

The City's Repentance

Jonah 3:1-10

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Called and sent by God, a prophet. Reluctant to take a message of wrath 600 miles to Nineveh, he flees. He puts down his money for a ticket to Tarshish, Spain, 2,400 miles from home and 3,000 miles from his assignment. After putting out to sea, a massive storm hits. After great efforts, the sailors cannot save the ship. They discover Jonah is the reason for the storm. Beginning to fear the Lord, the sailors hurl Jonah into the sea. Immediately, calm.

A great fish appointed by God swallows Jonah whole. For three days he lies in the depths like lying in a grave in a kind of death. After three days he prays a repentant lament and praise. He acknowledges God's sovereignty in salvation. In a kind of resurrection, he is spat up on the shore.

God Words to Jonah (v. 1-3)

¹ Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." ³ 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.

The Commission

Jonah's commission is renewed. The Word of God comes to Jonah the second time. This is God's command to Jonah. The Word of God comes to the prophet to not only tell him what to say, but also where to go and to whom. The issue of obedience for Jonah is not what he will say. The issue is will he go, will he obey? Obedience to the Lord is often both simple and complex. Jonah must go. That is obedience. But he must choose a time to leave, the means of transportation, how much money will he take

and where will he stay along the way. Submission to God then first means an orientation of the heart to do what God says that actually works out into the steps it takes to actually accomplish what God commanded. Anything else is simply not true obedience.

We do not know where Jonah was spit up nor where he was when his commission is renewed. It stands to the chiasmic structure that he is back where his original was received. Beware the old Sunday School approach. Jonah is not vomited out on a beach within sight of Nineveh's city walls. The ship Jonah took departed from Joppa on the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah was beached somewhere along the Mediterranean coast. The would put him at least 600 miles from Nineveh.

What is different about this commission?

There may be a change in the message. Jonah is to proclaim what God will tell him. Maybe it will be the same. But Jonah may be being prepared for a new message or an expanded message. What will he actually preach when he arrives?

There is not a reminder of their great wickedness in this commission. He already knows that God has noticed their great wickedness. There is no longer any question at all that that pagan and wicked city will escape the wrath of God.

So, Jonah is to go to Nineveh and to preach the message God will give him.

The City

Nineveh was one of the greatest cities on earth in its day. Estelle points out that "The Hebrew language in verse 3 reads literally, "Now Nineveh was a large city to the gods" or "a large city to/for God." Nineveh is called "a large city" in four places in the book of Jonah (see 1:2; 3:2, 3; and 4:11). It was a large city in eyes of the pagan gods. But even more, it was a large city that was still Yahweh's. The idea is that the city thought of itself as representing the greatness of her deities. Though she is a pagan city, she still belongs to the one true God of the universe. This great city of many false idols is still the Lord's. Therefore, He has the authority to command repentance and submission. He has the power to call to repentance through Jonah's preaching. (Estelle, pp. 107-108)

Three days journey... It was a much longer journey, so the three days can't be the length of the road from where Jonah was called to Nineveh. It was a very large city but some question whether this is referring to the size of the city. I think there is a sense in which this way of referring to great size of the city indicates the great wickedness it contains. Therefore, the three days is significant in the same way the three days in the great fish was. It would take a three days journey to go around the city. But it would take a 3 day's journey through death and resurrection to pay for the sins of such a wicked place and wicked people.

It is interesting that the Assyrian cuneiform for the city name is made up of two combined forms that mean, "House of Fish". This was probably initially because the city was built at the junction of the Tigris and Koshr rivers.

Sennacherib (704-681) made it his capital city. He spent enormous wealth to build the most magnificent city on the face of the earth. He built great walls around the city with fifteen gates, created public parks and gardens, aqueducts, irrigation ditches, canals, and greatly expanded upon and improved the structures of the city. His palace had eighty rooms and he proclaimed it "the palace without rival". It was the original site of the hanging gardens, not Babylon. Many references to these gardens have been found in Assyrian writings and in the ruins of Nineveh outside of Mosul, Iraq.

Under Ashurbanipal's reign (668-627 BCE) a new palace was constructed, and he began the process of collecting and cataloging all of the written works in Mesopotamia. The result of his efforts was Ashurbanipal's famous library which held over 30,000 inscribed clay tablets, the books of that time. Other improvements and renovations were made to the city under Ashurbanipal's reign which further enhanced Nineveh's reputation as a city of extraordinary beauty and high culture. Palaces decorated with enormous and intricate relief paintings were constructed and the public gardens expanded upon and enhanced. Ashurbanipal's love of learning, and interest in written works, drew scholars and scribes to the city in great numbers and the stability of his reign allowed for the development of the arts, sciences, and architectural innovations. (From www.ancient.eu/nineveh.) It was truly a magnificent and great city.

The Idols

Nineveh was polytheistic, worshipping several gods. They tended to assimilate conquered peoples. One of the ways that was done was to build idols to the conquered people's gods and to accept them into the pantheon of worship. In the main pavilions of the city can be seen many different statues to pagan deities.

Nineveh's native gods were Ishtar, the goddess of fertility. Among the ruins can be seen statues and reliefs on the walls of the Philistine half-man, half-fish god, Dagon. Assyria had many drawings and reliefs (raised carvings on walls, doors and pillars) of winged men and beasts usually depicting the Assyrians in victorious battle.

Jonah's Words from God (v. 4-6)

The great city had 13 gates. Through one of them, the Jewish prophet of Yahweh entered and began preaching in the streets.

⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ 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.

⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

The Prophet Preaches (v. 4)

As Jonah walks through the city, he begins preaching. He probably went about preaching for a day walking the whole while. In language that was used of the over-

throw of Sodom and Gomorrah and of Israel in the wilderness, Jonah warns the people that their doom is near. In forty days, they will be tested, judged and found guilty. Forty days in the Bible usually is a period of testing and trial. The people of Nineveh will be given forty days before the city will be overthrown. How will they respond? What is Jonah hoping for? Will he remain in the city or does he plan, after preaching, to leave?

There must have been more in the preaching than is recorded here. The response of the people implies much more knowledge of the Lord than just this warning. Though we are not told what more Jonah did say. The warning that is recorded here for us does fit in and comport with Jonah's attitude.

The People Repent (v. 5)

The people of Nineveh hear the preaching and they believe the Lord's message. God has granted them mercy. He has given them preaching to call them to repentance. He has given them faith to believe the message. They respond with repentance and sorrow. They respond fitting for their time and culture. They fast. They put on burlap. These were signs of grief. These were the public evidence of an inward change.

I have commentators who question whether this is "saving" faith. Is every single Ninevite, from the high society to the slaves, the greatest to the least, repenting? Is this maybe the greatest revival that has ever taken place? Did all 120,000 people believe and bow to the one, true God? When we ask questions like that, we are really missing the point of the story. We don't know. It is possible. It does sound fantastic. But that is not the point.

The point is that the violent, idol worshipping, pagan Gentiles believed the preaching of God's prophet.

Israel's enemy has done what Israel would not. Remember that at this time there are many startling parallels between Israel and Assyria. Both had had times of political difficulty but are seeing new economic prosperity. Both are recovering their reputations as nations to be reckoned with. Both have deep fracture lines in their social and political fabric that will eventually subjugate both to Babylon. Both have smart, savvy kings. Both are wicked and disobedient to God.

But one of the great lessons to Israel from the book of Jonah is: if Nineveh believed the preaching of God's Word, how much more should you? Why will you not repent and return to the Lord?

The King Repents (v. 6)

⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

This great turning to God begins with the populace. Then it moves to the regency. Some think that this actually happened in the opposite order. They see a literary order, not a chronological order. I see no reason for that. Jonah is preaching among the people. The people hear the message and believe it. Then, the Word of God, the message

that was preached reached the ears of the king. And, I suspect, the word that his city was turning to the Lord also. He believed. He repented. For a proud and powerful king to humble himself this way is truly remarkable. He steps down from his throne. He removes his kingly robes. He puts on sackcloth – think, burlap. Then he goes to the ash heap and sits down in it. These are the kinds of humble acts that God’s mercy and grace cause. So what about the king of Israel? Will he hear and heed the Word of God? Will he humble himself and turn from his own wicked ways?

The King's Words about God (v. 7-9)

The king’s repentance leads to a proclamation to his people.

⁷ 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, ⁸ 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. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

His Decree (v. 7-8)

It was a city-wide proclamation. This may be the reason that some reverse the order. The king repents first, and the people respond to his proclamation. It seems to me that the way the text works is that the king is repenting and then is calling on his people to express their own repentance in more dramatic ways. Otherwise, the general repentance is in obedience to the king, not belief of the message.

It called for fasting and mourning. It called for national repentance. The proclamation was not only for people, but for their herds and flocks. They had to be willing to affect their livelihood if they were going to genuinely repent. They were to call out to God for His mercy. So the king of Nineveh has proclaimed a national day of fasting, mourning over sin and prayer. What about Israel? What about the church?

It called for repentance from their sin and their national character. The king knows what he and his people are like. He knows that they are wicked, full of evil ways and prone to violence. For people to believe God’s Word and truly repent often means that they must turn away from their cultures. This is not a popular notion today. We think cultures are immune from being expressions of idolatry and essentially evil. While the Ninevites may remain a person who lives in Nineveh, to repent means to reject and abstain from every sinful attitude and action even when it was an essential part of their culture.

Its Design (v. 9)

He expresses a desire to submit to God. See how he phrases it as question? There is a way to demand the mercy of God. It thinks in terms of a transaction, a fair exchange. It says, “I am sorry and changing so God is obligated to not punish.” There is also a way to have no confidence in the mercy of God. It thinks in terms of inevitability. It says, “No matter what I do, God is going to do what He wants.” Both are wrong. We

cannot obligate God. But God commits Himself to respond to genuine belief and repentance.

In real humility, the king and his people seek God's mercy. They hope for the Lord's favor. They pray that God will withhold His wrath and the destruction they were warned about.

God Withholds His Anger (v. 10)

God responds to the Ninevites.

¹⁰ 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.

The Divine Mercy

The Bible constantly portrays God responding to the faith and repentance of people. God took notice of the Ninevites turning from their evil way. He then did not bring upon them the disaster, the overthrow, that the Lord, through Jonah, had warned them of. This is the mercy of God. It is the hope of people. We would be just plain stupid to turn from our idolatrous pursuits and wicked pleasures in repentance if there were no assurance of God's mercy.

I offer no caveats. When you believe the gospel, bow to Jesus and call on the name of the Lord, you will be saved. That is the invitation the gospel extends. It is full of mercy, hope and assurance that God will save you. This is not merely theological theory to be, even reverently, bandied about by theological camps. This is the clear, unmistakable word that the Bible says and that I say to you today. When you respond to God in the way He calls and commands, you will be saved from sin, from wrath and unto God, His people and eternal life beginning now and forever.

A Human Problem

But for careful students of the Bible, we do have a problem. How do we think about God "changing His mind"? What does it mean for God "to relent"? Does God plan and undo something He planned? One writer raises the issue this way, "What exactly does it mean when God relents (or "repents" in some translations) of punishment that he threatened to carry out against recalcitrant sinners who suddenly change their ways? Does this mean that God's decree does not stand firm and is actually open to alteration based upon the conduct of creatures here below?" (Estelle, pp. 114-115).

Consider Jeremiah 18:7-10

⁷ If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ 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. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

This is a deep and difficult question.

In eternity past, God decreed all things and thus the future is sure. There is a future, decreed and known to God that will unfold exactly as God directed. The Bible teaches us this.

God responds in time and space to the belief and repentance of people. He responds to our wickedness. He responds to our prayers. He engages us through His Word. His interaction with the world and with people is real. It is not an illusion.

How can both be true? It seems to us that one would contradict the other. The solution is found in the incarnation. Jesus is both divine and human. As the divine Son of God, He is all that God is. Every attribute of God is true of Jesus. To see Jesus is to see all that God is including all that the Father is. And, Jesus is fully man. He had flesh and blood. He was in all ways a true human being. The only thing He lacked was the sin nature.

From His birth throughout the rest of forever, the second person of the Godhead dwells in a human body. It is now glorified with all that means: but He is and will ever be in a human body. In Jesus, the Divine and the human meet in a single, indivisible person. This is what the Bible teaches us.

There is an interface between that which is God and that which not God. It is most clearly seen in Jesus. But we do not and are not told how that interface works. It is hidden in mystery. Similarly, God decrees all that is to come to pass. God reveals what He commands. In a real, genuine way, God responds to people who respond to His calls and commands. That response, while real and genuine, is following the determinative will of God.

Otherwise, He is not God. It is that simple. The god of the Open Theists and full Armenians is not the God of the Bible. It is a false god and a false religion. To clearly and with full understanding turn to a deity whose future is unknown is to turn from the Lord God of the Bible and turn to an idol of imagination and fancy.

Therefore, we teach that God has decreed each step of His interaction with the universe. What unfolded in Jonah 3, all of it, was ordained by God. And, God relented of the judgment He had warned them would fall in 40 days. Judgment eventually came around a hundred years later. Nahum in that day preached and prophesied of her coming doom. Nineveh was eventually destroyed, utterly overthrown.

Reflect and Respond

This world and much of Christendom is worldly, carnal, believing lies, shaped by the world, pursuing vanity and without God in the world. Like Israel of Jonah's day, there are millions who profess to be God's children, but who do not hear nor heed God's Word.

Then there is a scholastic Christian who is filling minds and notebooks with information. These hear God's Word with a detached, academic, eager to learn orientation. But there is little of the Spirit, little of self-examination, little repentance, little transformation. The truths of the Word of God are agreed with but not truly believed nor obeyed.

How do you hear the preaching of the Word of God?

Do you hear it as coming through the risen Lord Jesus Christ?

Do you hear it with fear, with godly respect and reverence?

Do you confess and repent of your sins, receiving the mercy and forgiveness of God?

Do you believe it and move to obey it by God's grace?

Maybe today you are hearing this message and recognize that you need to believe and repent. Be sure to know that judgment is coming. Be sure to know that Jesus does save those who believe in Him and bow to Him.

Jesus said to the Pharisees of His day that the people of Nineveh were going to rise up in the day of judgment and condemn them for not hearing the preaching of Jesus. If the people of Nineveh heard and heeded the preaching of such a prophet as Jonah, how much more must they listen to Jesus. And how much more must we?