

# A Literally Repentant Prophet

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In the Old Testament, the idea of spiritual repentance, as it regards humanity, means to *turn* or to *return* to the Lord. Thus, when people pursue some kind of sin, they are described as having turned away from God. And, when individuals repent of their sins, they are described as having turned toward God. This is all a metaphor of course (all this turning away and turning back) unless you are the prophet Jonah who has *literally* tried to run away from the Lord.

For Jonah to repent spiritually, he'll have to repent literally. When he headed for Tarshish, he was heading to the west while Nineveh was located to Jonah's east. Tarshish was located in modern day Spain. Nineveh was located in modern day Iraq. Jonah was heading in the opposite direction from his calling and was trying to put around 3,000 miles between himself and God's will for him.

Now, I'm not certain about this (so don't quote me or anything), but Jonah may be the sole example in all of Scripture where to repent spiritually the individual has to repent literally—where to turn to God the person needs to actually turn around. (Don't think too long about it, or you'll probably prove me wrong.)

Well, let's look at today's text together. And, see what God wants to teach us through Jonah's literal repentance.

## **Jonah 3:1-5**

**3** Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: <sup>2</sup>“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” <sup>5</sup> The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

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We will see three things in this passage as we study it. (1<sup>st</sup>) We'll see that God sends Jonah to Nineveh for a second time. (2<sup>nd</sup>) We'll see that Jonah listens to God.

And, (3<sup>rd</sup>) we'll see that Nineveh also listens to God. So, we have one repeat calling from the Lord and two repentant parties. Let's look at each of these.

### 1. God calls again (vv. 1-2).

Many of you will be familiar with the old *Verizon Wireless* advertisements where the spokesperson walks around repetitively asking—"Can you hear me now?" They depict him all over the globe in a number of the most remote areas of the world, getting crystal clear reception, thanks to his *Verizon* cellphone plan. (In a total coup, *Sprint* enticed the "Can you hear me now?" actor away from *Verizon* back in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Apparently *Verizon's* non-compete clause wasn't as clear as their cell reception was. *Oh the sting of corporate betrayal!*)

Anyway, whenever I think about those old *Verizon* commercials, I often think about Jonah and God in these verses. When the Lord issues his 2<sup>nd</sup> call to the prophet, I think that God was asking—*Can you hear me now, Jonah? Will you obey my call to Nineveh now? Will you go and preach?*

Why do I say this? Why do I think that's the message here?

Well, consider what you might expect if you were unfamiliar with this story—if you'd never heard it before. Just pretend you're part of the original audience sitting around a fire hearing this account for the 1<sup>st</sup> time. You'd probably be pretty relieved when Jonah comes out of that fish alive. You'd likely be thinking he needs some rest and a bath to wash-off all that vomit. You'd likely praise the Lord for saving Jonah, the Hebrew prophet. Then, abruptly, the narrator interrupts your thoughts.

*...the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you" (vv. 1-2).*

At this point, the action escalates as does the narrative tension in the audience. You see, when God issues this command to Jonah for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, the central conflict is reintroduced—the thing that has put Jonah at odds with God from the beginning of our story is between them again. In essence, when the Lord reissues the command, he's asking the prophet: *Do you hear me now? Have you changed your tune?*

This is a rebuke for Jonah. And, lest we miss it, this should be a rebuke to us. The original audience would've certainly felt it. They would have had no more love

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<sup>1</sup> You can read [this](#) article detailing how his switch from *Verizon* to *Sprint* came about.

for Nineveh than Jonah did. And, they would have realized—just like the prophet—that God wasn't giving up on their enemies.

Listen, Jonah (as well as all those Israelites who were in the original audience) would have been naturally adverse to preaching a warning message to the Assyrians. Their preference would be for judgment. Their preference would be for destruction. In their heart of hearts, they're all running from God. And when Jonah's escape fails, their escape from the will of God fails right along with him. The Lord is calling each of them as they listen *for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time* to Nineveh.

Let's apply this rebuke to our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Think about your life. If you're a believer, think about how you've learned to follow God. It's been messy, hasn't it? It's you going your own way—you thinking you know what's best for you; then, if you're like me, you fail miserably and recognize that the Lord's ways are what's actually best for you. Isn't that how it usually works?

It occurs to me that 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> callings from the Lord are very common for me. I go my own way, thinking I know best. Yet, my plans come tumbling down, and then God asks again—*Do you hear me now, Jason?* We think there's some place for compromise in relationship with God—*You know Lord, if we do this your way then we can do these other things my way.* Isn't that how many of us tend to think? But, there's no compromise. God is King. God is ruler over all. The will of the Lord is always the best way.

Notice I didn't say the easiest way, the most pleasant way, or the fastest way because it's often not any of those.

- It's not easy to work to forgive someone who has hurt you.
- It's not pleasant to confess when you're wrong or when you sin.
- It's not typically fast or efficient to do things with honesty and care.

Yet friends, we are supposed to do things in the Lord's way. It's our calling—whether we're operating inside the church or outside the church. We're commanded by God to obey his will or do things his way. This is the lesson throughout Scripture. So, the apostle Paul writes: "...whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus..." (Colossians 3:17). In short, Paul says do everything in a way that displays the character of Christ, the attributes of God.

The Lord is patient with Jonah and with us. When we ignore or disobey him, he often calls again. Don't ignore him. Listen and obey.

Well, what does Jonah do with his second call from the Lord?

## **2. Jonah turns (vv. 3-4).**

Look at the next couple verses of this passage with me.

*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. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (vv. 3-4).*

When we read this, we might be tempted to suppose that this is the 1<sup>st</sup> instance of obedience in our text. "Finally!" We think, "It's about time God was listened to! It's about time he was obeyed!" Yet, if we think this, we need to take a closer look at the narrative. It may be the 1<sup>st</sup> time Jonah has obeyed but not the 1<sup>st</sup> demonstration of it. Evidence of God's sovereignty and lordship are written all over this little book. It's one of the major themes.

- Jonah, up to this point, has refused to proclaim God's message of warning to Nineveh, but God's servants, the wind and the rain and the raging sea, have not hesitated to preach a warning message to a disobedient prophet. They have been obedient.
- Jonah has run west to Tarshish instead of going east to preach to Nineveh, but God's servant the great fish has not hesitated to swim in the direction the Lord commands. The fish is obedient.

You know, when Jonah repents and finally obeys God's call, he's just falling in line with everything and everyone else in this narrative. Jonah is the misfit here. He's the one who sticks out. And, ironically he's the one who should be least likely to stick out. He's supposed to be the prophet. He's supposed to be the one to speak on behalf of God—the one who personifies obedience. Yet, up until now in the story, Jonah's been the sore thumb when it comes to obedience.

We might ask why God has gone to such trouble to use this obstinate prophet. Why not use the natural elements? Why not the lower creatures? Why not an angel?

Certainly the Lord has authority over all of creation. Certainly it's within his power to do so. Why then does he insist upon this sinful human being? The answer is simply that he was created for it. *You* were created for it—to represent God.

We can undervalue what it means to be human; believers, however, must not. The Lord created humanity to share a special relationship with him and to participate with him in his governance of creation. He is, therefore, most praised when we walk in accordance to his plans for us. Certainly the Lord can use wind or water or animals or angels to speak on his behalf; but, he designed and called you for this glorious and worshipful task. Thus, like the prophet Isaiah when God calls him to his service with the question: “Whom shall I send?” we should reply: “Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). Again, you (like Jonah) were created for this.

Well let's look—in a little more detail—at what happens when Jonah preaches to the Ninevites as God has commanded him to preach. The results are unexpected. They are a surprise.

### **3. Nineveh turns (v. 5).**

Last week I cautioned that believers shouldn't try to defend what's miraculous in Scripture by showing that it's naturally possible. Saying we can believe that Jonah survived for three days and three nights in a fish because it's scientifically possible is essentially to say that if it's not scientifically possible then the story must be false. And, that's to rob God of his ability to work miracles; that's to rob him of his ability to be God at all.

This week we must be aware that we can be tempted to do the very same thing with historical explanations. I'll show you what I mean with Nineveh's repentance in this passage.

Many are surprised by the apparent speed with which all the Ninevites repent and turn to God following Jonah's short preaching stint through the streets of town. After all, Nineveh was a “great” city; it was big. Moreover, it wasn't a friendly city as I mentioned in week one; Ninevites weren't known for hospitality. It consequently seems strange that one prophet, one preacher, comes walking into town proclaiming that God's wrath is at hand and gets this kind of revival.

Some have reasoned, therefore, that all the speedy repentance is at least partly because of ongoing strife, which Assyria was experiencing internally and externally

at the time of Jonah's ministry. In short, these factors had so unsettled the Ninevites that they were far more ready to turn to God.

One biblical scholar explains it this way.

*...not only were there revolts from within the empire but also the nation was at war with a powerful country (Urartu) near the Caspian Sea. No doubt this depressed state of Assyria contributed much to the readiness of the people to hear Jonah as he began to preach to them.<sup>2</sup>*

Now, I'm not saying these weren't factors. There are always complex factors at work in revival. (When I came to Christ, I was experiencing personal challenges which I'd never experienced before. I had come to the very end of my own strength and ability. I knew I wasn't master of my own happiness. There were many factors that led to my repentance.) The point is rather that those historical factors are God's. The point is that God is the God of history.

So, the Ninevites ultimately repent in mass because the Lord has intervened and mercifully sent his prophet at just the right time—at precisely the right moment in history. A history over which he is sovereign. The Lord sent Jonah to the Ninevites because he takes no joy in the deaths of the wicked but desires that all should repent and be saved (Ezekiel 18:23). And, in this narrative, the Ninevites cry-out for mercy because Yahweh has worked through the events of Assyrian history to prepare them to repent and receive his grace.

Friends, as the Ninevites were experiencing the tumult and strife in their city, doubtlessly they were unsettled and nervous and unsure about what the future held. When there is unrest from within and from without, when there are wars and rumors of wars, anxiety is a natural human response. Yet, it was in the midst of that anxiety and fear and concern that the God of history stepped in to call Nineveh to attention—to call the Ninevites to himself. And, in the process, to save many lives.

Right now the world is in the midst of an unparalleled situation—a pandemic of which we've not experienced in over a hundred years. And, certainly many of us are anxious and fearful about what the future holds. What will this mean for my job? What will this mean for my family? What will this mean for my health?

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<sup>2</sup> Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 63.

In the midst of this whirlwind of questions and concerns, remember the God of history. Remember the God who reigns over the good times and over the bad ones. Remember the God who delights to bring beauty out of the ashes—life out of death. Turn to him. Trust in him. Serve him and find rest. Amen.