

Jonah 3 Sermon – Learning Repentance with Jonah

Last time I was up here talking about Jonah, we learned about the importance of humility in our spiritual lives. It is only by recognizing who we are before God, as humble sinners, that we are able to accept his salvation on our behalf. The pagan sailors, in contrast to Jonah, showed humility before God. Now we, with Jonah, learn another lesson from the pagans, that of repentance.

Jonah's prayer from inside the fish, ends with him saying "salvation belongs to the Lord!" That God alone saves is a central message of Jonah, and might be a candidate for the entire message of Scripture. A big part of why we are to be humble before God is because salvation belongs to him, not us. In our passage for today, we see that clearly. God brings the most unlikely people to himself, with the most unlikely means.

Jonah 3

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." ¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

This is the Word of the Lord.

The story as we find it in chapter three of Jonah is a redo of chapter 1. This time Jonah obeys the word of Lord and goes to Nineveh. There is question here as to whether Jonah has truly been changed by his experience in the fish. Jonah begins with obeying God's call to preach to the Ninevites. Though the story makes it seem like he didn't exactly give his best effort. While

the city is said to take three days to get through, he only makes it one day in. And the sermon he gives doesn't exactly test the Ninevites attention span. The Ninevite's response from Jonah's half-hearted sermon is the complete opposite. Ironically, the Ninevites take their repentance seriously, so seriously they even cover their animals with sackcloth.

Just like how the sailors showed Jonah what true humility was before God, the Ninevites show Jonah true repentance. Jonah is outwardly following God's call, but it doesn't seem to have reached his heart. Jonah may have followed God this time, but he was literally saved by a giant fish. The Ninevites on the other hand hear a half-hearted sermon and their whole city is overturned.

2Tim.2:25 says that repentance is something that is granted by God. It is often seen it as the first sign of saving faith. It is with a call to repentance that Jesus first begins to preach the gospel, "saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk.1:15). To be sure, we are not saved because we repent, but we repent because we are saved. Our repentance is a gift of our salvation, a result of a changed heart.

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This sermon will have two main parts, first we'll compare Jonah with the Ninevites and what that teaches us about repentance. Then we'll look at what true repentance looks like in our lives. To conclude, we'll see how these are united in Christ, who, after all, fulfills the "sign of Jonah."

So, first, what does Jonah here teach us about repentance? How does the Ninevites repentance teach us?

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Repentance is the central message of this chapter. Notice God's message to give to the Ninevites. He says, "forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." God gives the Ninevites time to repent because he desires their repentance. Jeremiah 18:7-8 is clear that all prophetic pronouncements are provisional on the continued behaviour of those being spoken about, saying, "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned." Jonah feared that they would repent as God desires, and that was one of the reasons he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. He wanted to see God's judgement on his enemies.

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God did not come to judge Nineveh for nothing, Nahum 3:1-4 describes Nineveh's sin as being in their militaristic imperialism, a "bloody city, all full of lies and plunder." In their imperialism they "heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies!" But not only this the city was also guilty of much sexual debauchery, prostitution, and witchcraft. Nahum says, "all because of the wanton lust of a prostitute, alluring, the mistress of sorceries who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft." Nahum had a real way with words!

This sin of Nineveh greatly distresses God. Our text says that Nineveh was "a very large city," but more literally translated, it says that Nineveh was "a city great to God." God cares about the people of Nineveh. He wants to see his creation working well, and people be able to enjoy the creation he has made. Enjoying God's creation is not the ultimate purpose that he has for his creation, as ultimately, he wants us all to come into relationship with him, but it is still good, and good for us. Nineveh is unable to even appreciate the common beauty and order of the world when they are in this sin, let alone what saving grace offers.

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Historically, it seems that the city had been primed by God for Jonah's message. Jonah says that they will be 'overthrown' or 'overturned'. The word "overthrown" is the exact term that is used to describe the judgement of God on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19:25, Amos 4:11). This possibility would have been in the historical memory of Nineveh, as the city had been destroyed in an earthquake a thousand or so years before Jonah's arrival. Right around the time Jonah came, Nineveh had also just experienced several natural disasters, famines, plagues, and revolts, as well as eclipses that could have been read as bad omens for things to come.

The word 'repent' or 'turn' is used four times in verses 8-10. The book of Jonah seems to be using the judgement of 'overturn' in an ironic way, playing off the ways that one can be 'turned'. First, in response to Jonah's proclamation that the city will be 'turned' the king calls the city to 'turn' from their evil ways. He says, maybe in response to this turning God will 'turn' from his anger. God then see their 'turning' and does in fact relent.

Nineveh is in fact overturned, but not like Sodom and Gomorrah, but like our hearts are overthrown, that is, given a new Lord, when we repent. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for

'overturn' can also mean to 'turn around', as in 'repent'.¹ This is how the word is used in Hosea 11:8. Repentance is getting a new Lord. It is becoming, "not my own," as our Catechism says. For Nineveh, they can do this willingly and be saved from their disaster, or they can do it unwillingly and burn in a firestorm like Sodom.

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This picture of turning or being turned is a great illustration of what salvation looks like, and the way that Nineveh responds shows the transformation that God desires when we repent of our sin.

The text says that "the Ninevites believed God." They heard the word of the Lord and sat in humility before it. They showed this humility "from the greatest of them to the least of them." The king makes a decree while lying in the dust, that the whole city must participate in this fast, even the animals.

We see the king, and even the animals, wearing sackcloth. This is the kind of thing one does when grieving in this era, showing a grand and outward display of inner grief. The Ninevites seem to be clear in acknowledging their sin and recognizing God's justice. The king sits in the dust, stating his humility before God's judgement.

It is not that God can be moved by outward signs. God knows the heart. Calvin says on this passage, "Whenever then Scripture mentions fasting, and ashes, and sackcloth, we must bear in mind that these things are set before us as the outward signs of repentance, which, when not genuine, do nothing else but provoke the wrath of God; but when true, they are approved of God on account of the end in view, and not that they avail, of themselves, to pacify his wrath, or to expiate sins."²

The Ninevites give an awesome and miraculous transformation. God took their hearts and softened them. Those who were so far from God's vision for his creation now stand ready to

¹ *Will be overturned*. The verb *hāpak*, 'overturn', is used elsewhere to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:25; Lam. 4:6; Amos 4:11). The basic idea underlying the verb is 'to turn'. On occasions it means 'to overturn' (2 Kgs 21:13, 'to overturn a plate'). However, it can also mean 'to turn around', 'transform' (1 Kgs 22:34, 'to turn around a chariot'; Jer. 13:23, 'to transform one's appearance'). With these different connotations the use of the word here is hardly accidental. Although Nineveh was not overturned, it did experience a turn around.¹

² John Calvin, [Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets](#), vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 104.

receive his word for their lives. They could have been ‘overturned’ like Sodom, but chose to overturn their sin, and trust in God’s word.

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The same is true for us. Our hearts can be overthrown by God and repent, or we too can face the fires of hell. This brings us to the second part of the sermon, what does repentance look like in our lives today? It can be hard to know whether we have truly repentant hearts, so to understand this, I asked Thomas Watson, a pastor from the 17th C., for a little help. Watson was a Puritan, and if the Puritans were good at anything it was repenting. He carefully describes true repentance as taking six steps.

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First, one recognizes their sin. He says, “before a man can come to Christ, he must first come to himself...where there is no sight of sin, there can be no repentance.”³ As in AA, where the first step is admitting you’re an addict, the first step of repentance is admitting you’re a sinner. Sin is at the root. Recognizing sin in yourself is as difficult today as any other time. Coming to see the depths of our depravity is never a fun sight! Many of us want the benefits of salvation without feeling the sting of guilt. So many of us are used to thinking that our relationship to God is merely of a loving father who always looks the other way or affirms us in who we are. Love and affirmation are almost synonymous in our world. But this is not the case with God. His love is cleansing, and the first step in cleansing us is recognizing the need for it.

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Second, Watson says, there is a need to feel sorrow for your sin. The church father Ambrose says this is what Paul means by being crucified with Christ (Gal.2:20). Like the tax collector who beats his breast saying, “have mercy on me!” we must feel sorrow for the pain our sin causes. Pain in ourselves, in others, and most importantly in God. The sacrifice God honours is a broken heart (Ps.51:17). Watson says, “the heart bears the chief part in sinning, and so it must in sorrowing.” Jesus teaches us that the heart, our desires, are the base of our sin, and so if we truly want to repent, our hearts must be conformed to Christ through sorrow for our sin.

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³ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance*. (first published 1668) Banner of Truth, 1987, 15-16.

Third, Watson says we must confess our sin. Watson says the sorrow for sin has two outlets. First, in our passions through weeping, feeling sorrow as we just mentioned. That is having an emotional response to our sin. And second, rationally through confessing our sins.

A real confession is particular, it recognizes individual sins alongside our original sin in the root. Recognizing the specific sins we commit endears us to the love and sacrifice of Christ, as in doing so we see what Christ has done on our behalf, and how the debt is so enormous we could not come close to paying it. Because we know that we are forgiven, we do not need to shy away from admitting our sin. In other religions, a person is constantly trying to avoid admitting something is sinful because this means they must give a better sacrifice, but we know Christ has paid it all, and so we are free to admit our sin freely. This is a totally different posture than any other religion. This is what Jesus means when he says, “my burden is light” (Mt.11:28-30). While we will never have a full account of every sin we commit, those that are brought to our attention, we should confess.

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Fourth, Watson says there should be shame for sin. He says, “Blushing is the colour of virtue. When the heart has been made black with sin, grace makes the face red with blushing.” Shame and stigma are not popular topics today, and this is likely because of their abuse. Shame can be wrongfully used; people can feel shame for things they shouldn’t. Scripture says that we should never feel ashamed for following Jesus, despite how the world mocks us (2Tim.1:8, 1Pet.4:16). Some people feel shame for having a certain body type, ethnicity, IQ, etc., these are inappropriate to feel shame over. Often people feel shame over lies they tell themselves, or others tell them.

This doesn’t mean they shouldn’t ever feel shame. Just because there are lies that we wrongly feel shame for, doesn’t mean there aren’t many *true* things about ourselves that should cause shame; even things that we might not have control over. Paul says that sinning when we know we shouldn’t, should cause us shame (1Cor.15:34). Paul also says in 2Thes. 3:14 that as the Church we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters in the faith to exclude them from the life of the church when they are in open sin so that they feel shame. This is loving your neighbour. Every sin puts us in a place where we deny our higher nature as God’s image, and trade it for our own hubris. This is stupidity, and shameful. Watson reminds us that our sin puts Christ on the cross, a deeply shameful place, and we should feel a sense of shame for our complicity in that.

Shame, however, is not the end. God frees us from our deserved shame. Ultimately our faith frees us from our shame, as it is the one who can do so. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for our sin, and if we believe that, our shame should lift. Shame for sin should always be mixed with knowledge of grace. Watson says that just as one can see a rainbow in the rain, we see grace amidst the tears.

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Fifth, there must be a hatred of sin. To see sin as God sees it is to see all the disaster and evil that it causes. The proper response to this is pure hatred. When one truly sees sin for what it is, a cancerous mutation of God's good creation, then they will not want to participate in it. Sin always takes something good and twists it into something horrid. Scripture teaches that the worst thing that God allows is for us to be given over to our own sin, as it results in all manner of evil and ultimate alienation from God.

When we are battling a sin, and want to repent, we might think that it's wise to give ourselves a break, like a cheat-day on a diet. But the desire for this 'cheat-day' shows us that we still desire that which is repugnant to God. Repentance must be seeing our sin as God see it, seeing the destruction it causes, seeing how our sin puts Christ on the Cross. We see pornography as the enslavement of young women. We see gluttony as warping God's desire for our bodies. We see lying and gossip as the destruction of community. These things deserve hatred, as God hates them. When we desire God's goodness, we will hate sin.

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Last, this hatred causes an ultimate turning from sin. This turning is possible because one's desires are changed. Watson says, "There is a change wrought in the heart. The flinty heart has become fleshly. Satan would have Christ prove his deity by turning the stones to bread. Christ has wrought a far greater miracle in making stones become flesh. In repentance Christ turns a heart of stone into flesh."

As best we can, we see these things in the repentance of Nineveh. The king of Nineveh calls his people to "give up their evil ways and their violence." They recognize their sin, how it destroys God's creation. They confess their sin and show sorrow for it in their fasting and grieving. The extent of their humility shows that they felt shame for their sin. And while we do not know whether there was a real hatred for this sin, or an ultimate turning, we do know that Jesus said that at the time of judgement the people of Nineveh will be among those who are with the Lord in his judgement.

This shows that there was a real conversion in the Ninevites. We might wonder how that can be possible with such a heinous place and such a meagre sermon. But that would be to discount the power of God in conversion. If we look at this conversion with a crooked eye, then we haven't really felt the depth of our sin or recognized the power of God.

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We too might look at the state of our society and wonder how God could ever bring the modern western world to repentance. We might think it silly to restart a church at the Christian school when there is so much division and arguing even amongst ourselves. But our part is not to make converts. Our part is to preach the gospel, in season and out. Our part is a constant repentance. A constant turning to God, acknowledging our sin, and accepting his forgiveness. Out of this we will see lives transformed, cities transformed, the proud brought low, and Christ Lord over all, even Nineveh, even Edmonton.