

*Let's try again.* Now that we have a new Jonah, a Jonah who went down to Sheol under God's judgment, but who has been raised up by God's mercy, let's begin again. And because you, too, have disobeyed God, *take heart* as we begin again, realizing that your sin cannot overcome God's purpose for you, because of the life-changing power of God's mercy.

If you think of God as a strict judge, if you think that new obedience earns His mercy, and if you're tempted to think that you've screwed up so badly that God has no more use for you, listen carefully, because Jonah 3 is full of good news! Jonah's second chance demonstrates that God is merciful, that mercy leads to obedience, rather than the other way around, and that even though you're a sinner, God can still use you to spread His glory to the nations.

Jonah 3 also gives us a clear picture of what repentance involves, and shows us a God who graciously forgives sinners who believe His Word and repent of their evil ways, not in a fickle or unpredictable way, but in a way that perfectly expresses His eternal nature according to His Word of promise. While the literary structure and artistry is quite complex, the message of Jonah 3 is very simple: God renews His call, Jonah obeys, Nineveh repents, and God shows mercy.

"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city," a city great to God, a three-days city. Last time, Jonah rose to flee; this time, he rose and *went*, according to the Lord's word. Nineveh is important to God, and so He repeats His commission to Jonah, who finally obeys.

And the message that Jonah preaches is very different than other prophetic messages. This one is stripped down to the bare essentials, "Forty days left until Nineveh is overturned!" We don't know if this is the entire message, or if this is the summary, but either way, the emphasis is on simplicity, which takes the focus off of the messenger and onto the message. Jonah's message was an announcement of coming judgment, a warning of what God was about to do.

But this message of judgment ("destroy" or "change") was somewhat ambiguous, which Jonah seems not to have noticed or appreciated. And so while his new obedience might seem to show a changed heart, it may be that Jonah reasons that if God barely spared the life of His own prophet, then surely Nineveh will be judged! Surely wicked Nineveh will rebel against God's Word even more than he did, and so surely their suffering will be even greater than his!

But God is powerfully at work: in 3:5, the people of Nineveh *believe* God, they put their faith in His word, and as a result, they immediately *crumble* in heartfelt repentance. They begin fasting, and put on sackcloth, signifying mourning and humiliation, from the greatest to the least.

And when word gets to the king the greatest of them takes his cue from the least of them, and personally humiliates himself before God. The repenting has already started before the king repents; they aren't repenting because the king said to repent, but because they believe God. The king also believes God, and so he steps off the throne, lays aside his royal robe, takes up the clothes of poverty and mourning, and sits in the ashes of death. He's saying that he doesn't deserve to be *king*; he deserves to *die*.

Not only that, but he then issues a proclamation that sets out the official response of Nineveh to God's word of warning: Food and drink are forbidden; the only thing any Ninevite, even the animals, should be doing is *repenting*. And the heart of their repentance is an *ethical* change, a changed life in response to God's Word: the Ninevites turn from their evil way and from the violence that is in their hands. It has only taken *one* day, not 40, but God's Word has overthrown Nineveh, and turned the whole city upside down.

Nineveh's full and complete repentance becomes the model for what real and full repentance looks like: first, it is motivated by faith in the Word of God. Second, it is a public and outwardly visible identification with death – sackcloth and ashes is another way of saying “we should die”. Third, they call out mightily to God, expressing sorrow and pleading for mercy. And fourth, they stop doing evil and wicked things! That's what repentance looks like!

Real repentance means more than saying you're sorry; it means overturning your whole life in response to God. So have you repented yet? Feeling bad and apologizing are a good start, but not enough! Oftentimes Christians can struggle to find peace with God or peace in their relationships because they've only just started the process of repentance. But half-hearted repentance cannot restore peace! You need to include everything and everyone in your repentance – your voice, your relationships, your wardrobe, your actions, and even your pets! This serious repentance shows that you've taken sin seriously, and that you believe God and His warnings about the judgment that's coming.

And v.9 is remarkable, because it reveals that the Ninevites aren't simply attempting to manipulate God through religious rituals. They don't know if any mercy is coming; they just know that what they have done is wicked and wrong, so that they deserve to perish under God's fierce anger. Their repentance is not a transaction that *obligates* God to show mercy; it is a heart-stricken acknowledgement of the wickedness of their culture of violence and evil.

"Perhaps," they say, "maybe if we turn, God will turn!" Their hope rests on "maybe mercy"; they know that repentance does not by itself *merit* mercy. *Jonah* knows that God is a merciful God who promises to show mercy to His people, but Nineveh has no such knowledge and no such promise. And yet even the cows of Nineveh are more faithful and humble than Yahweh's own prophet. Nineveh believes God and repents, bowing themselves before the mercy of God.

And I just want to flag something for you: in all this repenting, we see many rituals of repentance, but what big and obvious thing is missing? If you were Jonah, what would you be expecting? If you were an Israelite, what would you be bringing before God? In all of this repenting, *there is no blood*. No sacrifice, no judgment, no death. Symbolic death, yes, but no storm, no fire from heaven, no blood! They've repented for their sin, yes, but have they paid for it? In their violence, they shed a lot of blood. Are they going to get away without having their own blood shed? Is that justice? Maybe this is part of Jonah's problem.

Because what happens next is *stunning*: God sees how they humble themselves, and how they turned from their evil ways, and God relented of the evil that He had said He would do to them. Nineveh turned, and so God turned. They stopped doing evil, and so He didn't bring evil upon them. Nineveh was not destroyed; God had mercy on them!

And every sinner in this room should be shocked and stunned with relief and joy, because God is a God of mercy! You haven't just heard about the mercy of God shown to a bloodthirsty nation thousands of years ago. The *same* mercy that God showed Nineveh is the mercy that He shows to *you*, mercy that should absolutely take your breath away! You sinned, and yet God did not destroy you! You have done evil, and yet here you are! God's fierce anger was aimed right at you, and someone else stood in the way, so that you might not perish, but have life instead! The mercy of God means salvation for you! Thanks be to God!

And so in one sense, it should seem a bit impertinent to ask the next question, but we need to, because the Word of God drives us to it. In Numbers 22-24, King Balak of Moab wants to curse God's people, and so he hires God's prophet to blast them. Unfortunately for him, it backfires, and God speaks a word of blessing on His people instead. And so King Balak tries to change the prophecy, only to have Balaam say these words in Num. 23:19: "God is not a man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not fulfill it?" God's glory is seen in that His prophecies come true, and He does not relent. So what do we make of Jonah 3:10, where it seems like by *relenting* and *not* doing what He said He *would* do, God does exactly what He says in Numbers that He *won't* do!

This is a hard issue to deal with in the Bible, and it doesn't just show up here in Jonah. And to be honest, there is an aspect of mystery about it. I can't fully explain it, and I think we'll have to wait until we see Jesus to get the full answer. But today I want to go to Jer. 18, which, even if it doesn't have all the answers, points us in the right direction. Listen as I [read Jer. 18:1-10].

In this passage, God is talking about the exact scenario we see in Jonah: "If I promise to destroy a nation, and if they turn from their evil, then I will relent." So we can't ignore Numbers or Jonah, but Jeremiah helps us put it together in this way: God doesn't relent *like a man does*, on the basis of new information, say, or because he's reassessed how he defines good and evil. God doesn't go back on His Word! That's what Numbers is saying.

In other words, man relents by changing himself; God relents not because God has changed, but because man has changed. God's eternal disposition towards sin and sinners remains unchanged, but His eternal merciful nature doesn't change either: God always has mercy on those who believe in His Word and repent! That's what happens in Jonah 3:10.

God doesn't change like we do, and so when God "relents" and turns away from bringing disaster, He isn't changing. He's doing exactly what He said He would do *in the face of a changed situation*. And in Nineveh's case, what changed seems to have been a three-day journey of death and resurrection. Nineveh ritually offered herself up in sackcloth and ashes, and God acted entirely in accordance with His merciful nature.

What we see in Jonah 3:10 is not the human-like relenting of a fickle, changeable man, but the divine relenting of an unchangeably merciful God, the God of grace and forgiveness, the God of second chances, both for rebellious prophets and repentant nations.

And for us, that's good news. When we disobey, when we sin, God pursues us in order to turn us back to Him, and when we turn, He turns away His fierce anger. This is true no matter who you are, or what you have done, whether violence like Nineveh or rebelliously refusing to speak for God like Jonah. We are all sinners, in desperate need of God's mercy.

So if you have not yet repented, or if your repentance has been half-hearted and incomplete, so that you don't have peace with God, now is the time. Don't wait. Believe God that judgment is coming, and cry out to Him for mercy in the name of Jesus Christ! And if you need to talk to me after the service, if your sin is weighing on your heart, then please come! I'd be happy to walk with you in repentance, and point you to the mercy of God in Christ.

But even if by God's grace you haven't done the horrible things that Nineveh did, I want you to consider this: God has been urging us through His Word to take the gospel to our neighbors. Have you run from that call? I know I have. I'm good at finding excuses and sleeping in the boat, and so it's good news to hear that Jesus gives stubborn sinners like me a second chance to arise and go.

Very practically, a few weeks ago, we started making cards and bookmarks available to help encourage you to embrace God's call to share the gospel. I hope they've been helpful; I've filled out three names on my card, and have been praying for their salvation and for opportunities to share the gospel with them. Now, the important thing is not filling out the card; that's just a tool.

But the big question is, are you running from God's call, or are you praying and looking for chances to obey? Today is a day of recommissioning for us, too. God renews us here in worship, and soon He will send us out as His witnesses. Maybe it would do you good to take some time this afternoon to fill out one of these cards and start praying so that you'll be ready to arise and go when God calls you to share the love of Jesus with your neighbors.

Nineveh's immediate repentance is a standing rebuke to Jonah's stubbornness, but as I mentioned before, there is an atonement-sized, Jesus-shaped hole in the book of Jonah. There is an abundance of mercy, but there isn't an answer to the question "On what basis does God show mercy? Why is this mercy not unjust, especially to Nineveh's many victims? They get skinned alive and impaled while crying out for mercy, but God shows mercy to Nineveh without demanding any bloodshed, not even animal sacrifice?"

In the next chapter, Jonah is going to ask "where's justice?" The OT answer is, "God will provide a lamb", animal sacrifice, which is missing from this book. But maybe Jonah 3 is a preview of the NT answer that when God extends His mercy to the nations, He doesn't ultimately want the blood of bulls and goats. Nineveh believes God's word and call out for His mercy, and when they receive mercy, it shows that animal sacrifice at the temple is not essential.

For us today, we now know the name of God's Word, God's Mercy, and so when the question comes, "Where's justice?", we proclaim the good news that God's justice was satisfied through the shed blood of Jesus, so that God's mercy is poured out on all who believe in Him and cry out for God's mercy in Jesus' name. Abraham saw this dimly by faith, Jonah lost sight of it in his anger, but we see it clearly in the gospel, because a greater prophet than Jonah has come, which means that if Nineveh repented, how much more should we repent!

The cross is where justice and mercy meet, and God has promised to forgive and spare everyone who repents and puts their faith in Jesus. So let us thank God for the life we have in Jesus Christ,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*