

When God Relents

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Bible Verse: Jonah 3:10
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Thank you for being with us today. It's good to see you and have you all with us. I see some new faces, I see a lot of familiar faces and we love each one and welcome each one gladly. We are preaching through the book of Jonah and we've come to chapter 3, verse 10. I invite you to turn to Jonah 3:10 with me and I want to just give you an advance notice that we're going to be doing some very heavy lifting theologically today and I look forward to this time with you. The children introduced, in a sense, the topic for this morning as they sang about the love of God as expressed in the life of Jonah, and we come to the end of chapter 3. Last time we looked in detail at the repentance of Nineveh and we saw that that was a genuine repentance in response to a message of judgment that was proclaimed against them.

Look at Jonah 3:4 with me, if you would,

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."

A conclusive message of judgment that we looked at last time. In verses 5 through 9 we saw the repentance of Nineveh, that it was from the greatest to the least of them; that they believed in God; that they turned from their wicked deeds; that they called earnestly on God in response to this message from his true prophet and in verse 9 it ended and said,

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

So with humility, with repentance, in faith, they called upon the God that Jonah had declared to them, the God who had sent his prophet to them, and they called out in earnest repentance and faith that this God would have mercy on them in response to the message that Jonah had preached.

Now in verse 10 of chapter 3, we come to a most fascinating text in the book of Jonah. I would perhaps argue that it is the most fascinating text in the book of Jonah, even more so than when Jonah was swallowed by the great fish, because as we come to chapter 3, verse 10, all of a sudden the blinds are pulled back and we are able to peer for a moment deeply into the character of God in what we see displayed in this verse, and as we

compare this verse with other Scripture, we are going to have unfolded before us something of the majesty of God, something of the mercy of God, something that would give hope to trembling sinners and yet would also bring a warning to those who persist in their sin and their rebellion and their stubborn wickedness. We find in this text, in other words, something that sifts every one of us because it brings us into direct immediate contact with the great glory of God.

Let's look at verse 10 and read it together. Jonah 3:10,

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.

Look at verse 4 with me again just to put this side-by-side, realizing what we see here on the front end, on the front bracket of Nineveh's repentance is the judgment of God, verse 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.'" The first bookend is judgment and then we see repentance played out, and then in verse 10, the other bookend that we see is mercy, verse 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."

Now, we said last time that some maintain, some question whether there was a real repentance in Nineveh. Some think that, well, they just called and added God to their pantheon of deities; that this wasn't biblical salvation in any true sense. We utterly reject that. We saw that Jesus in Matthew 12 said that Nineveh's repentance would be a standard by which generations would be judged. They couldn't do that if that was a false repentance. He wouldn't point to the repentance of Nineveh, to his own generation if they actually really didn't truly repent in the end. That just turns the message of this book upside down into something unrecognizable to what the message of Jonah truly is. But surely today's verse furthers our understanding of the nature of their repentance, the reality of their repentance, the sincerity of their repentance. Unlike some today who would make a profession of Christ and yet continue in their wicked ways, that would continue in their wicked words, which would continue in their wicked intimidation, patterns of dealing in human relationships all in the name of Christ, no, no, no, no, no, that's not true salvation. What we see here in Jonah 3 is something completely different from what passes for so-called salvation in our day and age.

We see the real thing here in Jonah 3 and we know that it was real repentance because we see in chapter 3, verse 10, that God saw their deeds and it says that God relented from his judgment, "He did not do it." Would God, a holy God, forbear from a righteous judgment based on false repentance? That's craziness. That has nothing to do with biblical theology. Would God look on wickedness and pass by for a false repentance? No. No, God accepted their repentance as genuine. This verse shows us that. It says that he relented concerning the calamity which he had declared he would bring upon them and he did not do that, but I don't know if you ever thought about these things, you're going to be

thinking about them for the next 45 minutes or so, this verse brings us some very thorny and difficult questions about the nature of God and reconciling this with what Scripture says in other places is not exactly easy to do. How can we explain the fact that God apparently changed his mind over what he said he would do? How could God change like that? We have seen in past times in teaching from this pulpit that God is immutable, God does not change, and Scripture speaks to that eternal aspect of the nature and essence of God in many many places and I want to just take you to a few verses to stimulate your thinking in that regard.

Look at Numbers 23 with me. Numbers 23 as we dive into the deep end of the nature of God. Numbers 23:19 says that,

19 "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

Once God says that he's going to do something, Scripture indicates he does it. Well, he said that he would judge Nineveh, overthrow it, and yet it says that he relented from the calamity. How are we to understand that or is Scripture's testimony to the nature of God hopelessly convoluted and conflicting in a way that we can't really know what the truth is? You see, these questions actually become pretty important pretty quickly.

I'm going to read a few other passages. I'll give you the reference so you can write it down but I won't have you turn there just for the sake of time. In 1 Samuel 15:29 it says,

29 ... the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.

In Malachi 3:6 it says,

6 "... I, the LORD, do not change."

In Matthew 24:35 Jesus said,

35 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."

In James 1:17 it says with God

17 ... there is no variation or shifting shadow.

God is immutable. God does not change. God does not have mood swings so what is up in Jonah 3, then? What are we seeing play out before our eyes? There are two things that I want to say about this here this morning. If you would turn back to Jonah 3 now, if you're not already back there, Jonah 3, there are two aspects of the nature of the proclamation of the judgment of God that I want to bring to your attention here this morning and the first one is this: it is the conditional nature of messages of judgment. The

conditional nature of messages of judgment. Some have said, and they have well said, that the best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. It's not a man. It's not any particular teacher of any particular age. The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself and when you compare Scripture with Scripture, you will find that there is always a conditional element to God's threats of judgment upon sinners. There is always an "if" included in it even if it's not explicitly stated in any particular single verse, and this is what I want to show you for the moment here. I have to apologize. I had you turn to Jonah and I'm actually going to have you now turn to Jeremiah before we even refer to Jonah again. I would not do well or get many tips as a tour guide. "Oh, look here. No, look here. Look someplace else." I've been eager to preach this material for a few weeks now.

In Jeremiah 18, God declares what is in his mind when he is preaching through his prophets judgment and in Jeremiah 18:7 he says,

7 At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it.

Well, that's exactly what was going on earlier in Jonah 3:4, isn't it? He had said he was going to overthrow Nineveh using the same kind of language that was used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis. But go on and see what he says in verse 8 of Jeremiah 18, he says,

8 if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it.

He says, "I will declare judgment in advance on a nation, on a kingdom, on people," but he says, "if they repent in response to the message, I will relent from the judgment that I had declared that I would bring upon them."

Look at the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 33, the next book to the right from Jeremiah. Ezekiel 33:14, God says in Ezekiel 33:14,

14 "... when I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness, 15 if a wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes which ensure life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 16 None of his sins that he has committed will be remembered against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he shall surely live."

Wow. Step back and think for a moment or two about what that means. Who does God pronounce judgment upon except people that are greatly guilty, and in their great guilt, they are greatly deserving of great judgment? As I like to say, people who violate the eternal law of an eternal God deserve eternal punishment, and that's each one of us. Every one of you. Me. That is what we deserve by justice is great judgment from God and he would be fully justified to declare to every sinner everywhere, which is every man that

has ever lived, you will be judged and there is no hope for you. That is what justice would look like. That is what God's justice would look like and yet we find that though God by his own character, by his own righteousness, by his own revelation, by his own law is completely entitled, completely justified, completely righteous to judge sinners greatly forever, there is this promise of mercy that is embedded even in his proclamations of judgment. God is a God who is willing to forgive. Even though he doesn't have to, he is willing to forgive. Alongside the holiness and justice of God in his very great essence, is this merciful aspect of his character that even when judgment is being proclaimed, an offer of mercy is being extended to those who hear.

This is staggering to realize the greatness of a character like that because, let's face it, we know from a human standpoint, we all know people who once they are offended, there is no forgiveness to be had with them, is there? They won't hear your cries of apology. They won't hear of your cries for reconciliation. They will go, they will build walls, they will reinforce them and they will keep them there. What we find from our human experience, we realize that there is something different about the character of God that is very very precious. We see from these Old Testament texts that the warning of judgment carries within it, embedded in it a promise of mercy which sometimes is explicitly stated, sometimes it's not explicitly stated but we see from comparing Scripture with Scripture that is implicit in there.

Now think with me. We talked about this last time. If that was not true, why would God even announce judgment to an audience if there was no hope of mercy in it? If he was simply going to say, "You will be judged and now you are judged," why even bother? No, the fact that the message brought brings a message of warning that judgment comes upon sinners, implied in that is a window of time, perhaps very brief, where this God who has pronounced judgment is open to hear from those who have been on the receiving end of that proclamation of judgment. During that brief window of time there is an offer of mercy that is extended. I love him for that, don't you? That the judgment that my sin deserved was not carried out on me immediately. That got passed over it for a time to allow him to be sought in repentance. To allow time for the words of the great Gospel of Jesus Christ to be brought to this guilty soul. The time for the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart to take place to bring life where deadness previously existed. To bring mercy where judgment was deserved. All of this is a reflection of the fact that God is righteous in judgment and yet even as he declares it, there is an implicit, at least, offer of mercy to those that would hear, that those would repent, that those who would not harden their heart against the message that God's spokesman brings to them, if they would not harden their heart against it, that there is an opportunity for mercy. That's a message that matters. Beloved, that's the only message that ultimately matters.

Now, let's back up for a moment and I'll put a question on your lips toward me: how do you know that I'm not just making something up to avoid an obvious theological difficulty in the book of Jonah? You know, one of the great principles of biblical interpretation is that you interpret a passage within its own context and here I've jumped out of Jonah to look at other passages and you say, "Well, what about the book of Jonah? Where do you find this principle in the book of Jonah? How do I know that what you're

saying is true to the message of Jonah itself?" Well, now I'd really like you to turn back to Jonah, Jonah 3. What you're going to see is this, is that the book of Jonah itself makes this point abundantly clear, that the message of judgment proclaimed against Nineveh had within it an implicit offer of mercy to those who heard even though it was not explicitly stated in Jonah 3:4. You can see this. This is plain as day in the text of Jonah itself.

So God relents, Jonah 3:10, and Jonah gets ticked off. He is angry. Chapter 4, verse 1,

1 ... It greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.

Why was he angry? Why was he angry when people repented at his preaching? Do you know what? If some of you repented at my preaching, I wouldn't be angry, I'd join with the angels in rejoicing over your repentance. But Jonah's angry and in verse 2 we see why he's angry. He says,

2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country?"

He said, "I knew you were going to do this! I saw it coming! I didn't want this to happen!" Therefore in the middle of verse 2, look at it with me,

Therefore in order to forestall this [in order to keep this repentance from happening] I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.

Beloved, do you see what Jonah is saying there? Even though his words in Jonah 3 were only a promise of judgment and there was nothing else that was added to that message that Nineveh heard at this time, Jonah knew as he preached that there was a reality of God embedded in that message. He knew before he went to Nineveh. He knew theology. He knew God well enough to know that this God who pronounces judgment is simultaneously a God of compassion, a God of mercy, a God who relents concerning the calamity that he says he would bring on wicked men. Jonah rebelled against going to Nineveh – oh, watch this, listen to this, hear this and write it in your notes if you're taking notes – Jonah rebelled against going to Nineveh precisely because he knew that this message of judgment was in the final analysis an offer of mercy. It was an offer of mercy. That's why Jonah was upset. These people of Nineveh, part of the Assyrian nation, had long been troublemakers to Israel. Jonah in his nationalistic spirit did not want any aspect of Assyria to find mercy and healing and restoration at the hand of his God and he says, "I don't want to go to Nineveh and preach that. If I do that, they're going to find mercy." He knew it in advance and he said in his deplorable frustration, he preaches, revival breaks out and now he's sitting on a stone someplace with his head in his hands alternately angry and crying tears of frustration saying, "God, this is exactly what I knew was going to happen before I ever came. I knew this would be the outcome." How did he know that when all God told him to say was, "Preach this message of judgment"? Jonah understood

as a prophet of God that there is an offer of mercy embedded in the threat of judgment and that, beloved, that not only pulls back the curtain so we can see out the window and see through the window into the character of God, this allows us to open the window and let the breeze of fresh air blow through.

God offers sinners mercy. God offers unworthy sinners mercy all the way up until the moment of judgment falls. As he is warning sinners about coming judgment, he is offering them mercy to escape that judgment before it falls. In an individual life, that means that to hear the Gospel while you are breathing, even as a hardened sinner, means that God is offering you mercy even as he's declaring that you are worthy of eternal judgment. For our wicked world, the proclamation of certain judgment that this world so desperately deserves contains a promise of mercy to those that would hear and respond. And think with me from a New Testament perspective, beloved. Why would God send his own Son into the world to go to the cross to offer his righteous life up as a sacrifice to turn away the wrath of God from sinners if God did not intend for that message to be proclaimed widely as an offer of mercy to everyone who would hear? So there is opportunity for mercy, there is opportunity to repent even in the midst of the message of judgment being proclaimed.

My former co-pastor in another place, Phil Johnson, says it this way and I quote, he says, "This is always God's way. He graciously redeems and restores those who repent and does not carry out his threatened judgments against them." This is why we preach. This is why we tell you the things that we tell you, that in your guilt you deserve great judgment, to awaken you out of your spiritual slumber. But it's not simply judgment for the sake of judgment, it's not simply to speak harshly to people, we say these things to awaken you that you might seek the merciful God who brought the message to you in the first place. As though God were a physician bringing the bad diagnosis to you, "You are very very desperately sick and you are going to die," yet at the same time he says, "I have a cure for your disease. You need not die in response to this disease that racks your body now because I have a cure." And in like manner, the Gospel comes to your guilty judged soul and says, "There is opportunity for mercy here. Christ commands you, repent and believe in the Gospel and you can find that God is more than willing to pass over that judgment if you would come to Jesus Christ in repentance and in sincere faith. Not mouthing the foolish simple words that aren't real in your heart in a momentary act of prayer that has no real bearing on your life, that is not the cry of a desperately concerned sinner, 'God, deliver me from sin! Not just from hell, deliver me from this wickedness that is within me! God, I call out to you for mercy I don't deserve. I know I deserve judgment. I agree with you, God. Having brought this message of judgment to me, now show me mercy. God, I'm broken. God, I mourn my sin.'" All of this is great news. The word "Gospel" means "good news." All of this is good news, that that call of God's spokesman is ultimately a promise of mercy.

Go back to Ezekiel 18, verse 27. "Again," chapter 18, verse 27.

27 "Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his

life. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die."

Now, friend, let me just say quickly by way of clarification: that is not talking about a salvation by works. That is not talking about earning forgiveness through things that you do. It's simply expressing a reality that we've said many many times from this pulpit that true saving faith is a repentant faith. True faith in Christ is an inner reorientation of life away from your prior wickedness toward the righteousness that God would call you to, and you make that turn knowing that you cannot earn your salvation, knowing that you cannot earn forgiveness of sin, but rather it is an expression of the sincerity and the 100% earnestness of your heart to turn to Christ, to turn away from your prior life in order to receive this offer of mercy. And what was true in the Old Testament is true today. What was true in Nineveh is true in Cincinnati. What was true 2,700 years ago is true today, that those who truly repent in response to a message of judgment can find forgiveness in Christ just like the people of Nineveh did. The barrier, in other words, to salvation, the barrier to forgiveness is not on God's side, it's on the side of men who are unwilling to come. It is on the side of men who love their sin too much to give it up. It's on the side of men who are too proud to admit their guilt and to come to Christ saying, "I can't save myself. You must save me because I am unredeemable in my own self. I do not have the capacity to save myself and I am too guilty to be received by you. I appeal to mercy alone, in Christ alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, on the testimony of the word of God alone." Not on any other book. Not on any other religion. A total surrender, a total abandonment to Christ alone when the reality of the threat of judgment pierces your heart.

I spent some time in our private family cemetery back in Indiana yesterday. I say private, it's a retired cemetery where many of my ancestors are buried. And every time I go there, I think about ministry, I think about preaching, I think about the reality of the people that are in front of me like now, the reality that one day soon enough whether it's a week or a decade or longer, whether you are buried or your remains are disposed of in other ways, the reality is that that coming day is for you; that one day it will be your name etched in granite; the time for repentance will be passed for you and it will pass far more quickly than you think. It is urgent for you to take heed to the word of God, to take heed to the promise of forgiveness in Christ declared in the Gospel. It is earnest for you to make sure that as 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, to examine yourself to make sure that you are actually in the faith and that you are not relying on a false superficial response that never had anything to do with actual repentance in your life.

Now look, you know, I know that's not an entertaining message to preach and I know that those who avoid that message can fill much larger buildings than this one by giving people what they want, but do you know what? You know, when I'm there in the Green cemetery by myself looking on the testimony of headstones of those who gave their lifeblood through generations to me, and I see that at one time they had life like you do now, they lived 40 years, 60 years, 85 years, but it was a wisp of time in comparison, it was a wisp of time that now has testified to the fact that it's over. And it's kind of a weird experience, I look at their tombstones and I see your faces and I say, "This is what's going

to be true for them one day soon enough." So, yeah, I preach earnestly. Yeah, I preach urgently because the inevitability that one day that will be our name in stone cries out for your souls to be taken seriously, and ultimately you will bear responsibility for how you respond to the offer of mercy that God makes in the Gospel.

Beloved, fellow brother and sister in Christ that is here, don't you see that whatever your earthly circumstances are, that if God has had mercy on your soul and has saved you, that by comparison the eternal weight of the glory and the gift that has been given to you in true salvation, you've really been born again, you're not just faking it for social status or whatever that may be? No one comes to Truth Community Church for social status, by the way. We don't have that kind of prominence. We don't even want it. We don't care about that. Don't you see that the weight of glory, the weight of having your sins forgiven far surpasses any earthly circumstances that you are facing and, therefore, whatever the earthly circumstances may be as deep and grievous as they are, there are grounds for surpassing joy because of the greater gift that has been given to you? So when we hear words of judgment, we should understand that sometimes whispered in the background is, "There's a promise of mercy here. There is hope. God is calling you to repentance even as you hear this word of judgment."

Secondly, what's happening when God relents? Number 2: when God relents. What was happening when God relented in Jonah 3? Let's go back there again, Jonah 3. Jonah 3:10, let's keep the verse fresh in our minds.

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.

We saw that embedded in this is a conditional nature to the message of judgment, that there is a promise of mercy embedded in the true proclamation of judgment, but what this tell us about the character of God? How are we to understand the fact that God relented when God does not change? How are we to understand and to put these things together in a coherent way in our minds? We want to think carefully and we want to think biblically here. I told you at the start we were going to do some heavy lifting here. We just added a couple more weights to the barbell to lift them up here and now speaking probably more directly to those who have truly been born again, who truly are Christians, who truly belong to God and things like the nature of God actually matter to you, let's get to know God through these things.

We start with these two premises here this morning, these two principles. First of all, God is not like you. God is not like you, that's premise 1. God is not like us. Secondly, the nature of God is beyond our understanding. We so easily lose sight of this, particularly in the weak insipid preaching that dominates evangelical church today and just turns everything sometimes into a literal carnival. As I was driving home from the cemetery yesterday, I drove past a church that had a carnival going on. Here today for you, I want you to realize that that entertainment driven mindset has a way of pulling down greatly your view of God and turning him into not much more than a clown designed to entertain

you. That's not who God is and what we need to come back to is the high and lofty and transcendent nature of God to bring to our souls a sobriety and an earnestness and a humility that is worthy of the great eternal nature of his unchanging essence.

God is not like you and his essence is beyond your understanding. That bears in greatly to what we're seeing in Jonah 3:10, as I'll show you in a moment. God is the holy, infinite, uncreated Creator of the universe. There has never been a time where Father, Son and Holy Spirit were not. They have always existed. They had no beginning. You can talk about them, they and the three persons of the Trinity; you can say God has never had a beginning, speaking as one. By contrast, beloved, by contrast who are we? Who are you? Who are you? I'm not asking for your name, I'm asking what's your nature. You are a creature. Someone made you. You're finite. You had a beginning. You have an end that is coming, so speak, at least in earthly life. You're sinful. You're inclined as we sung earlier, you have a bent in you that is bent toward sinning that is utterly foreign to the nature of God. You're not like him in that way and that has an impact. That places a boundary upon the limits of language to take the infinite ocean of the character of God and pour it into the teacup that is your mind. You have a very restricted limited ability to understand the nature of God because he so far transcends you and there are limitations to our language and our ability to understand the glories of his incomprehensible essence. In other words, what we're saying is we have a high view of God because of that. Here's a little bridge for those of you that are into music. Here's a little bridge: because of that, Scripture will use analogies and figures of speech to describe God and his actions. They help us understand his transcendence truly even if we cannot understand it comprehensively. Scripture uses different figures to describe things about God that we can say, "Oh, I get that based on my experience." We're not meant to reduce God to the image, it's just an illustration to help us get beyond and to see things that we would otherwise miss. So for example, when Scripture says that God is a rock, you're not to think of him as a two pound piece of quartz. It's simply a statement of his stability, of his longevity, of his reliability. We can understand that.

Well, let's read Jonah 3:10 again with that in mind. Jonah 3:10, look at it with me again. By the time we're done, we'll almost have this verse memorized together. That would be cool. Jonah 3:10,

10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented [that's what we want to talk about] concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

Now before we dive completely into this, I've got to remind you of something really important: you should not think about this passage, you should not think about what happened in Nineveh as something where God said he would do one thing and then Nineveh changed and then God said, "Oh, I'm going to go to Plan B now. Didn't see this one coming so now I've got to reorient everything that I had planned because of what I just learned about in time." No. That would be, if we just stopped with what I'm about to say, you would see that that could not be the case. When you read Jonah 3:10, beloved,

remember that God intended to save Nineveh all along. It was always his intention to save them. If you bring in the fullness of biblical revelation, he chose them before the foundation of the world. But even when you step into time and you step into the four corners of the book of Jonah, you see that it was God's original plan from the beginning to have compassion on them. Jonah said so himself in verse 2 before he preached in Nineveh. He said, "God, I knew this was what you were going to do." Jonah wasn't surprised. He didn't like it but he knew what was coming when God preached or when he preached as God's prophet. And in verse 11, you see God says,

11 "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

This was God's plan all along to save Nineveh. Look, forgive the really crass thing that I'm about to say here. This is not a good illustration but I think it communicates and sometimes you just want to communicate. God did not send Jonah not knowing what was going to happen. God didn't send Jonah not having a plan that he had established all along, Ephesians 1:10 and 11. When Jonah went to Nineveh, God was not rolling dice and saying, "I wonder what will come up if Jonah goes? Ah, they repented, great." As if he was surprised by the outcome. God knew the outcome from the beginning. Scripture makes it plain he knows the end from the beginning and it was his plan to save Nineveh all along. So we need to understand that this was God's plan. This is what he intended entirely from the start and he worked it out, the means by which he accomplished that was by having Jonah preach a message of judgment which by its very nature was conditional; conditioned on their repentance, they could find mercy.

Now, let's bring all of this together. From a human perspective, from our time-bound perspective, it seems like as you read Jonah 3 from verse 1 to verse 10, from a time-bound perspective it seems like God changed. It seems like something has changed here but we see from a careful consideration of the totality of the book and the nature of God and recognizing our own limitations, we realize that our perspective in this little sliver of time is not the only perspective on this. From a time-bound perspective, it seems like change but we know from the character of God and from the whole book of Jonah God didn't change because this is what he planned all along.

So why does it talk about "relenting" which is a word that sounds like "change"? Well, just remember what I told you, Scripture sometimes uses figures of speech, uses images to help us understand in ways that we are not to press too far as though God were literally a rock or that God literally had wings like a hen. There is a sophisticated word to describe this. It's about six syllables, five or six syllables. I didn't count them, and bear with me. There is a sophisticated word to describe what is happening here in chapter 3, verse 10, and it is this: anthropathism. You can look it up but I'll tell you what it means. Don't look it up now. Pull out your phone, "Anthro, something." An anthropathism conceives of God as though he had human thoughts and emotions. An anthropathism is a literary device to help us grasp deep truth. We're not to understand them so literally that all of a sudden we inject change into the essence of the immutable God, rather we are to

understand that Scripture is helping us understand something that is outside the realm of our ability to fully comprehend and is certainly outside the realm of our experience. So God as he inspired the writers of Scripture, used different things to help us grasp from where we're at to reach into heaven, as it were, to understand things of his greatness that are beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

What does that mean with respect to Nineveh? Oh, this is sweet. The people who changed, the ones who changed in Jonah 3 were the people of Nineveh. They repented. They changed and when they changed, it brought them out of the realm of God's judgment and into the realm of his mercy. I'll say that again. I'm not wearing my glasses so everybody's face looks glazed to me when I'm not wearing my glasses, but in case there are glazes of, "I don't know what you just said," let me slow down and just explain because I really want you to get this. When Nineveh changed, it brought them out of the realm of God's judgment and into the realm of his mercy, okay? Those people really did change but, beloved, follow me now, this is where the anthropopathism really helps us: God's essence never changed because God does not change, and what is more, beloved, God's plan never changed. This is what he intended all along but as you and I as time-bound creatures read a story unfold chronologically, it looks like change from our human perception in time. What we are seeing is we are seeing sovereign compassion in action and what we see here is this: we see an eternal unchanging plan of the immutable God working out in time as that unchanging God deals with temporal changing men. He's the same God, it's the same plan, but because we can't comprehend it all in one great mental act of comprehension, it unfolds before us in time and we see the different colors of the aspect of the light hitting the prism, we see it playing out but all of the colors were there all along. So did God literally change? No, he didn't. The relenting is a human perspective as God worked out his eternal plan in the lives of these unworthy sinners who repented and came to him.

What does that mean for us today? I'll tell you what that means for us today. The great news is that he's the same God today that he was back then. He hasn't changed. He can't change. Change would either be from good to worse or from one situation to better, actually improving, but God is perfect and he has always been perfect. There cannot be change in him. He's either going down or he's going up and both of those would violate his eternal perfection. That has implications for your soul today. The fact that he's the same God today, the fact that he manifested mercy to unworthy sinners back in the day of Nineveh means that you have every reason to trust him and to seek him in your own life today.

Look at Isaiah 55 and we'll bring this to a conclusion here in just a moment. Isaiah 55:6 and 7. This is so very sweet, that what was said 2,700 years ago by a contemporary of the prophet Jonah would be true today, and you see how all of this ties together in verse 6,

6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD,

And what will be the outcome of that? What have we been saying all morning long, beloved?

And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.

God pardons those who come to Christ by faith. God forgives them. In other words, I'm just repeating myself in saying the same thing in different ways. God does not hold our sins against us. God relents from judgment and all of that mercy is found in the perfection of our Lord Jesus Christ in his death on the cross. If you are convicted and afraid of God's judgment on your soul, recognize that even in that conviction is God's promise of mercy to seek him for the forgiveness that is freely available in Christ.

In Acts 26:18, you don't need to turn there because I'm closing with this. In Acts 26:18, in the words of the Apostle Paul, or actually what the Lord said to the Apostle Paul. He said, "I'm sending you to Gentiles, people just like you,

18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."

The unchanging God promises enduring mercy to people like that. Are you one of them?

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your grace, for your mercy. We bow low in worship before the surpassing grandeur of your character. We bow low in humility before you in light of the great mercy that you promise to sinners who come to Christ. How can it be, O God, that you are like this? How can it be that you are a God who offers mercy even when you are proclaiming righteous judgment against men? How can it be that you are a God who will not despise a broken and a contrite heart except that you're not like us. So we offer you our worship. In Christ we offer you our imperfect repentance and faith knowing that in Christ you accept us. In the righteousness and shed blood of Christ, there is hope for every sinner everywhere while he is still drawing breath but, O God, let no one trifle with such a great message because an hour of death is coming, an hour of judgment is coming, there is a grave waiting to receive us, and so let us flee to Christ while there is still time. Let us find mercy from the hand that offers mercy now in time before the stroke of judgment falls. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

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