

## The God Who Relents

### Jonah 3:1-10

I grew up in a revivalistic church culture. Those were the days of Bob Harrington the famous Bourbon Street evangelist, and Billy Graham who took his crusade ministry worldwide. Perhaps some of you were converted at a Billy Graham crusade or watching via television as he preached the gospel to thousands of people. As great as their evangelistic events were, they pale in comparison to Nineveh.

It is striking that if we want to see an OT picture of repentance, we turn not to Israel for an example but to Nineveh. James Montgomery Boice said of Nineveh's repentance, *This was the greatest and most thorough revival that has ever taken place.*<sup>i</sup>

If we look all the way through the OT, there is no such turning in Israel in repentance toward God as was in Nineveh.<sup>ii</sup> It is the OT example of a mass people movement in faith and repentance to God.<sup>iii</sup>

Jonah was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, the 10 breakaway tribes. His prophetic ministry had two highlights: his prophecy concerning the NK and his preaching in Nineveh. The histories of the NK and Assyria are intertwined. The LORD, it seems, raised up Assyria to humble the NK because of their idolatry. By the time of Jonah, the NK had paid tribute to Assyria for 60 years and was teetering on collapse. God had mercy on them, raised up Jeroboam II (784-746 BC) as their king and sent Jonah to prophesy of a turn of their fortunes and the restoration of their borders to days of Solomon (2Kgs 14:25).<sup>iv</sup>

The 800-pound gorilla in the room of Jonah's prophecy to the NK is that God's restoration of them was not due to their repentance.

At the same time, Israel began to ascend, Assyria went into a period of decline. God, however, was not finished with Assyria but their wickedness had *come up before him* (cf. 1:2). He would ultimately use them to exile the NK. But for now, the time had come to judge them or save them. So, God sent Jonah to preach to the Ninevites. The last thing in the whole wide world Jonah wanted to see was Nineveh spared. The Ninevites, however, repented at the preaching of Jonah, and God relented from the evil he would have done to them.

These realities highlight the message of Jonah: God is merciful (4:2b).<sup>v</sup> The book

illustrates God's mercy to us by showing mercy at work in Jonah, in pagan sailors, and in Nineveh. The irony is Jonah was so thankful for the mercy he received, but thought the Ninevites were undeserving of mercy. Mercy, by definition, is undeserved.

Had Jonah forgotten the underserving nature of mercy? If the fish was to teach him anything, it was to teach Jonah that he did not deserve the mercy of God. Does that truth not give you hope for the world?

I've been learning a lot about mercy lately. Why is mercy so offensive? We have a hard time rejoicing when people receive good they don't deserve. I have found that I have much more in common with Jonah than I would like to think. With good reason, Jesus included the elder brother in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:25ff).

What can we learn about God's mercy from this text?

### **1. In Jonah, we see God's mercy to his people (1-4).**

After verse 3:5, Jonah disappears from view, and the focus shifts to Nineveh and God. We will not pick Jonah up again until chapter 4.

Jonah 3 begins in a strikingly similar way to chapter 1. God has hit the reset button on his prophet and once again commissioned him to go to Nineveh.

#### **A. The man (1-3a)**

While there are similarities to the beginnings of these two chapters (cf. 1:1-3a and 3:1-3a), there are differences as well. This is the second time the *Word of the LORD* has come to Jonah. Friends, is not the mercy of God to Jonah showcased in those words, *second time*?

Perhaps Jonah thought God was finished with him when the fish vomited Jonah out. *Vomit out* is typically not a sign that God is looking favorably on you,<sup>vi</sup> but in this case, it was just the opposite, a sign of God's mercy triumphing over judgment.<sup>vii</sup>

God was merciful to Jonah in sparing his life and in commissioning him again to go to Nineveh, but Jonah was still not right. In fact, he will be downright angry over the result of his preaching (4:1), but God will come to him yet again.

God had set his affection on Jonah. Mercy had Jonah in its grip and no matter how stubborn he was, how much he resisted, or how angry he became, mercy would not

let him go. Jonah was not in pursuit of mercy, but mercy was in pursuit of him.

The word of the LORD came a second time saying, *Arise ... So Jonah rose and went ... according to the word of the LORD*. The expression *according to the word of the LORD* ties this text with Jonah's prophecy concerning the NK in the days of Jeroboam II (cf. 2Kgs 14:25).<sup>viii</sup> The borders of Israel were restored *according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Jonah the son of Amittai*.

Jonah obeyed and went to Nineveh, but his heart was not in it. We'll get back to that in chapter 4.

### **B. The message (4)**

Jonah was to go and preach the message that *God would tell him* (2b). He would get the message when he got there.<sup>ix</sup> On the first day of a three-day preaching tour, the LORD gave Jonah his message (4a). That message turned out to be an 8-word sermon,<sup>x</sup> *Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown* (4b).

This is an interesting choice of words the LORD has for Jonah, especially the word, *overthrown* (hapak). It is used two ways in the OT.<sup>xi</sup> It can mean to *overthrow* in the sense of *destroy*, or it can mean to *turn around* in the sense of *repentance*.

These words hold if Nineveh is destroyed or if they repent. Jonah hopes for the former, and the Ninevites hope for the latter. There is a threat of judgment in these words, and there is hope for mercy.

### **C. The mercy (3b)**

In the second part of verse 3, we have an extended description of Nineveh. It was *an exceedingly great city* (ir gadol elohim), *three days journey in breadth*. This differs from the previous descriptions (1:2 and 3:2, *great city*, ir gadol). Your Bible may have a footnote that offers an alternative translation: *a great city to God*. Some scholars say the word *God, Elohim*, is used simply as a superlative meaning as translated here, *exceedingly*. Others, however, say it means the city was important to God.

I think retaining God's relation to the city is in keeping with the flow of the book. The book will close with the LORD's final words to Jonah in defense of his mercy to Nineveh, *Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?* (4:11)

Nineveh was not important to God in the sense that God was somehow dependent on Nineveh. It was important to him because for that time, he was as determined to be merciful to Nineveh as he was to be merciful to Jonah. But Jonah did not share God's view of Nineveh.

Jonah becomes for us one in whom we see God's mercy at work.

## **2. In Nineveh, we see the pattern of turning to God (5-9).**

An eight-word sermon, even shorter in Hebrew, and the people of Nineveh repented. We cannot miss the remarkable nature of Jonah appearing in Nineveh and preaching this short sermon loaded with meaning. A person, less off an Israelite prophet, could not just show up in Nineveh and start preaching on the streets and hope to survive. Jonah, however, was a sign to them. He was a living parable of one who had been overthrown by mercy. At his preaching, they repented.

In the Ninevites, we see the pattern of a person or a people turning to God. In verses 5-9, two basic conditions arise that are essential for any genuine turning to God: faith and repentance (5a, 8b). Believing is faith, and turning is repenting.

### **A. Faith and repentance are the result of a prior work of God.**

The faith and repentance of Nineveh are the result of a prior work of God. They are inseparable graces or gifts that come from God. Genuine faith is never devoid of repentance, and genuine repentance is expressed in faith. These come together. Repentance and faith are the necessary conditions for justification not the cause of justification.

You can see the king express this in verse 9 when he concludes, *Who knows? God may turn....* The sea captain had expressed a similar idea, *Perhaps, the God will give a thought to us...* (1:6). God is free to save and to judge, and no one can accuse him of wrongdoing.

There is no presuming on the grace of God in Nineveh. Theirs was no formula faith. There were no spells and incantations and repeating certain phrases to somehow coax God into sparing them.<sup>xii</sup> I know God is merciful, but I fear that the familiarity some have with the Christian faith is destructive for their souls. They see God as somehow obligated to save. It's his job.

Genuine, heart-felt faith and life-changing repentance are the necessary conditions for salvation, not the cause. The cause is the sheer mercy and grace of God that

moves him to save the believing. Salvation is not a cause-and-effect proposition where the cause is in me with the effect of God being moved by me to save me.

Rather the cause is God himself, and the effect is I am moved by his work in me to repent and believe. In verse 10, *when God saw what they did* (mahaseh—deeds, works), *and how they turned...*, *He relented*. What God saw in the Ninevites was the result of his prior work in them.

This is an important point. God had been at work in Nineveh long before Jonah got there.<sup>xiii</sup> Jonah, at first, went the opposite direction from Nineveh to get away from the Presence of the LORD (1:3,10). When Jonah went to Nineveh, he ran into the Presence of the LORD. On the mission field, I was always struck by the reality that God had already been at work wherever I went. Missions is playing catch-up to God's prior work in his world.

Genuine, saving faith and heart-felt repentance are always the result of God's prior work. What do genuine faith and repentance look like?

### **B. Their faith (5a)**

*The people of Nineveh believed God (5a).*<sup>xiv</sup> The words *believed God* are huge in OT and NT language. These are the words that describe Abraham's justification by faith (Genesis 15:6; cf. Rom 4.3; Gal. 3:6; Jas 2:23). There is no reason to think their meaning is any different here than elsewhere. This reference linking the faith of the Ninevites to the faith of Abraham is the Bible's way of saying their faith is an example of genuine faith. We should pay attention to it. It is the necessary condition of justification.

### **C. Their repentance (5b-8)**

The Ninevites believed God (5a) and turned from their sin (8b). These two things always go together. Their repentance is seen in two ways: self-humbling and turning from sin.

#### **1) Self-humbling (5b-8a)**

When they heard Jonah's message, the people took the initiative to call for a fast and put on sackcloth. This is a grassroots movement of self-humbling. Citywide, from the greatest to the least, they humbled themselves before the LORD (5b).

When the king heard, he humbled himself, rose from his throne, removed his robe and put on sackcloth in its place, and sat himself in an ash heap (6). He intensified

and expanded the people's outward show of self-humbling (7-8a).<sup>xv</sup> He exhorted all to *call out mightily to God* (8a). *Call out* is a repeated exhortation in the Jonah. It's important now: *For everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved* (Joel 2:32; cf. Rom. 10:13)!

True repentance will always be accompanied by expressions of self-humbling. Faith and repentance have physical, tangible expressions that reflect spiritual realities. The Lord's table is a very tangible, physical expression of faith.

I have never seen someone putting on uncomfortable, coarse clothing and sitting in ashes to reflect the discomfort and affliction of their souls over their sin.

However, I knew a dear brother who decided to go to church with his family one Sunday. At some point in the service, God gave him repentance. He went home and cried all day. His family tried to console him, but he couldn't speak to them. His life was changed that day. He faithfully served the LORD from that day till he went to be with the LORD. His soul was afflicted, and it showed outwardly.

## **2) They turned from their sin (8b).**

They turned from their *evil ways* and *violence* (8b). This is repentance. They turned (sub). This is not some kind of corporate or national repentance. Each person is exhorted to repent of his *evil ways and violence that is in his hands* (8b).

Their hope in believing and turning from their sin is that God might *turn* (sub) *and relent* (naham) *and turn* (sub) *from his fierce anger, so that they may not perish* (9). *Who knows?* the king says, *God may turn and relent*.

Dear friend, perhaps, part of the problem in your inability to turn from your sin is your sin has not become so abhorrent to you that you are willing to suffer the pain of leaving it. We think we can keep feeding and indulging ourselves and not make any life changes and still overcome our sin. Paul buffeted his body and kept it under control (1Cor. 9:27). The fruit of the spirit is self-control (Gal. 5:23).

Perhaps the repentance of Nineveh was more thorough than any we have experienced? What do you mean you can't stop your sin? Friend, it's not a matter of you can't, it's that you don't want to. You want your sin more than you want to be right with God. Dear friend, the gospel says, the power of sin has been broken, and sin will have no dominion over you (Rom. 6:1-23).

## **3. In God, we see the possibility of mercy (10).**

The question in your heart and mind this morning could be, *Will God forgive me?* Perhaps you are at the place in your life where you think there is no way back for you. There is no better news for you to hear than the possibility that God may be merciful to you. His great compassion may *overthrow* your life. This is what happened in Nineveh.

Verses 9-10 have the language of *repenting* (turn) and *relenting*. The repentance of the Ninevites is contrasted with the relenting of God. The king has a better understanding of these concepts than many today who want to assign to God the attributes of a man. The king properly calls God's *turning, relenting* (9). Men repent. God relents. How does God turn from wrath to mercy? By relenting.

He does not repent in the sense that people repent. When people repent, they turn from sin and experience a change of mind and heart. Scripture reminds us: *God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind* (Num. 23:19; cf. 1Sam 15:29). When God relents, he acts in mercy and compassion toward sinners consistent with his unchangeable character.

The language of the king in verse 9 is the language of Joel 2:14, *Who knows whether he will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him.* Joel has taken up the same theme with which Jonah is wrestling.<sup>xvi</sup> From where did these prophets get these concepts?

Joel and Jonah put Exodus 32 and 34 together. Those two chapters are bookends of the golden calf sin. They give us what we are to learn about God from the story. In Exodus 32, Moses prayed for the people, and God *relented* of the disaster he would do to them. He is the God who *relents!* That is the first time the concept of God *relenting* appears in Scripture. In Exodus 34, God revealed his glory and proclaimed his name to Moses. Why would God relent in Exodus 32? Because in Exodus 34, God revealed his unchanging, immutable nature: *the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...* (Ex 34:6; cf. Ex 32:14; Joel 2:12-14; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2).

We have the answer to the king's question, *Who knows?*<sup>xvii</sup> Jonah knew (4:2). Jesus answered that question for us as well: *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out* (Jn. 6:37).

*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it* (10).

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<sup>i</sup> Boice, *The Minor Prophets: Hosea-Jonah*, vol. 1, 291. He quotes Frank E. Gaebelien saying, ...*For here is the record of nothing less than the greatest mass conversion in history...* (see, Gaebelien, *Four Minor Prophets*, 95).

<sup>ii</sup> See 2Kgs 22-23. Jonah was in Nineveh most likely in the 750s BC. Josiah was king in Judah starting in 639. More than 110 years after the Nineveh revival we see Judah find the law book and restore Passover but too little too late. We have to get all the way to king Josiah's reforms before there is a hint of revival. Other than that the most significant reform in Israel would not come until post-exilic times with Ezra and Nehemiah. Even then we hardly see a people movement to rival Nineveh.

<sup>iii</sup> Jesus held up Nineveh as an example to the chagrin of his generation. When he held up individuals as examples of faith, they were all gentiles: the Queen of the South who came hear Solomon (Mt. 12:42), the widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon to whom Elijah came (Lk 4:26), and Naaman the Syrian who came to Elisha (Lk. 4:27). In his own day, it was the Centurion who had faith like Jesus had not found in Israel (Mt. 8:10), and the Canaanite woman who had such great faith that Jesus did as she desired (Mt. 15: 28).

<sup>iv</sup> God so moved in Israel, not because they repented, but simply because *the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash* (2Kgs 14:26-27).

<sup>v</sup> Jonah will spell it out in 4:2b, *I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*

<sup>vi</sup> The idea has a rich theological meaning regarding God's judgment. If Israel was not faithful to the covenant, the land would vomit them out in exile. See Leviticus 18:25,28; 20:22.

<sup>vii</sup> See James 2:13.

<sup>viii</sup> The only other occasion this phrase is used of a prophet other than the two instances in Jonah is of Elijah (1Kgs 17:5). Jonah like Elijah did *according to the word of the LORD*. Jonah's narrative, miraculous theology is paralleled only by Elijah and Elisha. Other than the miracles this is on more connection between them. See Goldingay, BCOT, 396.

<sup>ix</sup> The is similar to the commission of Abraham to go to a land God would show him (Genesis 12:1).

<sup>x</sup> 5 words in Hebrew. See Bruchner, NIVAC, 90-91.

<sup>xi</sup> Overthrow as in destroy has Sodom and Gomorrah as primary reference (Gen. 19:21,25,29x2; Jer. 20:16; Isa. 13:19; Amos 4:11 (See Trimmer, NSBT, *A Gracious and Compassionate God*, 97-98). For the positive meaning see 1Sam 10:6-10; Deut. 23:5; Jer. 31:11,13; Ps 66:5-6 (see Bruchner, 105-106).

<sup>xii</sup> I can illustrate this with a conversation I had with a Muslim man. I asked how does one become a Muslim. He said, You make the confession, *Allah is One and Mohammad is his prophet*. I replied, *Allah is One and Mohammad is his prophet*. Then I asked, *Does that make me a Muslim?* He said, *No, there is more to it than that.*

<sup>xiii</sup> As noted in the introduction, at the time of Jonah Assyria began a steep decline. There was instability in the government and society. A number of famines, revolts, and plagues are recorded in Assyrian records, events whose evil portent was believed to be clearly indicated by accompanying eclipses. The eponym list and other official documents records a plague in 765, revolts in 763-759, a solar eclipse in 763, and famine from 765-759. Eclipses were seen as omens that the king would be deposed, floods and famine would come, and a deity would strike the king and fire would consume the land. The eponym list for the year of Assur-dan III (773-756) fits the above description well. Jonah's time in Nineveh fits well in the time of Assur-dan III. This situation would have made Nineveh unusually attuned to the appearance of Jonah. Could it be that this was part of God's prior work in Nineveh? (See Trimmer, 94. See also Stuart, *Word*, 490-494).

<sup>xiv</sup> Some see the faith and repentance of Nineveh as somewhat less saving on the grounds that Nineveh was not included in the Mosaic covenant as the people of God. I don't know why some feel the need to torture this one OT example of people turning to God. One, it has all the characteristics of evangelical faith and repentance. Two, genuine faith and repentance is always saving. Three, their faith was like Abraham's whose faith preceded the Mosaic covenant. Fourth, we are saved, and we never have been incorporated into the Mosaic covenant. Fifth, Jonah is finally being to Nineveh as Israel was to have been to the nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation because all the world belongs to God, and he has a redemptive concern for it (Ex 19:5-6).

<sup>xv</sup> Fasting and sackcloth in the OT were the physical evidence of self-humbling before God. Fasting afflicts the body inwardly and sackcloth outwardly. The physical discomfort reflected the earnestness of their heart cry for the

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mercy of God. It aided their crying out mightily to God. Their bodies were reflecting their spirits. They were mourning over their sin.

<sup>xvi</sup> In the wider context of Joel, he is calling on God's people to repent. Listen to his language: *Yet even now, declares the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him* (Joel 2:12-14a)?

<sup>xvii</sup> Jeremiah's insight into the character of God answers that question: *if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it* (Jer. 18:7-8).