

# THE GRACE OF REPENTANCE

Jonah 3:5-10

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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 (JON. 3:10).

**O**f all the great revivals in the history of this world, few can compare with the mass repentance of ancient Nineveh. Hugh Martin comments:

A great and proud city suddenly smitten into the most profound humiliation, from the greatest of its inhabitants unto the least of them – from the king on the throne to the meanest citizen – is a spectacle to which, I suppose, history affords no parallel. Cities, and countries, and communities have oftentimes, with not a little unanimity, given themselves to humiliation and fasting. But there is no event on record that can at all be compared with the fast and the repentance of Nineveh.<sup>1</sup>

This great revival occurred through the preaching of one man, the prophet Jonah. And, as always with revivals, it began with the awakening of the messenger himself. Revivals begin in the repentance and renewed faith of the church, just as the repentance of Nineveh began with Jonah's own. Seeing this, we realize that the revival of Nineveh was a mighty act of God in his mercy. According to the Lord Jesus Christ, it stands through all history "as a sign and witness against both the poverty of our obedience to the Lord and our low expectations for the success of the gospel in our own time."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Martin, *A Commentary on Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1870, reprint 1958), 260.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 87.

## NINEVEH'S REPENTANCE

Jonah had obeyed God's call to preach in Nineveh, crying throughout the city: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). To the astonishment of history, the wicked Ninevites did not respond with violence against the prophet, or even with mocking indifference to his call. Instead, they presented one of the classic instances of repentance, as an entire society turned from sin and called upon the Lord.

A biblical definition of repentance will include at least three vital elements, each of which is present in the case of Nineveh. The first is a *sorrowful mourning over sin*. We see this in that the Ninevites "called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (Jon. 3:5). False repentance is that which grieves over the consequences of sin; people are sorry not that they sinned but that they got caught sinning. True repentance grieves over the sin itself. Gordon Keddie writes of the Ninevites: "A deep sorrow swept over the hearts of the nation. Not only were they convicted of sin, they were grief-stricken in the realization of how much offense they had offered to Jonah's God."<sup>3</sup>

We see the Ninevites' sorrow for sin in three ways. The first is that they "called for a fast." Fasting has several biblical purposes, one of which is a public expression of penitence. It is interesting that in this case, even the animals of Nineveh were required to fast. The king decreed: "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water" (Jon. 3:7). The intent may have been to display to God the total repentance of their society. Moreover, the lack of food and water would cause the beasts to moan and cry, increasing the intensity and seriousness of the city's repentance.

Secondly, the Ninevites' sorrow was acted out by the wearing of sackcloth. "They... put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (Jon. 3:5). Sackcloth was coarse and rough cloth used for making sacks, which normally only the poorest of people wore. Like fasting, sackcloth expressed lament, grief, and humiliation.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 90.

Thirdly, the king of Nineveh set an example for all others by sitting in ashes. When he heard Jonah's preaching, "he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (Jon. 3:6). Taking off his rich and costly robes, donning sackcloth and then squatting in ashes involved the ultimate public display of self-humiliation.

Inevitably, people wonder if such public expressions as fasting and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes are appropriate today. The answer is that public, civic expressions of repentance may be quite appropriate. If a nation loses a great battle in war, for instance, expressions of public lament may be a legitimate way of expressing their inward groaning for divine favor and mercy. But we are warned by Jesus against hypocritical public displays. He said, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them" (Mt. 6:1). Fasting, especially, may be a useful way of stimulating prayer or of chastening the soul, but only when accompanied by the corresponding inward reality. John Calvin urges: "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."<sup>4</sup>

All of these actions by the Ninevites expressed their repentance in terms of sorrow for sin. But repentance also requires an actual *turning from sin*. J. I. Packer writes, "Repentance is a change of mind issuing in a change of life."<sup>5</sup> We see this in the king of Nineveh's proclamation: "Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands" (Jon. 3:8). Nineveh was renowned for violence, so here its king acknowledges the wrong of their ways and calls the people to repudiate their chief and characteristic sin.

Thirdly, repentance culminates in *a turning to God in renewed faith*. Thus the king of Nineveh decreed, "And let them call out mightily to God" (Jon. 3:8). In short, he was summoning the people to pray to the God of Jonah for mercy. Throughout the Bible we find sinners who repent turning to God in prayer and discovering his grace in

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 3:104.

<sup>5</sup> J.I. Packer: *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 58

reply. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of his temple establishes the principle for us all:

If they sin against you – for there is no one who does not sin – and you are angry with them... it they turn their heart... and repent and plead with you..., then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you (1 Ki. 8:46-50).

The Ninevites had probably never heard of Solomon's prayer, nor could they plead with God as his own covenant people. But they understood enough, having heard Jonah's warning of judgment. How much more should Christians, knowing not only more than the Ninevites but more than the Jonah himself – looking back as we do on the grace of God in the blood of Christ – freely and eagerly turn in repentance to God for his mercy. The apostle John has given us a great assurance of success, writing: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).

## THE GRACE OF REPENTANCE

**T**he repentance of Nineveh was a truly extraordinary event and, from a human perspective, totally surprising. How can we account for this striking repentance?

The first answer is found in the initial words of Jonah 3:5: "And the people of Nineveh believed God." This shows us that repentance is always a firstfruit of belief in the Word of God. It was because they believed the message Jonah preached that they repented. We may assume that Jonah's preaching involved a fuller exposition of the warning that in forty days the city would be overthrown. No doubt, he proclaimed the reasons for their coming judgment and the holiness of the God who threatened them. Believing Jonah's message, their faith was the catalyst for the repentance that followed.

Nor was it merely that they repented because they believed the word of judgment against them. They must also have believed that God might have mercy if they turned from their sin. Their king mused: "Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish" (Jon. 3:9). This hope of mercy was

essential to their change of heart; true repentance is always grounded not merely in the law of God but also in the gospel. True repentance is evangelical repentance; it is actuated not merely by fear of wrath but also by hope of grace. Paul says, “The grace of God... teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions” (Tit. 2:11). Therefore it was the hope of salvation that spurred Nineveh’s repentance. Calvin comments: “No one can willingly submit to God, except he has previously known his goodness, and entertained a hope of salvation; for he who is touched only with fear avoids God’s presence; and then despair prevails, and perverseness follows.”<sup>6</sup>

But where would the Ninevites have gotten an idea of God’s mercy? Two sources are apparent. The first is the offer of mercy implied by Jonah’s warning. When the electric company warns that your power will be turned off unless you pay your bill, that warning implies that if you pay the bill the threat will not be carried out. Likewise, the Ninevites saw hope of mercy in the fact that God had offered them a warning. Compare their situation to that of Sodom. No messenger from God wended through Sodom’s streets alerting them of the fire that would destroy them from heaven. So why was Nineveh given the warning that Sodom was denied? The evident reason was God’s purpose to spare them through faith in his message.

It is from this perspective that we should view the threats of judgment in the Bible. Why, after all, does God warn that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23a)? The obvious reason is to draw us to “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23b). Peter warned, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved” (2 Pet. 3:10). What was his point? “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?” (2 Pet. 3:11).

In addition to the mercy implied in Jonah’s warning, the Ninevites’ faith must also have latched onto Jonah himself. Here, we remember Jesus’ teaching that Jonah “became a sign to the people of Nineveh” (Lk. 11:30). This indicates that the Ninevites had learned of Jonah’s amazing history. They knew that he had disobeyed God and that his

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 3:110.

flight from God's presence led to his apparent death in the sea. They also would have learned that Jonah was nonetheless spared by God's mercy, receiving a sort of resurrection through the belly of the great fish. Therefore, the very sight of such a redeemed sinner as Jonah encouraged the king that God might have mercy for him as well.

If Jonah's reemergence from the whale spurred the Ninevites to a hopeful repentance, how much more ought we to be persuaded by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Jesus argued, "[Nineveh] repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Mt. 12:41). Jesus went into the grave not for his own sins but for ours. Therefore, his resurrection offers a hope of new life sufficient to persuade us to hope in him and repent.

So Nineveh's repentance was grounded in their belief in God and the message of his servant. But this leads to a second source behind their repentance, namely, the grace of God.

The mass repentance of the most wicked metropolis of the ancient world was clearly the result of God's supernatural working. There is no other sufficient explanation for this remarkable event. Who could expect that the arrival of one bedraggled prophet into the heart of violent, arrogant paganism would be received the way Jonah was received? Yet this one man brought low the capital of a blood-thirsty empire simply by the message that he preached! How did this happen? It happened by the secret working of God's Spirit in and through the Word of God that was preached.

Our repentance must also be empowered by the grace of the Lord. It is not easy for any man or woman to repent. Therefore we must pray when seeking for a radical change in the life of someone we love. And when it comes to our own repentance, we should bow our hearts before the God of grace and plead for him to do the work that so often our own hearts cannot perform. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me," King David prayed (Ps. 51:10). And God will answer such a prayer offered up in trusting faith. Repentance, like salvation, is by grace and through faith, in the power of God's Holy Spirit bearing witness to God's Word.

And what a blessing it is to repent! Too often, believers and non-believers alike think repentance an unpleasant topic, however

necessary the Bible says that it is. Yet it is through repentance that many of God's choicest graces enter into our experience. If each of us took stock of our habitual sins and earnestly pleaded with God in persistent prayer, relying on the power of his grace, then the freedom we would gain from breaking just one sinful habit would revolutionize our lives. If we studied passages like Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), finding there the most obvious defect in our character, and then earnestly sought God's grace for repentance, the change in our manner of living would bring scarcely imagined blessing into our homes, marriages, and other relationships.

Realizing this, we see why this king of Nineveh is so worthy of praise. Those who exercise authority in society, the church, or the home have no higher duty than to lead their people in sincere repentance. Likewise, there are few more baleful curses upon any people than to be ruled by those who make light of sin, spurn the warnings of God's Word, and harden not only their own hearts but the hearts of the people against God. By setting an example of humble contrition – rising from this throne, removing his royal robes, covering himself with sackcloth and sitting in ashes – the king of Nineveh offered the best possible service for the well-being of his people. May we seek such leaders for ourselves, and beg God's mercy in providing them.

## GOD'S REPENTANCE

The chapter closes with the strongest encouragement for us to repent. For it tells of God's response to the humbling of Nineveh. The wicked people having repented of sin, God repented of his plans for their destruction: "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" (Jon. 3:10).

First, notice what it is that God desires to see: "how they turned from their evil way." It was not outward ceremonies that God desired to see. God relented not because he observed that they abstained from food and water for a time, or briefly wore cheap material in the place of their normally luxurious dress. It was not because sacrifices of

animals or money were made in an effort to purchase God's favor. It was because they repented: their hearts turned from their evil ways.

God desires the same from us. We may come to church and worship him. We may recite liturgies of repentance. We may offer fervent songs of praise. We may bring large amounts of money to the coffers of the church. We may become experts of theological learning. But what God desires to see is a sincere turning from our sins, because we have believed the message of both his law and gospel; that is, because we have truly grieved for the wickedness of our sins and have cast ourselves upon God's mercy in Jesus Christ. So it was that Jesus began his preaching ministry with this call: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt. 1:17).

And when even Nineveh repented, whose wickedness was so great and whose guilt was piled as high as the pyramids of skulls its conquering rulers delighted to construct, God relented of his judgment. This shows us that God can and will forgive anybody who believes and repents. Calvin writes: "We hence learn for what purposes God daily urges us to repentance, and that is, because he desires to be reconciled to us, and that we should be reconciled to him."<sup>7</sup>

Some versions of this verse state that God "repented" of his judgment. This has led some to question the omniscience of God – as if he had previously judged them in error – or the immutability of God – that is, his changelessness – since he appears to have changed his mind. There are several answers to these suppositions. One is that God accommodates his Word to our mode of understanding. Just as the Bible ascribes human physicality to God, speaking of "the hand of the Lord," or "the ears of the Lord," so also does Scripture ascribe human reasoning to God when it speaks of him "repenting." John Mackay explains: "When God is said to change his mind, matters are viewed from our human perspective. It appears to us that there has been a change in God, but what has in fact changed is our human conduct."<sup>8</sup> The point is that in "repenting" of his threatened judgment, God was exposing not his changeableness but rather his

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 3:113.

<sup>8</sup> John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 47.

unfailing consistency and faithfulness. Hugh Martin explains this well:

It was wicked, violent, unrighteous, atheistical, proud, and luxurious Nineveh which God had threatened to destroy. A city sitting in sack-cloth and ashes, humbled in the depths of self-abasement, and appealing as lowly suppliants to his commiseration – a Nineveh like that – *that* Nineveh, he had never threatened. *That* Nineveh he visited not with ruin. He had never said he would.<sup>9</sup>

It is precisely because God is unchanging that we are encouraged to repent. God is unfailing both in his wrath against sin and his mercy towards faithful repentance. There is no variation in his opposition to wickedness; thus, we are always called to repent of our sin. And there is no variation in his delight in receiving sinners who call on the name of the Lord and lay hold of his mercy through faith in his Word.

And yet we may still wonder, “How could God forgive a city so wicked as this? How could God look past their many and gross sins, relenting to avenge the blood of their thousands of victims?” The same question could be asked of each of us: “How could God really forgive the things that I have done? How could he just look past the blasphemies that have dishonored him from my tongue, the injuries I have caused other people, and the pain I have inflicted?”

The answer is found in the particular Hebrew word used to describe the repentance of God. The word *shubh* describes the repentance of Nineveh: it signifies the turning from evil to good. But a different word is used of the repentance of God, since God has no evil from which to turn. Here it is the word *nacham*, which denotes an inward suffering. It is best rendered as saying that God was “moved to pity.”<sup>10</sup> This reveals that the answer to how God can forgive sin finds its answer at the cross of Jesus Christ. God literally suffers in repenting from judging our sins; he suffered at the cross of Jesus Christ. Jacques Ellul states: “He takes upon himself the evil which was the wages of man’s sin. He suffers the very suffering which in his justice he should have laid on man. God causes the judgment to

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<sup>9</sup> Martin, *Jonah*, 290.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Baldwin, *Jonah*, in Thomas E. McComiskey, ed., *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical & Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 560.

fall on himself; this is the meaning of his repenting.”<sup>11</sup> God placed the evil of all those who turn to him on the cross of Christ, so that he might justly repent of his holy obligation to condemn us, all because of the merciful grace that calls us to believe and repent.

## THE WITNESS OF NINEVEH

This is why the great need of our world today is a legion of Jonahs, who fresh with the awareness of God’s grace in their own lives call out to the world with the same message of grace. For God will and must judge the wickedness of our world. God will and must visit your sins with the fire of his wrath. But he has sent his own Son into this world to bear the sins of those who believe. This is the Word that Christian pulpits must preach and the witness that Christian lives must present. In this respect, the ministry of Jonah stands as a perpetual encouragement to the preaching of the gospel of Christ.

But the response of the Ninevites themselves also stands as a perpetual witness. Their repentance and God’s relenting of their judgment stands as a testimony to the grace of God for all who will humble themselves in faith. Jesus said, “As Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation” (Lk. 11:30). He offers forgiveness to all who believe, repent, and seek his saving grace. But, Jesus added, for all who refuse God’s offer of mercy, who harden their proud hearts to the gospel of salvation, it will not only be Jesus who bears witness against them on the Day of Judgment. For, he added, “the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Lk. 11:32).

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 99-100.