



Speaker:
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Repentance

◀ Series: Jonah • 3 of 3

9/19/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Jonah 3**

So far in the book of Jonah, we've covered his flight from God, his reining in by God through the agent of a large sea creature, and his prayer of thanksgiving to God for sparing his life.

We left Jonah last time being vomited out onto a beach. He was certainly glad to be alive. And we hear God giving Jonah his instructions again. In other words, he was back where he started! His rebellion resulted in him being in a storm, putting the lives of others at risk, being thrown overboard, almost drowning, being swallowed whole by a sea creature, and finally being spewed out. All this trouble could have been avoided had he simply obeyed the God he claimed to follow.

Now he's become more submissive to God, he embarks on his mission. A very long journey lies ahead of him. The five or six hundred miles he needed to travel would take one to two months on foot. Even if he were able to get himself a camel or donkey to carry him, it'd still be a long and tiring journey.

From this story we've tried to extract facts about God and his purposes in salvation. It bears witness to his power, sovereignty, wisdom and mercy, for example.

This third chapter we're looking at today focuses on the repentance of the Ninevites. So the message today will be about repentance: the repentance of those people, the apparent repentance of God himself, and what form the preaching of repentance should take today.

The repentance of the people

It tells us in v.4 about Jonah going "a day's journey" into Nineveh. Based on what I proposed to you a couple of weeks ago about the size of Nineveh, I understand this to mean he walked around the city of Nineveh for a day **or** he travelled 10 to 20 miles into the larger area I called "Greater Nineveh".

Many sermons have been given about Jonah's preaching. A lot of them seem to be based on assumptions. Preachers claim Jonah preached just one message, and it contained these few words we see in verse four.

The truth is we don't know how many times Jonah preached, how many different locations in Nineveh he preached in, and whether the words recorded for us make up the entirety of what he said.

However, these are all the words we have recorded, and it leaves for us this great contrast between the insignificant voice of a single man and the subsequent repentance of hundreds of thousands of people.

This was one of the biggest acts of corporate repentance in history. It's a shame the heathen had this habit of not recording anything in their histories which cast them in a bad light. It would have been nice if the Assyrians themselves would have included this major event in the history they left for us.

But what a change this was! You heard me describe the depths of wickedness the Assyrian people had reached; yet they believed God! They believed in a god that wasn't their own. They believed he had the power to overthrow their entire civilisation.

We see too in v.6 this repentance stretched to the highest levels in their society. The king himself carried out the ritual of grief the ancients practised, swapping the finest robes for a covering of rough cloth, and coming off his ornate throne and sitting instead in a pile of ash.

We might find the whole sackcloth and ashes thing a bit odd. It's all very theatrical; but is it genuine?

It's no different from crying. In our culture, when people cry, we don't always know for sure whether it's sincere or not. So yes; people using sackcloth and ashes can be faking it. But in our passage, it's clear there was a genuine repentance behind it all.

The people called for a city-wide fast, and the king quickly made it into a royal decree. There would be a season of fasting, and people were to wear sackcloth. More importantly, people were to turn from their wicked ways.

Even the animals were included in the outward show of repentance. They too would be covered in sackcloth and denied water and food for a season.

It's very common for commentators to claim the livestock repented too. Every preacher wants to comment on a passage of Scripture in a refreshing way. But there's always the temptation to impress the hearers by revealing something in the passage no one else spotted.

And so it is we hear preachers tell us about the cows repenting of their sins. It should be obvious to you that, for several reasons, it makes no sense to claim the cows, goats, sheep and donkeys were all consciously crying out to God for mercy because of their sin.

After a few days of being without food and water, the animals *would* have started to make a lot of noise, and their sorrowful voices would be added to those of the people and exaggerate the spectacle of repentance. *That's* the point.

Well we see in all this the essence of what repentance is. **Proper repentance demands we both stop sinning *and* turn to God for mercy.**

Obviously, the people of Nineveh didn't suddenly become sinless. I imagine they became much like what the modern-day evangelical's like. I'm sure they stopped committing acts of violence. I'm sure prostitution ended. I'm sure they stopped stealing.

Like us, they'd still have artefacts of sin within them. Outwardly, the change of behaviour would be nothing less than revolutionary. And this would have come from genuine change within also. My point is a genuine repentance requires we at the very least stop committing the most obvious sins. Rooting out the more subtle sins usually takes time. They can torment us our whole lives.

Apart from turning away from sin, proper repentance demands we turn to God and beg for forgiveness. And this is what the people of Nineveh did. They all prayed to God and begged him to change his mind and spare their lives. That brings us naturally to our next point.

The repentance of God

If the repentance of the people of Nineveh was significant because of the numbers involved, the repentance of God was significant because of who he is.

Based on what we know of God, this doesn't sound right at all. How is it possible God can repent?

More recently, the word "repent" in v.10 has been replaced by alternatives like "relent". As useful as that is, we're left with the difficulty that the same Hebrew word is used to describe what the Ninevites did *and* what God did.

The reason for the difficulty is to do with the character of God. There's a doctrine which refers to God's *immutability*. This means **God cannot be changed**. Not even if the whole of creation were to conspire against God to change his nature could he *be* changed.

The doctrine also means **God cannot change himself**. We describe God as omnipotent—that is, all powerful—but there are limits to what he can do. Even with all his power he cannot, say, discard his immortality. He cannot cease to be a trinity and become a duality. And we're even more grateful he cannot go back on his promise to save his people eternally.

Let's have a look at reference to God's immutability in the Scriptures:

God is not a man, that he should lie, neither the son of man, that he should repent. Hath he said, and shall he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

Numbers 23:19

This makes it clear God cannot lie, repent, or go back on his word.

It's this type of apparent contradiction which many atheists seize on to use as ammunition against belief in God. But the only people who'd use this are either people with below-average intelligence who genuinely believe they've made a cast-iron case, or people with above average intelligence who use the argument in an act of desperation.

The solution is seen in how we often use the same word in different ways. When we say the Ninevites repented, we mean it in the way I described earlier, with a turning from sin and prayers to God for mercy.

When we say God repented, it's to be understood as a figure of speech. Here, the word's used in a different way as part of what we sometimes refer to as "the language of accommodation".

In a way, I'm doing it right now. To be understood by as many people as possible, I change the way I speak. Naturally, I speak very *quickly*, I *don't* pronounce my words properly, and I speak with a *Scouse accent*! (If you're not from the UK, "Scouse" describes the accent of someone from Liverpool.)

So in preaching, I speak more slowly, pronounce my words more carefully, and try to neutralise my accent. I'm not compromising who I am. I simply want the ministering of this vitally important word of God to be as clear as possible. In doing this, I'm in a way employing this principle of accommodation. I'm changing my communication for the sake of clarity.

God graciously does the same to us. Through his human authors, he describes his appearance, character and behaviour in ways we can relate to. When the Bible describes our heavenly father as sitting on his throne, baring his holy arm, enjoying the smell of animal sacrifices, etc., it should be clear to you we're not meant to understand these literally.

The image given to us here is of God issuing a threat, the people asking him not to harm them, and God agreeing to their request. It's a theatrical representation of what's really going on.

And it's there to teach us something. It encourages us not to get bogged down in the mysteries of God's providence but rather see it more simply. Why do you pray? You pray because you believe God responds to prayer. And when we say God "responds", that implies he's changing course!

Theologically though, we know what we call God "answering" our prayers is nothing more than God doing what he was always going to do. In the same way, God was always going to spare Nineveh.

His threat against the city was conditional. Here's how God explains it through the mouth of his prophet:

At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them...

Jeremiah 18:7-9

But the mystery of *how* God meshes our prayer with his will is too great for us to understand. And like I said, God doesn't *want* us to waste time trying to attain a complete

understanding of something far beyond us. Instead, he's reduced it to a formula that has both simplicity and a heavenly elegance. *Ask, says God, and you shall receive.*

The Ninevites understood the threat well enough. God would demolish their city...unless they repented first. They did repent, and he did relent.

The complexity of the purpose of God in saving Nineveh is unfathomable. Let's think of just a few of the results of it:

- In his threats against Nineveh, he declared his power
- Amidst the general repentance, there may well have been many of God's elect who repented unto salvation
- And in bringing about the repentance, he not only showcased his mercy but prevented innumerable acts of wickedness.

Consider as well that this event would play a part in the purposes of God for every individual in that city, and a far greater multitude who would read about it afterwards, you see how God accomplishes innumerable intentions in this one act of mercy.

One interesting purpose of God sparing Nineveh then was his use of them as his weapon of war against northern kingdom of Israel thirty years later. The repentant spirit of some of the Ninevites would be temporary, and the emergence of the next generation would see Nineveh become part of the Assyrian armies which are used by God to punish Israel's idolater king, Jeroboam.

The repentance we preach

Repentance is of course preached to this day. We preach repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Most evangelism is carried out by pastors and evangelists, but it's a primary responsibility for all believers to not be ashamed and to bear witness for Jesus.

With the limited details of what Jonah preached, we might conclude his message was different from ours. It's true there was no preaching about Jesus Christ specifically, since this was before the incarnation.

However, we should keep in mind two things. One is the message was the same at its most fundamental level. Man has sinned, God is angry, punishment will follow, but mercy can be found in him.

Another thing to remember is Jesus *was* preached in the Old Testament. He was preached by the patriarchs and is preached by the prophets. They didn't know him as Jesus as such, but they did use terms which are equivalent to the meaning of "Jesus" and "Christ".

But you and I live in a special time. The gospel has been revealed to us through the Bible in a more comprehensive way. The Messiah has come. His name is Jesus. He is the Christ. And all we need to know about him has been revealed to us.

It's interesting to note Jesus referring to Jonah and his tale. You may remember the religious leaders of his day promised him they would believe on him if only he would give them a sign. They were obsessed with signs, with proofs.

Jesus refused. The one who could call down fire from heaven not only wouldn't do it but also condemned those who asked for such things. This is what he says to them, as recorded in Matthew's gospel:

But he answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign. And there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Matthew 12:39–40

(Let me quickly point out where it says the *whale's* belly you shouldn't think it means a whale specifically. The New Testament word, like the Hebrew equivalent, refers to a sea creature. The translators decided it must have been a whale.)

So Jesus denied them a sign in the form of a spectacle, but he taught them that Jonah's experience was the only sign they'd be given. *The sign of Jonah*.

What he meant was Jonah's experience with the fish was to foreshadow his time in the grave. The subtle difference is that I said Jonah's time in the water was as good as being in the grave, but of course Jesus died in the proper sense.

Jesus going to the grave isn't itself impressive or unusual. Same thing happens to everyone. The crucial difference is Jesus was only three days and three nights in the grave. The grave couldn't keep him down. After that symbolic period had ended, a resurrected Jesus walked out of that tomb.

When people demand evidence from us, we've no obligation to provide sophisticated evidence which stands up to their scientific or philosophical scrutiny. We are required to testify Jesus has risen!

And this means so much more than just someone coming back to life. It includes a victory over death itself, the signing of the death warrant for Satan, and a display of the future resurrection promised to all those who are aligned with Jesus.

Our conviction of the truth of the resurrection is based on two things. There are the eyewitness testimonies recorded for us in Scripture, and the fruit of the resurrection in our own lives. We have an inward, Spirit-induced certainty that our sins have been forgiven by God. And that forgiveness could only come with the success of Jesus's mission. Calvary wasn't enough; we had to have the empty tomb as well.

You'll find plenty of people in this world who scoff at our claims. Let them. Remember these are the same people who would listen in a far more even-handed way in one of our law courts. When someone takes the stand to give evidence, the judge and jury are not looking

for an unanswerable case. The witness simply states what they believe to be true, and the hearers make a judgement as to the truthfulness of it.

But that even-handed attitude goes out the window when people are listening to us give evidence about our encounter with Jesus Christ. In their blindness, they repeat almost word for word what their spiritual forefathers, the Pharisees, said: *Show us a sign! Give us proof!*

Anyone who's familiar with the Scriptures will shake their heads in frustration with these people. Because we can point to many occurrences recorded in the Bible where the provision of miraculous signs by themselves didn't produce the effects people think they would.

The people we encounter in the world today will tell you how they'd believe in God on the spot if they saw a sign. From our knowledge of the Scriptures, we predict something else. If people saw a miracle, they would be amazed. Many would spontaneously break out in acknowledgement of God's power.

But when this state of euphoria has ended, what would the lasting result be? We could use multiple examples from the Bible to show just how temporary these effects usually are.

The example I'll use concerns those places in Galilee where Jesus did so many miracles. Places like Bethsaida, for example. The people in those places witnessed more miracles than anyone else in the whole of history. Now let's listen to Jesus's condemnation of them:

"Woe unto thee, Chorazin, woe unto thee, Bethsaida; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."

Matthew 11:21

This doesn't mean miracles were useless. Jesus and the apostles used them to confirm their message. But Jesus showed through the example of the Galileans that miracles alone will not save an unbelieving heart. **Whether miracles are present or not, God's grace must be given to a sinner by God or else they will perish.**

Christians today often get disheartened at the apparent lack of response to their message. A brother came to me one day with utter despondence. He'd given out 10,000 gospel leaflets in his local area and hadn't received a single contact as a result.

The sudden surges of religious enthusiasm we read about may or may not be genuine. We shouldn't forget the work of God in drawing in his elect people to his kingdom is more often than not a slow and quiet business. Considerable time can pass before we hear of someone turning to Jesus Christ.

But it continues, nonetheless. And that running total of the redeemed keeps increasing. Sometimes it increases more quickly than at other times, but it always goes up. When we bemoan the lack of interest in the things of God, we shouldn't forget that each day the number of that great multitude is rising.

We should count it a great privilege to be witnesses for the gospel. Whatever Jonah said, the principle remains that it was a lone voice that caused an entire metropolis to repent. You may think that's unlikely to happen today, and I'd agree. We haven't seen it happen throughout history, so there's no reason to expect it now.

I know there's not one of you that would deny God could save an entire country in one go if he wanted to. So we retain the faith he can do this. But we remember not many people travel down that road which leads to eternal life. Most people are on the broad road which leads to destruction, an annihilation of a type which is conscious and never ending.

So we press on. We declare not that Jesus loves everyone, not that Jesus died for everyone, or anything like that. We declare "Jesus Christ and him crucified" and we assure people if they're burdened with sin and will approach God in humility, he will, if you like, repent of the evil he would have done.

And remember this: he won't only accept their repentance and grant mercy but will *delight* in that repentance and *delight* to respond in mercy.

Amen.