

Jonah III – God Responds to Repentance

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,<sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”<sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth.<sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”<sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.<sup>6</sup> The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.<sup>7</sup> And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water,<sup>8</sup> but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.<sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

<sup>10</sup> 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.

When was the last time you thought about repentance? Let me take it one step further: when was the last time you actually repented of something? My guess is that many of us here maybe have an idea of what it means, but it's not a regular practice in our lives. But what if repentance was the way of entering the Christian life and continuing in it? In 1517 Martin Luther wrote his ninety-five theses laying out his understanding of the Christian faith, and do you know which was the first one? “our Lord and Master Jesus Christ ... willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” And if reading Jonah 3 closely, you'll see that the word “turn” occurs a lot in this passage. Actually, that's the Hebrew word for “repent”, and it crops up four times in verses 8-10. The central message of this chapter of Jonah is about repentance; turning away from one way of living to another way of living, or turning away from evil to God instead. And we'll see that from the king to the beggar in the street every Ninevite repents, but what is it that motivates this change? This morning Jonah 3 will teach us why repentance is needed, show us how to do it, and tell us how God responds to it.

***Trans.** We get in the opening paragraph of Jonah 3 a recap of chapter 1. After God spoke to Jonah first, and after he has been through the storm and the belly of the whale he's arrived at his destination. And the word of God comes to him a second time in much the same form: “get up and go to Nineveh and proclaim the message that I will give to you.” And this time Jonah obeys. He gets up and walks into Nineveh. It's taken him a while, and some serious soul-searching but he's finally made it! But we must first address why Jonah needed to preach in the first place.*

**I. Why repentance is needed**

- a. Repentance is needed because of **the reality of God's fierce anger** against injustice and sin, which leads to judgment. You can see this at the end of the king of Nineveh's proclamation in verse nine: "who knows? God may turn and relent, and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish". The message that Jonah is told to bring in verse 4 also makes this clear:
  - i. In forty days' time the city will be overthrown. Torn down. Destroyed. We're told over and over again in this book that Nineveh is a "great city", but this powerful metropolis with so much influence that makes up part of the greatest empire of the time, will be brought to nothing. All its might will not help it against God's wrath.
- b. But why this message of wrath?
  - i. Remember the reason for Jonah's being sent by God? It's because Nineveh's evil is so great that it cannot go unchecked or ignored.
    - 1. Assyria was an empire that was incredibly wicked. It was renowned for its injustice, imperialism, and oppression of the poor. Assyrian kings would record their victories with cruel glee, depicting cities burned to the ground and littered with corpses. They would subject the survivors of war to punishing and violent forms of slavery and devise graphic ways of murdering their enemies to inflict the greatest suffering possible. And this wasn't only their practice during war; it seems as though injustice and violence were everywhere in the city as a daily practice.
  - ii. This is a clear reminder for us that God cares about the injustice and evil of an entire culture or city as well as of individual people. The individual can't hide from God behind the group, and the group can't just blame its evil on select individuals because we all are part of the whole.
- c. And God's response is **fierce anger** which leads to **disaster** for the unrepentant. They are aware that if they continue in sin, they will **perish**. These are strong words: there is a God who will call all injustice to account. This is fearful, but what if it is also good news?
  - i. Until recently, in many different societies and religions a God who judges evil with wrath was the norm. It was widely accepted. It's only in affluent modern societies that people struggle with this. And that's probably because we fail to see how God's anger is right and even desirable when many of us haven't come face to face with any real kind of evil. We say that we believe in a God of love, not a God of anger. But there's a fatal flaw in the idea that the opposite of love is hate or anger.
    - 1. Years ago, a holocaust survivor named Elie Wiesel, who had seen more evil in his lifetime than any of us ever will, put it this way: "The opposite of love is not anger. It's indifference." If God is indifferent to evil and is simply benign harmless love, then let us move on and find another god worth worshipping. But in reality, God's love for his creation *requires* him to be angry when evil destroys it. You cannot have one without the other. True love

always reacts in righteous anger when the beloved is threatened. God's anger is not opposed to his love, it's a part of it. Think about how you feel when someone or something you love is threatened! It's deeply personal, and so is God's wrath against evil and sin.

- d. At this point I want to give an important caveat. There is a difference we need to acknowledge: God's anger at sin is a very real danger for those are not yet in a relationship with him. However, for the person who is already in relationship with Jesus we don't repent out of a fear of God's wrath (because Jesus has absorbed it all on the cross), but because we have broken our father's heart. Either way, God's displeasure calls for a personal response. That personal response is repentance.

***Trans.** So we've seen that repentance is necessary because the anger of God at sin and injustice is very real. And that this is both sobering and good news if we will embrace the truth of it. But we're taken on further into the story to see **how we should repent.** Jonah journeys into the city of Nineveh for a day and then cries out his message of judgment, and the immediate reaction of the Ninevites is as instructive as it is surprising! They show us that there's an **inward aspect** and an **outward aspect** to repentance. Let's look at the inward aspect first.*

## **II. The response of repentance**

### **a. Inward:**

- i. Verse five tells us that the people of Nineveh **believed God** after hearing Jonah's message. Actually, the Hebrew literally says "in God" which shows us there's an implied trust in the God who sent Jonah to proclaim this message. The first step in repentance is **you believe what God has said about you.** You trust his verdict, no matter how uncomfortable and shameful it is. You trust that because he is God, he knows more wisely and completely who you really are.
- ii. And humility is the sign you accept this verdict. Look at what the Ninevites do: they sit in the dust, put on sackcloth, they fast. All these were outward signs in the ancient world of deep inward grief and repentance. The king is particularly interesting when it says he removed his robe. In Hebrew it literally says the king removed his "majesty". In the ancient world your clothes were a status symbol, they represented might and power. So, the king removing them represents his removing anything he could boast in or defend himself with. He totally humbles himself.
- iii. I realise all of this is pretty controversial in an age of self-esteem, where we have done away with the idea of sinfulness. We don't believe in judgment and sin. We might believe in the natural consequences of doing wrong, but we don't believe in an ultimate, universal moral standard.
  1. But this robs us of the gift of peace and reconciliation with God. With no real repentance there can be no real peace; without accepting God's verdict on your sin, there's no hope of having the

joy of its forgiveness. When the doctor tells us we have a tumour we could easily ignore their diagnosis to avoid the emotional pain of acknowledging it and the physical pain of having it removed. But to do so would lead to us perishing. To believe the doctor and act would lead to healing. So, have you believed the doctor? Do you trust God's diagnosis of your condition?

- iv. But don't think here that these steps are like a formula to get God to accept you! Repentance can so easily turn into a way to convince God (and ourselves) that we're so miserable we deserve forgiveness. That's not true repentance because it's self-centred. True repentance is God-centred, and flows from an acknowledgment that we've wronged him.

b. **Outward:**

- i. But what about the outward signs of repentance? Well, here it looks like Nineveh turning from its wickedness and doing justice.
  - 1. Now, these are not two different things. They are linked together inseparably. In fact, many if not all of the calls of the prophets to Israel in the Old Testament are spiritual in nature (relating to their relationship to God) but have profound impacts on the society around them (relating to their relationship to one another). But unfortunately, some in the wider church think that turning to God is a purely spiritual and private matter. They tend to prioritise evangelism and neglect social action. Still others tend to emphasise social justice over evangelism, making Christianity a purely public matter.
  - 2. But the truth is it's both. Are you making room for both? Which are you better at, or doing more consistently? I wonder, does evangelism or social action make you more uncomfortable? Your answer to that question might reveal an imbalance in your understanding of the gospel.
- c. But we must recognise here that such a rapid turnaround of the society in Nineveh is astounding! It's hard to find consistent sociological reasons for changes on this level, and it reminds us that repentance is ultimately a gift from God. We're reminded in 2 Timothy 2:25 that it's God who takes the initiative in declaring our need for repentance (like he does through Jonah in this story), and then grants the ability to repent to us.

***Trans.** So if repentance is needed because of the reality of God's anger, and we do it through inwardly accepting God's verdict on us and outwardly changing our actions, what response can we expect? Will God turn away his anger? That's the question that the Ninevites pose in verse nine and the final point we'll turn to here this morning.*

**III. The result of repentance**

- a. Look at Jonah's proclamation in verse 4. Did you notice how he doesn't actually hold out the possibility of God's mercy to the Ninevites? He doesn't say, "Forty

- days and Nineveh will be overthrown, but if you repent there's hope of mercy from God!" Instead he seems to be eagerly waiting for God to destroy them, not tearfully pleading for their salvation. It's clear what his priorities are!
- b. But in verse ten we're told God relents from the disaster. He does the unexpected: he responds with mercy. When the Ninevites promise to turn from their course of action, God turns from his promised course of action.
    - i. How can he do this? We've spent a considerable amount of time talking about how God won't let evil go unpunished, and yet here he is letting the Ninevites off the hook! There are two things we must realise here:
      1. This relenting from disaster is temporary. Nineveh is eventually destroyed by the Babylonians as the Assyrians return to their evil way (but not before Assyria destroys the northern kingdom of Israel). The response of the city might have been genuine, but it quickly lapses back into its old ways. We must also remember here that there is no evidence of the Ninevites entering into a covenant relationship with God. God's covenant name Yahweh is not used here. God is compassionate and patient, but he's not a fool and he won't be mocked.
      2. Nevertheless, it sets up a paradox that will send Jonah spiralling into anger in chapter four: how can God claim to be just and yet forgive sinners? As we saw last week, this is a tension running throughout the entire bible. God presents himself as both the judge of the wicked and the merciful one who forgives sin. If he is only love then there is no justice for the world, if he is only justice then there is no hope for us, but how can he be both without his mercy contradicting his love, or vice versa?
  - c. Now, the Ninevites couldn't be sure, but we can. The answer is found many years later on a hill outside Jerusalem. The Son of God dying on a cross and experiencing the penalty and perishing our sin deserves opens the way for God's mercy to come to those who truly repent. Those of us who are Christians here this morning can look at the cross and say, "It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished." We can see that God vindicates his justice against our sin at the cross and opens the floodgates of his mercy for the repentant.
  - d. And it gives us hope that God responds to incomplete, imperfect repentance.
    - i. The Ninevites didn't have the knowledge of the rituals and sacrifices that Jonah had as an Israelite, but they repented from the heart and God turned disaster away from them. You don't have to be perfect in repentance to receive forgiveness. The sacrifice of a broken heart God will not despise.
    - ii. Because if our repentance were dependent upon it being wholly perfect, we'd be lost. But we can depend on the mercy of God shown most fully at the cross to give us courage to come to God without fear of judgment and hope for real and lasting change. So, take heart! God responds to repentance.

*Trans. Throughout this chapter we've seen that repentance is needed because of God's anger against sin and injustice, that we repent by believing his word inwardly and changing our actions outwardly, and finally that God shows mercy to the repentant. And I just want to leave us with a few final applications to take away from all this.*

#### Conclusion – concrete application

1. Do you believe God is angry at sin? Do you find it difficult to reconcile God's love with his anger? Maybe you need to spend time thinking about this; talking to other Christians and praying through it.
2. Are you struggling to repent? Is your repentance still defensive in nature? Are you hiding behind excuses for the sin in your life, or denying that it's no big deal? Do you need, like the king of Nineveh to "remove your majesty", whatever you're hiding behind, and humbly admit your sin?
3. Are you finding it difficult to repent because you don't think God will accept it? You feel the shame and know you're a sinner but aren't sure you'll be forgiven? Maybe you need to come to terms with God's willingness to forgive that we find here in Jonah.
4. Finally, are we both individually and as a church to taking the whole gospel of God's wrath, mercy, and the reform of society to the city? Osaka is a great city! How are you obeying the call to bring the good news of Christ in the gospel and do justice here?

So, those of us who are Christians, let us continue in the path of repentance as we walk with Jesus. Let us experience the joy of being reconciled to and forgiven by our father as he lovingly exposes our sin. And may we by God's grace see a radical turnaround in the city of Osaka, may we see whole communities repenting just like Nineveh.