel.

Second, we must remember why Jonah was sent to Nineveh in the first place. Back in chapter one God had said to Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." We can only conclude that the evil in Nineveh had become so acute that God was determined to bring about a change. Either the city would repent within 40 days, or the city would be overthrown.

Finally, we must remember that the Ninevites were a heathen people with little to no exposure to God's law and covenants. They were not God's "chosen people" per se. They qualified as one of "the nations" to whom Israel was to serve as a light and a testimony of God's righteousness and steadfast love.

With all of that context in mind, our expectations for Nineveh's response to Jonah's message are pretty low, right? Like Jonah, we would not expect this mighty city of heathen, violent people to give a rip about Jonah's prophecy of imminent doom. We would expect them to heckle the Jewish prophet or beat him or kill him or, at the least, ignore him. But that's not what we read here in Jonah 3. What we learn is that "The people believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, for the greatest of them to the least of them."

So how are to understand the nature of Nineveh's repentance? The first aspect of the people's repentance is perhaps the most significant, and it's simply this: they believed God. All true repentance begins with believing God. If we truly believe God regarding His law, His judgments, our accountability at the end of the age, and His unmerited love for sinners as demonstrated by Christ on the cross, we will be those who repent. However, the inverse is also true: our refusal to repent is a direct indicator that we don't believe God.

Think about it: we act upon what we believe. Back in 2020, it was very obvious to observe those who believed that the Covid virus was a real threat to human life, and those who did not. Those who believed that Covid was lethal to themselves, or others were super-vigilant about wearing masks, avoiding crowds, washing their hands, and social distancing. When vaccines were promoted, they were the first to get vaccinated.

Those who did not believe that Covid was lethal behaved very differently. They didn't wear masks, they didn't care about or practice social distancing, and they didn't care to get vaccinated.

Now, I'm not suggesting one group was right and the other was wrong...don't get triggered out! I am simply pointing out the obvious: what we believe to be true is obvious by our attitudes, choices, and behaviors.

If you tell me that you believe God, but then you are passively indifferent about your sinful behavior, it would be the equivalent of telling me that you believe the stove is hot, and then placing your hand on the burner. You clearly would not place your hand on the burner if you believed the stove was hot; you clearly would not be indifferent about your sin if you believed God.

So how did this large city of violent heathen come to believe God? Jonah preached the wrath of God; the Holy Spirit came upon the city; and their eyes were opened. For the first time, the citizens of Nineveh saw their human, sinful condition in light of God's judgment, and it led them to repent.

Secondly, we must note that the Ninevites' repentance affected the entire social spectrum. The text states that the citizens of Nineveh repented "from the greatest to the least." Only the Spirit of God through the Word of God can cause people across the entire social spectrum to see their sin and repent. Apart from the power of God's Word, one group of citizens will inevitably blame another group for the city's problems. The people in the suburbs will blame the urban core dwellers for the increasing rates of violence and crime. The people in the urban core will blame the city leaders for their neglect and their unwillingness to apply resources to meet the needs of the poor. The city leaders will blame the suburb dwellers for tax evasion that cripples their ability to keep up the city's infrastructure, and so it goes. Each segment of the social spectrum blames the other. But note how, by the power of God's Word, the entire social spectrum repents. The entire city participates in two outward practices of repentance.

First, the citizens of Nineveh who hear the daunting message of Jonah call for a fast. Fasting, which is the denial of the essential appetite to eat and drink, represents the serious nature of Nineveh's repentance. The opposite of fasting is indulgence. I'm sure you would agree that whenever we indulge our appetites, we are not in any real posture of repentance. I know that when I indulge my appetite for lunch later on this afternoon, I will soon be in the posture of taking a nap! So fasting is an outward expression of our inward repentance because we are denying our bodies the indulgence of satisfaction. We are committing to abstain out of our sorrow for our sin. The longer we fast, the more desperate we become for God's mercy and forgiveness because our bodies begin to experience the remorse and brokenness of our repentant souls. If you ever watched the movie called *The Mission*, Robert De Niro's character goes into a deep season of repentance after he kills his own brother out of anger. He refuses to eat and almost dies before he finally accepts God's forgiveness. That is the picture here. Sincere grief over their sin sweeps across the city, and the citizens call for a fast among themselves.

Secondly, the citizens don sackcloth. Sackcloth was exactly what it sounds like: wearing sackcloth was to make a garment out of the materials that comprised sacks for carrying vegetables or grain. Think about a big, burlap bag of potatoes. Take that empty bag, cut out a hole for your head and two holes for your arms, and that's the image here. It's an outward sign of humility. A person who wears sackcloth is publicly grieving; publicly repenting; and by wearing sackcloth they are setting aside any kind of status or attempt to "look good" in the eyes of others.

Now, note that the first reference to the citywide repentance simply states that "the people of Nineveh" believed God, called for a fast, and donned sackcloth. But note, it was not only the common people of Nineveh who believed God and repented...it was also Nineveh's king.

II. The Repentance of the King

In vs. 6 we read, "The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself in sackcloth, and sat in ashes." It's important to observe that the king did not even see or hear Jonah directly, and yet when the word reaches the king, he immediately vacates his seat of privilege; he removes his royal robe; he joins the rest of the city

in donning sackcloth; and then goes even one step further and sits in ashes. Ashes represented utter destruction and loss; so when one poured ashes on one's head or sat in ashes, it was another outward expression of grief, loss, and...in this case...repentance. The king's behavior would lead us to believe that he had prior exposure to Jewish customs since donning sackcloth and applying ashes was a famously Jewish practice.

The king also takes things a step further. Exercising his office and his responsibility to lead his people, the king issues an edict for the whole city, ensuring that those who did not hear Jonah directly would get the word and participate. The edict stated, "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."

Note that the king makes the fasting and donning of sackcloth a formal reality for the whole city. This makes perfect sense. Since Jonah's prophetic condemnation was against the city of Nineveh, the king ensures that the whole city of Nineveh is responsible for repenting and calling out to God for mercy. That means every citizen, and all the animals as well!

Now, I know some of you can't help but chuckle at the thought of animals fasting and wearing sackcloth. And we might even assume that the king was urging the animals to cry out mightily to God as well as the humans!

So how are we to understand the inclusion of animals in the king's edict of repentance? Well, we might assume that the king was familiar with the story of Noah, right? When God declared His imminent justice upon the earth to Noah in Genesis 5, God's justice was going to wipe out both humans and animals. At the same time, God chose to save some humans and some animals, which may explain the king's urgent edict for both humans and animals to participate in outward signs of repentance. The citizens were dependent upon the animals for food, transportation, labor, and battle. If God were to take out the animals, there would be little hope for the survival of the city.

Let me pause here to note that we don't know much about what was going on in Nineveh, but there is a logical observation we can make that might give us some further insight here. It is a well-known fact that evil, and violence are corrosive to a society. We would be foolish to assume that Nineveh's evil and violence was limited to their behavior towards outsiders, while the rest of the time they all got along swimmingly as citizens. That's never the case. Evil and violence are corrosive to those who engage in such behaviors...that tendency is built into the way God made the world. The more we engage in evil and violence, the more it defiles us, corrupts our children, unravels our economy, spoils the environment, and potentially influences the way we treat animals.

For example, go and visit our dog at the West home and you'll find a pet who is loved, healthy, cherished, and lives a pretty plush life. Go and visit the dog who is chained up in the backyard of a crack-addict, and you'll find a dog that is half-starved, neglected, and likely a

danger to other dogs and even other humans. Evil affects every aspect of a society, and the evil of Nineveh had become so acute that it “rose up” before God.

As silly as it might seem, we should acknowledge that animals share God’s creation with us, and the plight of animals is often dependent upon the moral behavior of humans. Although animals are not morally accountable creatures, they are still God’s creation, and according to Paul in Romans 8, “the whole creation has been groaning together” due to sin. We should not think that the animals are spared the effects of the Fall... all of the creation groans, and so all of the creation is looking to God for His redemption of what has been lost due to sin. God’s redemptive work begins to take effect in a city that repents, and that change of heart and behavior will bless both the people and the animals.

III. The Command to Turn

Now, there is one more aspect to the king’s edict that is critically important. In addition to calling for a fast and the donning of sackcloth for people and animals, the king commands the citizens to “turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.” The king understands that repentance is not simply a matter of religious, outward rituals. Fasting and wearing sackcloth accomplishes nothing if not accompanied by a turn in behavior. Clearly the king is aware of the corrosive, habitual practices of evil and violence that have been going on in his city. So, when the Word of God comes to the king, he doesn’t need a lot of convincing that the city of Nineveh is vulnerable to be overthrown due to the longstanding consequences of their evil and violent tendencies. So, the king commands the citizens to literally turn from their evil intentions and the violence they had been planning towards others.

This command to turn in terms of social justice, this call to repent in a way that would lead to changed behavior and justice for the oppressed, immediately brings to mind Isaiah 58 where God laments that the people of Israel regularly go about their religious practice of fasting while all the while engaging in practices of evil and violence. Beginning in vs. 3 the citizens of Israel complain:

“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it?”

God then answers, “Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.” God then goes on to describe the kind of fasting and repentance that He is looking for from His people in vss. 6-11:

Is not this the kind of fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour out yourself for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as noonday. And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places...

Israel had become a complacent society filled with hypocrisy. They assumed God's blessings while failing to turn from their evil and violent ways. Then they couldn't figure out why God was no longer protecting them from conquest. They couldn't understand why God was turning away from their prayers.

Go back and read the prophets and you'll find numerous passages where God warns Israel and Judah to turn, to repent, to enact justice for the orphan and widow, to care for the poor and the foreigner, and He threatens them repeatedly that justice is coming...just as God has threatened Nineveh. But here's the irony we simply cannot miss: the heathen Ninevites repent and actually TURN from their evil and violent ways, but the "people of God" do not.

And that leads us to my fourth and final subheading:

IV. God's Response to Nineveh's Repentance

In vs. 10 we read God's response to Nineveh's repentance: 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.

There are several things we can observe about this closing statement regarding God's response to Nineveh's repentance. First of all, note the obvious: God saw what they DID. Faith is evidenced by action...by what we do, not how we feel. We find nowhere in scripture that God looked upon the good intentions of a person, or how God looked upon the feelings of repentance that a person had. God looks upon what we DO, and when God looked upon the citizens of Nineveh, He saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, and that was enough for God to relent.

Because of their repentance that was not simply religious observation, but a repentance that led to a turn in behavior and habit, God shows mercy to the capital city of Evil...God shows mercy to the capital city of Israel's enemy.

Now, let's be clear about something: Nineveh did not CONVERT to Judaism. We have no indication at all that the Ninevites ceased worshipping idols. We have no reason to believe that the Ninevites adopted God's law and became worshippers of the One, True God. The king doesn't use the specific name of Yahweh, instead he refers to Elohim, the generic word for "god", and neither the king nor the citizens make sacrifices or vows, as we saw with the Gentile crew from the ship.

The repentance of Nineveh is not a "saving" repentance that might, in some way, lead them to be utterly transformed and redeemed as we think of Christian repentance. But even so, their repentance was enough to avert disaster. A sincere turning away from evil and violence is rewarded with God's mercy...although we might just as easily say that God's mercy leads to the sincere turning away from evil and violence! After all, it was the hope and opportunity for God's

mercy (“Yet forty days”) as well as the threat of God’s imminent justice that led the Ninevites to act in faith and sincerely turn from their wicked ways.

Ironically, due to God’s mercy towards Nineveh, the Assyrian Empire remained healthy enough long enough to conquer Israel 50 years later, in 722 BC. So...how does that work? How are we to think of God’s mercy towards the enemy of Israel? What’s the point of this story if Nineveh only repents for a time, and then ultimately does evil later? What’s the point of this story if Nineveh repents for a time, but then is later overthrown by the Babylonians a hundred years later?

Well...I think we’ve already seen sufficient evidence that this whole story points beyond itself to the Gospel. But let me show you yet another way this story points to the Gospel.

First of all, God is a God whose primary practice is patience with those who are evil. God is a God of forbearance. If God acted decisively every time a city or a people group offended His justice, there would be no people left.

Secondly, we can note that God’s justice is imminent, but God’s tendency is to give ample warning to those who deserve punishment. If those who are warned will repent and turn from their evil ways, God’s tendency is to relent and to resume a relationship of patient forbearance.

Third, we can observe here an early example of what Jesus taught us in the Gospel: “Love your enemies.” God loves the enemies of Israel. God loves even the most evil, ruthless, violent people on the planet. In the 8th century BC, the most evil and violent people were thought to be the Assyrians, but ironically the Jews had their own problems with evil and violence as we read in Isaiah 58. This story teaches us to be careful how we judge others so harshly while turning a blind eye to our own evil tendencies. This story also serves as a prelude to a central Christian truth found in Romans 5:8, “God demonstrates His love for us in this: while we were yet His enemies, Christ died for us.”

It’s God’s nature to love the unlovable. It’s God’s nature to show mercy, even to His enemies. It’s God’s nature to be perfectly just and perfectly merciful. We’ve seen example after example of God’s nature revealed in this little story of Jonah, and we’ll see His patient and loving nature even more in the fourth chapter of Jonah as our story draws to a close.

So...what can we take away from the nature of Nineveh’s repentance? Let me give you some things to think about as we wrap up.

First of all, let us constantly remember that what we do will ultimately and obviously reveal whether or not we believe God. Take some time this week and consider if what you do reveals to the world that you believe God.

Secondly, although Nineveh's repentance was just a beginning, we must keep in mind what true, Christian repentance truly is. Hugh Martin says it perfectly:

True repentance is a change of mind, of heart, of disposition. It is the making of a new heart and of a right spirit. It originates in regeneration; in our being born again; in our obtaining a new nature and becoming new creatures in Christ by the Spirit. And it flows forth, in unmistakable manifestations, in a new course of conduct; in a reformed life; a life aiming at new ends, conducted under a new rule, and aspiring to attain to a new standard. Repentance, springing from a true fear of God and a true sight of sin, manifests itself in a dutiful obedience to God's law and a jealous abstinence from sin.

Finally, remember that God's nature is to love and show mercy to His enemies. That doesn't mean that He devalues justice, but wherever there is a bit of repentance, His nature is to forgive and to be patient, even when people continue to get it wrong. That was true for the Ninevites, that was true for us, and that remains true for those who offend and threaten us. If we follow Jesus and do as He taught us, we will, over time, learn to live in relationship with the world, even our enemies, with God's merciful nature, and that is always the point of discipleship.

Church, do you believe God? If so, repent...and let your repentance be obvious in the way that you turn from your evil ways, do justice, love mercy, and walk intimately with your God. This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Let us pray.