

# Nineveh Repents

*Jonah*

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**Bible Verse:** Jonah 3:4-9  
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We look to the book of Jonah again this morning and I invite you to turn to Jonah in your Old Testament. Jonah 3:4 through 9 will be our text for this morning. I'm going to start by reading the entire chapter of Jonah 3. We skipped Jonah last week and I just want to read the whole chapter to reset the context as we come to this most critical part of the book of Jonah in verses 4 through 9. Jonah 3 beginning in verse 1 says,

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. 4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. 6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 9 Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." 10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

Then if you would, turn to the Gospel of Matthew as well where we have an inspired commentary from our Lord Jesus on the nature of this repentance. I'll come back to this at the end of the message but I want you to see it now. Matthew 12, beginning in verse 40, our Lord Jesus said,

40 ... Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart

of the earth. 41 The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

As we consider this account of the repentance of the city of Nineveh from some 2,700 years ago, we're struck by the fact that this is an enduring testimony of the nature of true repentance. When we say that Nineveh repented, we're saying that they came to true salvation in the true living God at the preaching of his prophet and what we see in the commentary of our Lord on that, on our Lord's own words about the nature of Nineveh's repentance, we see that it provides a pattern for what real repentance looks like even today and in that, this text gives us a measure, it gives us a thermometer by which to measure our own spiritual life and the nature of our own real repentance.

Look, I understand perfectly well that there are people in this room who do not know Christ. Some of you know who you are, some of you are conscious in your rebellion, conscious of your deadness of heart, and some of you even kind of revel in it, you like it that way, you like being a bit of a rebel. You need to hear this passage. For some, this passage might wake up a slumbering soul thinking it is alive to Christ when it is not and the nature of real true repentance would awaken them to the reality of spiritual life that they might flee to Christ and find true salvation. It is a common common problem, it's a common reality for people to think that they are true Christians when they are not, to think that they have been born again but they are not, and the only thing that can help is the word of God, that's why we preach it, and what we find in this passage is a statement of the reality of real repentance which is actually rather rare and we see the pattern by which we can understand our own spiritual experience. Does your life pattern something about the nature of the repentance found in the city of Nineveh? Jesus said it's the real thing. In fact, Jesus said so real was their repentance that the men of this city from 2,700 years ago, almost 2,800 years ago will rise up and condemn more modern generations because they did not repent at the preaching of Christ. So this is really important. For those of us that are in Christ, this will have a great confirming impact on our lives to realize that for all of our faults, for all of our ongoing struggles with temptation and sin and adversity, we see the echoes in our own heart of real repentance and say, "This testifies to me from the living word of God that I truly belong to Christ," and we can walk out in hope, walk out in confidence, walk out in an assurance of salvation that our salvation is real and the one who saved us in the past will keep us until we arrive safely home in heaven.

So this passage has something for every one of us here, but just going back to that first group that I mentioned, those of you who are conscious of your rebellion against Christ and you have sloughed it off, may I just remind you as we come to God's word here this morning that the word of God says that more severe punishment awaits those who have heard the Gospel and spurned it; that have heard the word of God, who have heard about the saving Gospel of Christ and rejected it, who trample his blood under their feet by refusing the invitation of the Gospel to come to Christ and to be saved. So as we come together here this morning, beloved, we come together to deal with really important spiritual realities and these realities echo throughout all of eternity. The things of which

we will see today will be bases upon which generations will be judged and it behooves us to come to the Lord humbly and ask him to work in our hearts that we might receive it well, receive it truly, that we might respond to it rightly and truly that we might be found on the side of those who have known true repentance, that it would be well with your soul in the end. That's what matters. That's why we preach the word of God and not other things. We're concerned for your eternal soul. We're concerned for your eternal well-being. We realize that we could attract others if we did different things and we do not care about that at all. We don't care about that because to do other things is to distract from the centrality of the Gospel and so we just try to keep these things front and center.

Well, we know the story of Jonah. We've been dealing with it for a couple of months now and so we'll just pick it up in chapter 3, verse 1. Jonah has been in the belly of the fish. He himself has repented of his prior rebellion and the fish has coughed him up, you might say, and now Jonah has gone to Nineveh in response to the word of the Lord. You see that in verse 3, "Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD." Now we find in this chapter or in this passage, I should say, verses 4 through 9, what it is that happened when he went there. What is it that happened in this text at this brief period of time that echoes so much throughout all of eternity and what did Jonah find when he went there?

Well, one ancient historian, just a little bit of historical background here, one ancient historian says that Nineveh as a great city was surrounded by walls that were 100 feet high and 50 feet wide with 1,500 towers. Some estimate that the population may have been in the area of 600,000 people at the time in the city and perhaps the surrounding areas. You can read this, you'll often see commentaries referring to those kinds of numbers and statistics. It's possible that those dimensions were exaggerations in accordance with the way history was sometimes written at the time, but the point that we don't want to miss, the main point that we want to see is that this was a city of grandeur. This was one of the greatest cities of all of ancient history to which Jonah went to speak. After Jonah's ministry, a subsequent Assyrian king would make it the capital city of the Empire. It was probably not the capital city at the time of Jonah's ministry but Jonah is going to one of the great cities of the ancient world when we see him ministering in chapter 3, verse 4.

Look at it with me,

4 ... Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

Now let me remind you of something that we said a few weeks ago that many of you weren't here to hear, those of you that are visiting. We try to do what we can to give context to things so that even if you're only visiting with us on a one-time basis you're able to follow what we are saying and doing and not presume too much. What we said weeks ago that gives us a context for Jonah's ministry from the perspective of the Ninevites is this, is that the nation of Assyria had been decimated by plagues right around the time of Jonah's ministry. It's a documented historical fact that they were suffering

plagues that were taking the lives of thousands and thousands of people in the year 765 and 759 BC. It is an astronomical fact, a fact of astronomy is what I'm trying to say, that there was a total eclipse of the sun that would have affected the region of Assyria on June 15, 763 BC. So there is a climate of doom that was pervading the atmosphere as Jonah came. To the ancient world, a total eclipse of the sun was a sign of eminent judgment and it is in that context of massive loss of life, of signs in the sky that would have been interpreted as judgment, that Jonah comes and delivers his message. And just enter in, step back with me 2,700 years, if you will, step back into the environment of the time, the environment of the city at that time and realize that they were already immersed in a prevailing atmosphere of doom. They were already feeling the dark weight of eternal matters of life and death and judgment from the gods as they knew them at the time, when Jonah comes and delivers this message. So it would be like, for those of you that are old enough to remember this, it would be like in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on our own country 17 years ago. If there had been plagues sweeping through our country and that successful attack on New York City carried out by enemies of our state, the economy, you picture a collapse of the economy, and everybody is discouraged and the whole atmosphere is negative and there is a climate of fear that is animating discussions on the street and in people's homes, "What does this mean? What's going to happen to us? How much longer do we have?" You can picture that, and in the superstitious days in which Jonah spoke, multiply it by a factor of three or four or five and you have a sense of what was going on in the hearts of the population to which he preached at this time. They are frightened and Jonah then comes, look at verse 4, Jonah comes preaching and saying, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." What would their response be except, "I knew it, and this is just the final nail in our coffin. I knew this was coming and now we have a prophet from outside of our walls coming in and declaring it." This is totally believable to everything that they knew and had been experiencing. So there is this dark night of gloom that is pervading the population as they hear the message.

Jonah uses the word "overthrown" there at the end of verse 4, "forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." That word is the same word that's used in a familiar passage of Scripture back in Genesis 19. Go back there with me, if you would, Genesis 19. Genesis 19:24 and 25. And you know, I know that gloomy atmospheres are not what people like. We're fascinated with frivolity and we much prefer parties and feasts to funerals and difficulties, but you know, I don't think that's what Scripture commends to us, in fact I know that it's not. Scripture commends to us in Ecclesiastes, it says it's better to go to a house of mourning rather than to a house of feasting because the living see it and take it to heart. Maybe one day we'll have the opportunity to minister God's word in a time when it's not the frivolity that marks the modern mindset but a time of gloom and the message of the Gospel will go forth and sound forth in a way like it did into the city of Nineveh, but what we want to see and the reason that I say that is to just realize that serious contemplations that lead to fear in the hearts of men are not a thing to be despised by those that preach the Gospel. This is opportunity for the truth and the weight of eternal matters to come to bear on people's hearts. So when Jonah says "forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown," he uses the same verb that Scripture uses to describe God's judgment on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Look at Genesis 19:24 and 25. It says,

24 ... the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, 25 and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.

Sodom and Gomorrah were turned upside down. Their existence as they had known it came to an end and the judgment was complete, it was devastating. God overthrew that city by what he had done and now Jonah comes to the city of Nineveh and says, "forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." A piercing in the context of their day, in the context of Scripture, in the meaning of the verb itself, there is this great threat upon them that cannot be denied and they had been providentially prepared to hear precisely that message.

Well, what happened? What happened in response? Verse 5, chapter 3, verse 5,

5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

Here in verse 5 what you have is you have a general overview of the response of the city that's going to be described in more detail in the verses that follow, but it's giving this general response that they believed what Jonah preached. They received it. They submitted to it. They acknowledged it to be true. The word "believed" here used in Jonah 3:5 is the same verb that is used in Genesis 15 when Abraham believed in God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. This was not a superficial response. This was not, if you can picture this, I laugh because I have a picture in my mind as people over the years stream out and greet you after you have preached to them, "Nice sermon, Pastor. Thank you for that reminder, Pastor." You know, it's just kind of the nature of things. It's more a courteous greeting than any kind of actual response to the message. That's okay. What I want you to see by contrast, however, is this is not Nineveh saying, "Jonah, thank you for that reminder. Jonah, thank you for the good word but, you know, the roast is in the oven and I've got to get home now." This was not a superficial response that so often marks the way that people respond to the word of God in their own lives. They earnestly received it. They earnestly believed it to such an extent that the same verb that Abraham is described as responding to what God said to him in Genesis 15, that same verb can be used to describe their response. They responded to the message of the true and living God in the same way that the father of the Jews did. This is real. This is from the heart and one of the ways that you can know that this is from the heart is the fact that their faith was accompanied by true repentance. True repentance. A true turning away from sin, not simply a mental acknowledgment that Jonah had said something true to them that did not sink into their hearts and actually change their lives. No, what we see described here affirmed by Jesus Christ himself later on, is that there was an entire turning of their inner man toward the truth of what had been said.

Look at verse 5 again, "the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them." Fasting, sackcloth in that culture was a common means in the ancient world of expressing grief, of expressing humility, and expressing penitence. Their lives, their outward actions manifested in accordance with customs that showed the true feelings of their heart, their outward lives using these customs manifested the change that had taken place in their heart. "O God, I am sorry! O God, I believe your word to be true! O God, I am worthy of the judgment that has been proclaimed against me and my countrymen!" Earnest, sincere, heartfelt repentance. Acknowledgment of guilt, recognition of wrongdoing all manifesting a sincerity of their belief and of their response. To put on sackcloth, to put on that itchy grainy material is symbolizing the rejection of earthly comforts. Too fast, same thing, "I won't eat. I don't even want to eat because of the agitation and the turmoil in my heart. Food no longer holds appeal to me. Earthly comforts no longer hold appeal to me. What appeals to me here is that my soul would manifest through my body the reality of what I know to be true in response to the message of the word of God that has come to me." True repentance, true faith being manifested in their response.

For that to happen in the heart of one person is amazing. Scripture says that a conversion like that is a true miracle that has to have the power of God to generate that. You must be born again. You must be born from above. It takes the power of God to produce that kind of change in a human heart, in one, what's amazing here is that there is an entire city manifesting this kind of response. Everyone in the city responded to the message. Look at verse 5 again with me, "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth," so there is belief and repentance and then the writer of Jonah gives us a perspective on how widespread this was and he says that this response that was just described was manifested, "from the greatest to the least." This was a citywide repentance that had taken place. This was universal to those who heard the message. Beloved, this is an amazing revival in the truest biblical sense. An amazing revival broke out in the city in response to Jonah's message that affected everyone in the city, and if the population estimate of 600,000 is correct, there you go. There you go. There's really something appealing about that, isn't there, to the believing heart today, to the Christian heart today? Those of you that share Christ at work, share him in your neighborhood, share him with family and are just met with stony glassy eyes that have no interest in what you're saying, you understand why this is so sweet and precious. Wouldn't you love as you share Christ to see that kind of response manifested from the ones who hear? That people would respond in faith and repentance as you share the Gospel with them? Yet you are met with a stony heart of resistance and indifference. Yeah, I can relate to that too. Here's the thing, is that we start to maybe subconsciously just start to accept and think that that's the way that it is; that that's the way that it necessarily will be; that this is what is to be expected, just that cold indifference to the Gospel, that cold indifference to the word of God; but what we see here is that it doesn't have to be that way. When God attends the preaching of his word, there can be a totally different response and this is what the response should be when sinners hear about the nature of God and hear the threat of judgment preached to them, there ought to be a response of repentance and faith and when we don't see it in response to our evangelism, in response to our ministry, we don't question the truthfulness of what's being proclaimed, we go back to God and say,

"God, help. All is vain unless the power of your Spirit falls down on what we're doing. It's all in vain, Lord, because there is not the capacity in a dead human heart to respond the way that it ought to be but I look at Nineveh, Lord, I look at the way these people genuinely sincerely responded and I pray that would be true of everyone who hears the sound of the Gospel but, God, I can't produce it in my own power. Here I am in my impotent flesh preaching to people with dead spiritual hearts. Lord, how is anything good going to come out of that? How is there going to be any powerful spiritual response unless you act?" That's why we pray week after week after week as elders as we gather together beforehand. We pray week after week after week, "Lord, we pray that you would save some in the hearing of your word as they come. Lord, we pray for those who sit week after week, month after month in cold indifference to your word. We pray for them, praying and longing, O God, that there might be some that manifest the reality of this kind of repentance."

Look, that's the simplicity of our hearts in ministry. We would have you be saved from your sin and that's why we try to eliminate every other distraction so that that message is not confused to you; that we don't send mixed messages by emphasizing other things because we realize how difficult it is for the true message of the Gospel to get through. Here in Nineveh, it got through. Here by the power of God, that message pierced the heart of an entire city. When God unleashes his power, when God unleashes his power on his word, that is the kind of response that is possible but impossible by human means, fully possible with God. And we never know. This is so very important what I'm about to say: we never know when God is going to be pleased to deliver that power on the hearts of men and so our perspective on it is it didn't work last week, let's do something different this week. No, and this is not just about a church ministry but this is how you approach sharing the Gospel with your loved ones. "Yes, I know for the past 50 times they didn't listen but, God, maybe time 51 will be the time when you are pleased to pour your power out and make it happen, and if you would do that, God, I want to be found faithful." Because we never know when God is going to pour his power out like this, we just try to be faithful doing what we do trusting the time will come when he does on one, on two, on three, and that has an implication for you too. That's why what you do and what so many of you do being so faithful to be under the sound of the preaching of God's word faithfully week after week, that faithfulness is so important because we never know exactly when the Lord is going to use something in your life with power. We understand that messages hit people differently. You never know when the Lord is going to do a particular work of power in your heart through the preaching of the word. That's why you have to be faithful and come. Maybe it will be today. "Lord, work in my heart today." So that's why we do what we do.

In verse 6, the author builds on this sense of from the greatest to the least of them. How far did the message of Jonah reach? How far did this real repentance reach? It reached even to the king of the city, even to the king, to the highest one in authority in that realm. Look at verse 6 with me,

6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh [what did he do?], he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.

This king of Nineveh was most likely somewhat like a governor of the province city of Nineveh. It probably wasn't the king of the whole Assyrian Empire. There are a whole lot of historical reasons why I believe that to be true. This speaks of the city of Nineveh, not the whole kingdom of Assyria, that broad kingdom that existed in that day.

The one who had the highest authority in the city comes and responds. We're not told how the message reached him but it did. To lay aside his robe, to lay aside his robe, listen, was for him to lay aside the very symbol of his kingly authority. He took off the robe of a king, the robe which symbolized his authority and he laid it aside and he took his position alongside the common man in expressing the same kind of repentance. He joined at the level of the people and joined them in sackcloth, and joined them in ashes and expressed his own personal repentance in what was done. Imagine, if you would, any of our Presidents of the United States over the course of our history responding to the Gospel in like manner. Imagine those in the highest realm of authority at state or local government openly repenting of their own sin and using their authority to support the true preaching of the word of God. That's foreign to everything that we do in America, isn't it? Separation of religion.

Here the reality of true repentance reached the throne. The true message reached the throne and the king himself repented. Whoever this king was, we're going to see him in heaven. Whoever this king was is there now. And yet while we see him manifesting the same kind of repentance flowing out in kind of a telescopic expansion of explanation of what was said in verse 5, from the greatest to the least of them, when I say the greatest the writer says, "Let me tell you what the king did." And yet this king takes on one who has a measure of care for the souls of those under his authority, uses the pre-existing authority that he had, Even though he had laid aside his robe, he still had the actual authority of king. He didn't abandon the throne, he just laid aside that authority and takes his position among the common people, but then he uses his authority to declare what the entire realm of his reign would do in response to this preaching.

Look at verse 7 with me.

7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh [you see, it's a Nineveh, it's not over the whole kingdom, within the realm of Nineveh] by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands."

I love this king. He's my favorite political figure of all time and I've shaken hands with Ronald Reagan. This king used his authority to seal, to enforce, to support the citywide

repentance that was taking place within the realm of his reign and he tells them, "You call on this God earnestly that Jonah has come and described to us."

Look, beloved, at this point in the narrative, at this point from the king's understanding, the only thing that he has heard is that his city as 40 days and then it's going to be overthrown. As far as he knew, his kingdom was on the verge of utter destruction. He has been totally humbled by the surrounding circumstances of providence in his life and in his city at that time. He has been totally humbled by the message that came to him in the midst of that proclamation. Notice what he did not do. This king is a better man than some of you in this room in the way that you have responded to the Gospel. He did not harden his heart to it. He did not adopt an attitude of indifference to it. He did not do like Nebuchadnezzar and stiffen his neck. He humbled himself under the preaching of the word of God. He believed it. He received it for himself and then he looks out on those under his reign and he commands them to do the same thing.

He ordered universal fasting for men and for animals. If you think about him having somewhat of a parental role for those under his authority, he joined in the response, he joined in the repentance, he brought them into it rather than standing apart from the true faith, apart from the true repentance as some parents like to do. They'll send their children off and say that they really don't care so much about what God's word has to say on their own hearts and lives as long as the children get it with some kind of false sense of piety accompanying it. Look, if you really understand the implications of the Gospel of Christ, it will personally revolutionize your life and you won't stand apart and say, "That's good for someone else, that's good for my kids but I'm just going to kind of keep doing what I do." That's an indication that someone doesn't understand the first thing about the reality of the Gospel to respond that way.

This king repented himself and then he sought to bring those in his authority into that same spirit of repentance and he commands it, and those of you, we've got so many precious young families in our church, I just encourage you, I ask you in response to God's word here today to make certain that you place as your first priority not your children's walk with God but your own walk with God. That is your first priority is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind, and don't try to do some kind of pass-through where the implications of the Gospel bypass you as long as your kids are respectable, as long as your kids don't embarrass you with their behavior. Beloved, this is not a response to the Gospel, you don't use it as a means to try to protect your own respectability by having kids that are outwardly moral. There needs to be an overturning in much of evangelicalism about our own response to the Gospel. When we want it for other people but don't take it seriously ourselves and don't manifest a personal repentance of our own, what is that? I'll tell you what that is, that is hypocrisy and we don't want to be hypocrites here.

Look at the king, the one with supreme authority in his realm and recognize and look at verse 6, look at it with me. See how he personally received it, personally applied it, and then began to share it with others, then began to use his role. It didn't bypass his own heart. That's the point.

Now it might seem unusual to us that he included animals in his decree. Isn't that a little weird? Verse 7, "Do not let man," okay, I get that, "beast, herd, or flock taste a thing." Verse 8, "both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth." Why include the animals? They don't even have souls. Why are they being included in the expression of repentance here? What sins did they commit? Well, it's not that they committed any sins. You know, the truth of the matter is that although it's not nearly as common today as it used to be, this is not unknown even in our own land. It's known in our history even in America to drape horses that are carrying a hearse in procession, to drape them in black, for example for heads of state. It emphasizes the universal nature of the national loss when you drape the horses in black that are leading the procession. Everything is draped in black because there is a universal effect of the loss of this great leader that is going to be expressed in every element of our society and existence. Well, in a greater way, this is what is being expressed here. He is leaving no aspect of life and existence untouched by these expressions of repentance.

Nineveh, the city, was mourning its universal sin and, therefore, there will be a universal response manifested in every aspect of our existence. You know, you could go into rooms and the room is draped in black, that kind of thing. It's an expression. It helps express the environment, the spiritual environment that is being there everywhere you would look, at every living moving thing would be an expression of repentance. O God, I would live for such a day to see it in my time, genuine repentance being expressed with these outward symbols but, beloved, and as you kind of measure your own spiritual response to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, lived, died, resurrected, to make an atoning sacrifice for your sin, as you would measure your own response to that, look at verse 8. This was never just about the outward symbols. This was not hypocrisy at all. Verse 8, "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth." You could fake the outward display, I suppose, but the fact that this is genuine is shown in what follows in verse 8, "and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands." There it is, beloved. This was a real, genuine, earnest, spiritual response for which he called. This is not an outward show of ritual, of external religion having no bearing on the inner reality. He says, "Every one of you, call on God earnestly from your heart. Every one of you, turn from the sin that is in your hands in response to this message that God has brought to us." He's commanding the people to call on God earnestly.

They're already showing this. The king is leading them even further in the manifestation of their true faith and repentance and he calls on them to call on God earnestly. It's a picture of calling on God, a call that involves all of their strengths and all of their might in perfect keeping with the first commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and might." This is what he's calling them to, "You respond to Jonah's God in this way." And based on what the description of the response of the city is: they are in perfect sympathy, there is a perfect symphony of harmony of response between the people and the decree of the king. Everyone was on board with this. There were no tares in the midst of this wheat field. The king calls them to forsake their violence which was a known sin among the broader Assyrian culture of that day. They

were a violent people and the king calls them to a transformed life. "Forsake the sin in your hands. Forsake the violence in your hands. Turn away from it." So the king calls them. The king, I love that. The king calls them to a transformed heart manifested in transformed behavior all of which is expressing the reality of true repentance illustrated for us in this text, affirmed to us by what we have already seen, the affirmation of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the real thing. And do you know what? There's another aspect of this that shows how real and how genuine this repentance is. This is amazing. In one sense, we're just now getting to the best part of this expression of faith.

Look at verse 9 with me. I want to weep as I read this as you get an insight into what is in the king's heart and that of his nobles who joined in the issuance of the proclamation. He says,

9 "Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."

Who knows? Beloved, do you see it? Do you see what this means? The king and his people repented in this way with no guarantee that it would actually turn away the judgment of God. They repented in this manner because it was the right response to the message, not because they were trying to manipulate God into relenting from the judgment. He had no guarantee of success. He had no guarantee that the city would not be overthrown when he repented and when he commanded the city to join him in the repentance that they were already expressing. The king suggests that relief is possible but it is not guaranteed when he does that. You see why that's precious, right? It's precious because it shows the sincerity and the unconditionality of the repentance. This is the real thing. This is a complete humbling for God and this is, therefore, something that is really really rare. The humbling that these people manifested was so complete that there is no sense in their mind or in their response, "God, I'll repent if you'll relieve the judgment." Their response was, "God, I'll repent. Period." And in what the king says, he shows that he is simply committing himself and committing them completely to the justice and mercy of God without any demands or prior conditions on what that looks like. That's the nature of real repentance, the nature of real submission, "God, no conditions on my repentance. No condition on my yielding to you. Whatever you do with me will be right and I submit to that. I accept that. I give my guilty soul to you for you to do with what you want but, Lord, I genuinely turn from the sinfulness of my ways." That's real repentance illustrated for you in the text, affirmed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, let's think through this. We need to follow this all the way through. There is an expression of hope there in verse 9, isn't there, "God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger." There is an expression of hope there. Think with me: what would give him any grounds to think there was any hope here? Jonah said, "Nineveh, 40 days and this city is going to be overthrown." What would make the king think that there was any hope? Well, beloved, you stay with me right now. Stay with me because we are following to a greater point for our day.

What gives him any hope? Well, first of all, God had sent a prophet, right? God had sent a messenger beforehand. God could have just done it, no warning, but suddenly there is a prophet in our midst giving us a warning, giving us an indication that judgment is coming? Why send a prophet unless you were inviting a response of some kind? Think with me a little further: why place a 40 day moratorium on the judgment unless somehow God was seeking some kind of response? Maybe there was hope. The advance warning, the delay of execution – beloved, watch it – was already a sign of mercy to them. It was already a manifestation of grace to them. They were ripe for judgment. The tree was ready to be shaken for the fruit to fall out but God said, "Not just yet. Here's a man to tell you. Here's a man to warn you." Mercy, the first drops of mercy of a rain shower of mercy had fallen on them, perhaps greater mercy could be had from the hands of the God of this prophet, is what's in his mind. "Who knows, maybe he'll relent but that will be entirely his prerogative because we know that we are guilty and we deserve the judgment."

You know, it's amazing to me that there are Bible teachers, commentators, who look at this and say that in light of all of this will still say, "This wasn't true repentance. This was just a momentary turning of things, a superficial emotional response with no real lasting reality." They say this was a superstitious people making an emotional response. Beloved, that's not true. This was real repentance, a model for us today. Think with me: what does Scripture say about them in this text? They believed. What does John 3:16 say? "God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life." These Ninevites believed. Jesus said in Luke 24 that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be manifested or should be proclaimed to all the nations. What did these people do except repent and perform deeds in keeping with repentance? What does the text say except that they called on the God of the prophet earnestly and forsook their wicked ways? This was a complete inner and outward change in these people and I'll say it for the last time, affirmed by the Lord Jesus Christ in his assessment. The infallible interpreter of the Old Testament was Jesus Christ. He says these people repented. Do you know what I believe therefore? I believe they repented. It ain't that complicated. False repentance would not have qualified them to judge the Jews in a future age.

How do you explain this? How do you explain a city repenting? And beloved, I want every one of you to reflect on this fact which is the ground of what Jesus says in Matthew 12: they repented at far less revelation than we have today. They repented in the shadow, so to speak, of God's revelation of his mercy. What do you have today as an unbeliever sitting in our midst? What you have today is the full revelation of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. You see the fullness of God's willingness to show mercy to repentant sinners by the death, burial and resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the universe took on human flesh because of his desire to show mercy to repentant sinners and now he has brought you providentially under the hearing of his word and the word goes forth to you. If you believe in Christ, you can be saved. Nineveh hadn't seen any of that. They hadn't seen anything of Christ and yet they genuinely repented. What excuse is there for us in our day and age with Christ being manifested to us? With Christ crucified, buried and resurrected? With Christ saying, "Come to me and I will give you rest"?

What's going to happen to those of you that walk away from that without responding in the same kind of heartfelt repentance and gratitude that is shown in these Ninevites? What do you think is going to become of you to spurn that kind of mercy when Nineveh responded at much darker shadows of the same?

Beloved, how could a city repent? Look at Jonah chapter 4, verse 11. We keep going there, don't we? God says, "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?" How could a whole city repent? How does one man repent? Jonah came with a true message from God and here's what happened: the Holy Spirit authenticated that message to the hearts of those people with power. He opened their hearts to believe the message that they had heard just like Lydia's heart was opened in Acts 16 to believe the things that were being spoken to her by Paul. In 2 Timothy 2:24 and 25 it says perhaps God would grant them repentance. They repented because God granted it to them, because God sent a messenger to them and authenticated and sealed the certain truth of that message to the hearts of those who heard with such power that it overturned their hearts. Beloved, I know as we've said so many times, people think about the book of Jonah and they think about a fish swallowing a man in the sea and it's true that God moves the sea, Jonah 1, it's true that God can move a fish with power to accomplish his purposes, but do you realize that Jonah is telling us something of far greater import than that? More than a natural miracle? Jonah is an illustration of the fact that God moves the human heart with power when it pleases him to do so and he can do it with 600,000 as easily as he can do it with one because he has that almighty power to accomplish his purposes, and he declares the message and then he calls people like you and me, "Repent and believe in the Gospel," Mark 1:50.

We'll see next time God's response to their repentance in Jonah 3:10, but for now I just want to say this one thing. Go back to verse 4 for just a moment. Jonah said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Do you realize something? That came true. Nineveh was overthrown but they weren't overthrown in judgment, God overthrew them spiritually and brought them to salvation. They were overthrown. They were completely different at the end of those 40 days than they were at the beginning but God overthrew them in mercy rather than in judgment. Praise be to his name.

Beloved, a people from 2,700 years ago has shown you the pattern and now the Gospel based on New Testament revelation says that Jesus Christ died for the sins of people just like you. Will you join with the city of Nineveh and call on the God of this Gospel earnestly and turn from your wicked ways? Would you receive the hope of saying, "If he received the people of Nineveh," maybe you are here and now you are convicted and you say, "I am in danger of judgment." You can look at the people of Nineveh and say, "He forgave them, surely he'll receive me as well. He received them before Christ had died, now Christ has died for people like me." And you look out to Christ, you look up to his royal position at the right hand of God and see his arms opened wide to sinners who call on him for mercy and to realize that there is a perfect Savior who has offered a perfect sacrifice to bring a perfect salvation to perfectly guilty people just like you, and you look not inside your heart for whether you have repented enough or you have faith enough, you look up, you look out to Christ and say, "There's a perfect Savior who can save me.

I'll cast everything about my imperfect response on him and trust him to save me." And based on the authority of God's word, I can promise you dogmatically, definitively, without fear of contradiction, that Christ won't refuse you. He will receive you. God will turn from his anger and forgive you completely, immediately, and forever. See how Nineveh repents and then for all of us, ask yourself, "Do I know something of a repentance like that?"

Let's pray.

*Father, we thank you that you are a God of mercy and a God of all comfort and that there is no sinner too great who cannot find forgiveness in our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us each one to examine our hearts in response to what we have heard. Help us each one to look to Christ and find in him the perfect salvation that you freely offer to unworthy sinners like us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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