

The God who Relents

Jonah 3:1-10

It is a well-documented phenomenon that men don't like to ask for directions – even when they're hopelessly lost. I have no doubt that most of us here today could tell our own stories about this. People have debated long and hard the reasons why men don't like to ask for directions. Some of the reasons given include pride, arrogance, conceit, ego, a primal urge to conquer challenges, competitiveness, a genetic predisposition to be in control, and a general reluctance to admit "I'm lost."

This summer if you're on a trip somewhere and a man is behind the wheel and you are lost, this is what you need to say: "Honey/Dad/brother, maybe you should repent." They will hate you for saying this, but it will be true. Repentance wasn't originally a religious term (see MacDonald, *A Resilient Life*, p. 119). In the ancient world there were few maps or road signs and getting lost was common. When you realized you were going the wrong direction, you needed to "repent." That meant admitting, "I'm lost; I'm going the wrong direction." And then you needed to change directions and get back on the right path.

We all know that men don't like to repent when they're driving a car. But why do all of us find it so hard to repent when we're going the wrong direction? Why are we so reluctant to admit, "I'm lost" in relation to _____ (my emotions, my relationships with the opposite sex, my thought life, the things I say, how I spend money, my work habits, etc.)? Why are we so reluctant to stop and ask directions (from God or from somebody who knows God), change directions, and get back on the right path?

The reason could vary from person to person. Maybe you think that you sin isn't really a big deal – certainly not rising to the level of needing "repentance." Or you might think that repentance won't do any good; you've tried changing in the past and now you don't really think certain areas of your life *can ever* be different. Or perhaps you haven't really been aware that repentance is a live option; you think you have to pay for your sins the way a person would pay off a debt. There could be a lot of reasons why different ones of us are just like the guy who knows he's lost but won't ask for directions.

Today we are going to look at Jonah 3. The simple truth that is illustrated in this chapter is that **God notices genuine repentance**. And God is predisposed to pour out His grace upon us when we repent. This passage simply challenges us to repent in the areas of our lives that are headed the wrong direction. It's not enough to know that God notices genuine repentance; we actually have to repent (admit "I'm lost, going the wrong direction" and then get back on the right path).

In chapter 1 Jonah refused to go to Nineveh and warn the people that God's judgment was imminent. As you know, he ended up in the stomach of a big fish. When Jonah came to his senses, he cried out to God in submission. God rescued him and the fish spit him out on dry land. Jonah 3 describes how the people of Nineveh repented when Jonah finally showed up with God's message for them. (This week's hot tip on finding the book of Jonah: simply memorize all 39 books of the Old Testament. Or you can just turn to page 657 in the blue Bibles.)

The Account of Nineveh's Repentance (Jonah 3:1-10) This chapter describes how Jonah finally obeyed God's command to preach to the Assyrian city of Nineveh.

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you."

God didn't always give people a second chance to carry out some mission; but Jonah did get that opportunity. The Lord tells Jonah very specifically that he was to "proclaim . . . the proclamation" he would be told. In other words, there wouldn't be any editorializing on Jonah's part. He would say exactly what God told him to say. Verse 3 records Jonah's obedience.

3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk.

The enormity of Nineveh is expressed in an interesting way. The last line says literally that "Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, *a distance of three days*." A length of time is used to describe a distance (much like a "light year" is the distance that light travels in a year). Most likely "a distance of three days" meant that it took three days to walk around the circumference of the entire metropolitan area of Nineveh. The point is that Nineveh was a very large, important city. We learn from chapter 4 that the population was at least 120,000. We know from both biblical and secular histories that Nineveh and Assyria were growing in military might. For these reasons we can understand why Jonah wouldn't have minded at all if God destroyed the city of Nineveh; it would be one less threat for Israel to worry about.

4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

Jonah's message was quite direct and clear: In forty days Nineveh would be "overthrown." The term overthrow was used in Genesis 19 of God "overthrowing" Sodom and Gomorrah. This is the primary meaning here: God would destroy the city of Nineveh. [Interestingly, however, the term also means "turn upside down" in the sense of change radically. Some see here a double meaning – that Nineveh could either be devastatingly overthrown or radically reformed. Notice the response of the people of Nineveh.]

5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

Even though the Ninevites worshiped their own gods, they responded when Jonah proclaimed that the sovereign God over all gods – YHWH – would judge them in 40 days. Their response was that "the people of Nineveh believed in God"; they believed that He would do what Jonah proclaimed. Such a whole-hearted response of faith by people who worshiped other gods seems a bit "out of the blue" to us. Why would they believe a stranger who showed up and announced that destruction would come upon them in 40 days? Ultimately God brought about this change of heart in the Ninevites; God in His compassion *wanted* them to repent. We know from extra-biblical sources that other factors might have played a role. We know from 2 Kings 14 that Jonah lived during the first half of the 8th century b.c. During that time Assyria experienced famine, a solar eclipse (an ominous sign; 763 b.c.), and uprisings in various cities. These events might have helped prepare the people of Nineveh to believe Jonah's message.

Whatever the specific reasons, they believed and they repented. First, they called a city-wide *fast* – abstaining from food (and drink we’ll learn shortly). Second, they put on *sackcloth*, a coarse, uncomfortable fabric (perhaps like burlap) as a symbol of their repentance. This repentance extended to everyone, from the greatest to the least of them. Speaking of the “greatest,” notice how the King responded.

6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.

Their repentance was extraordinary in terms of how sincere and how comprehensive it was. Jonah had gone to the heart of Nineveh to pronounce judgment. The king of Nineveh sends his messengers throughout the city and into the surrounding suburbs with this proclamation of repentance. Both man and beast were to display their repentance through fasting and sackcloth. As well (v. 8), they were to “call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.” Violence is often mentioned as one of the sins that provoked God’s judgment (e.g., the flood in Genesis 6:13, the exile in Jeremiah 6:7 and Ezekiel 7:23). Nineveh’s violence was one of the things from which she turned.

Notice in verse 9 how the Ninevites held out hope that if they turned from their sin, God would turn from His judgment.

9 "Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."

The king of Nineveh was quite discerning when it came to God’s judgment. Without presuming upon the mercy of God, he understood that God had the freedom to relent concerning the judgment He had promised. The king understood that God in His sovereignty had full freedom to change His mind in response to their repentance and to “withdraw His burning anger” and spare their city.

This is actually a theme that runs throughout the Old Testament. When God threatened to wipe out the children of Israel in the wilderness because of their rebellion, Moses argued with God saying, “Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people” (Exodus 32:12). When David’s son with Bathsheba was on his deathbed, David fasted and wept before God; his rationale was, “Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live” (2 Samuel 12:22). People held out the hope that God might relent concerning some judgment He had promised.

As we’ll see in Jonah 4, to relent concerning judgment is quite characteristic of God. God has chosen “a style of governing the world” that includes human participation – a partnership, if you will, in which our prayers play a role. The king of Nineveh got it right: If we repent, God just might relent concerning some judgment He had planned. In His sovereignty He has the freedom to do so.

We read in verse 10 that the very thing for which the Ninevites hoped actually came to pass.

10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

Next week we'll see that this was Jonah's greatest fear – that the Ninevites would repent and therefore avoid God's judgment. Next week we'll talk about the necessity of aligning ourselves with the God's compassion toward our enemies and toward people who are far from Him (something Jonah refused to do). But our passage this morning challenges us to consider the importance of genuine repentance in our lives.

The Importance of Repentance in our Lives (Matthew 4:7, Acts 2:38, 2 Corinthians 7, Hebrews 12:1-2) As I mentioned at the start, nobody nobody likes to be told, "You need to repent." Of course if we never went the wrong direction, we'd never need to repent. But since we *do* sometimes go the wrong direction (in our thinking, our speaking, our relationships, our emotions, our actions, etc.), ***repentance is a wonderful gift of God.***

If repentance weren't available, we would be doomed to go the wrong direction the rest of our lives; we would be stuck in our sin with all its heartache. Repentance isn't a punishment; it's a gift, a good gift from God. What would have happened to the city of Nineveh if repentance hadn't been an option? She would have ended up like Sodom and Gomorrah or Jericho; she would have experienced a harsh judgment of God.

If you're a follower of Christ, your repentance will be different from that of the Ninevites. You aren't repenting in order to avoid the wrath of God (like the Ninevites were). If you are in Christ, you have the assurance that the wrath of God that you deserved for your sin has fallen on Jesus on the cross; that's what the term propitiation means – the wrath of God has been satisfied. If you are in Christ you are fully accepted by God. Your repentance needs to be understood in the context of an ongoing relationship with your heavenly Father. When you sin against God, He's still your Father. As a matter of fact, the NT emphasizes that He's a Father who disciplines His children so that they might become more like Him. He doesn't discipline out of anger, but out of love. Our repentance is a response to God's loving discipline. Our repentance is a way of saying to God, "You're right and I'm wrong. Teach me to walk in your ways."

We enter into a relationship with God through repentance. We admit, "I'm lost. I've been going the wrong direction my whole life. I trust that when Jesus died on the cross, He died for my sin. I accept His payment for my sin and I want to follow Him as a disciple/apprentice the rest of my life." If you've never repented and believed in Jesus, that's the place to begin.

But we don't merely repent once at the beginning of our walks with God. No, repentance and faith should become our lifestyle. I like the way Donald Whitney puts it: "Christians are lifelong repenters and lifelong believers" (*Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, p. 105). As long as we live in this life we need to practice repentance. To do anything else is to be like the guy who is absolutely lost but who won't ask for directions. Life is too short to stay lost and continue going the wrong direction in any area of our lives.

If you've identified an area of your life that's headed the wrong direction, why not commit yourself to a lifestyle of repentance in that area of your life? If the Ninevites could fast from food and drink and go around wearing sackcloth day after day, surely you and I (by the grace of God) can change directions when we realize we're off course. The very Spirit of God within us will guide and empower our repentance, but our wills need to be engaged. Three guidelines:

First, ***express to God your sorrow over your sin.*** This is where you admit to God, "I've sinned against You. I have been running from You. I have rejected Your will for this area of my life." Don't rush this step in the process. You may need an extended time in the presence of God in order to realize how long you've been running from God and how far you've strayed from His will. There have been times in my life when I've had to do a rather comprehensive inventory of my life and express sorrow for sins that had piled up for years.

Your sin may be such at a simple, "I'm sorry" isn't quite enough. If there has been a prolonged habit of sin or if your sin has been especially destructive to yourself or others, perhaps you need an extended season of sorrow for your sin. For example, if you run over your neighbor's newspaper, a simple, "I'm sorry" will probably be enough; if you run over his dog, a more thorough expression of sorrow would be appropriate. The Scriptures make clear that God takes our sin personally; we need to take that into account in our repentance.

What do you do if you're not really sorry for your sin? That's a great question because repentance isn't telling God sorry even if you don't mean it. Repentance starts by actually being sorry for what you've done or for who you've become. If you know you've sinned, but you aren't really sorry, you simply need to put yourself in a position to allow the Spirit of God to give you this godly sorrow: thoughtfully read appropriate Scriptures, talk with a trusted friend about it, and simply ask God to convict you of your sin.

Second, ***receive God's cleansing.*** Remember that Jesus died for the very sins for which you've expressed sorrow. 1 John 1:7 tells us:

7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Through repentance we "walk in the Light" – we bring our lives back under the scrutiny of God and His truth. And the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. We simply receive this cleansing through faith.

Third, ***pursue a path of obedience.*** When Zacchaeus came to Jesus, he repented of his greed and extortion. He didn't merely express sorrow for what he'd done; he pursued a path of obedience by giving away half of his possessions to the poor and if he had defrauded anyone, he gave them back four times (Luke 19:8). John the Baptist spoke about bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:8).

This is where we often short-circuit the process of repentance by not actually going a different direction. Genuine repentance isn't merely feeling sorrow over sin; it also includes pursuing obedience. The goal is never to simply stop sinning; it's always involves godliness of life. If, for example, you're repenting of sins of the tongue (sarcastic, critical, mean), you pursue

obedience by memorizing appropriate Scriptures, meditating on them, and actively learning to give grace by your words. Once a week, you could ask those close to you “How am I doing?”

Repentance isn’t all that complicated. It simply involves expressing to God our sorrow over sin, receiving His cleansing, and then pursuing a path of obedience. The king of Nineveh was right: Who knows how God might respond? God is predisposed to pour out His grace on those who genuinely repent.