

Repenting for the City

Jonathan K. Dodson | Jonah 3:1-10 | September 24, 2017

If you're visiting for the first time today, I want you to know this isn't a typical sermon. There's an intensity about this chapter of Jonah I'm going to try to get across, and trust the you'll be open to what God has to say. We pick up after Jonah has been delivered from death as makes his way to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh. There are three movements in this chapter: The Word Comes, The City Repents, God Relents.

The Word Comes

The chapter opens, "*Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time*" (3:1). The word of Lord is repeated twice. It came with no confusion, as it did in chapter one. As a prophet of Israel, Jonah would have received direct revelation from God to communicate to his people. Prophets don't work like that today; they are open to error. The only infallible revelation we have is the Bible. That is how the Word of God comes to us. Hebrews says the Scriptures are "*living and active Word,*" *alive.* When the Word comes to Jonah, it's not a suggestion, a stray thought; it is an alive Word, from God. Did you notice the Word acts like a *person*? It is alive; it speaks; it moves people to action. In fact, John tells us *Christ is the Word.* The Word speaks, knocks, calls out to us. It knocks on your door, the door of your heart. It says to Jonah Arise, go. It calls for obedience. Has the Word been speaking to you? Maybe these past couple of Sundays, over the summer, through your own reading? Are his words trying to get through? Is it alive to you; or are you dead to it? This was the second time God had tried to reach Jonah on this particular issue. And notice; God doesn't berate Jonah for running away. He doesn't even bring up his disobedience the first time; but he calls again giving Jonah another chance to *heed the Word.* We heed things we find important or valuable. If you check Facebook or Instagram every day; you can heed the Word. Is Jesus giving you another chance to hear? Is he asking you to do something, reconcile, witness, serve, study, pray, repent? Or are you running? Is there some thing or some right you're holding onto, something so precious you are unwilling to part with it? Perhaps you think God owes you something, that have you put *him* in your debt? A better spouse, relationship, job, church, income, status? Here's what God has to say to that: "*For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?*" "*Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?*" *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen*" (Rom 11:34-36). God does not owe us a single thing; we owe him everything, everything we have, we can do, and have done. *All things* are from him and deserve to go back to him—how?—in gratitude, service, worship—your intellect, your longings, what you do with your body and what you do with your heart—it all belongs to God. What does God want from Jonah? He wants the Word not just to come to him but to come through him. For his message to come through Jonah out into the city. *Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.* Is the Message of God going through you? Are you going to the city or just using the city for its goods and services? [soccer guy] How do you if the message is going through you? If you moved out of the neighborhood, dorm, condo, office, would your neighbor care? What would they say about you—that you loved the city and God's Word was on your lips? That the message of Christ moved through you? Jonah's message is, "*Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown*"

(4). Jonah must have said more, we just don't have it. Because the word "evil ways" is repeated twice, and Jonah is told to cry out against that evil city in chapter one, it's likely Jonah called them to repent of their evil ways. God deals with evil. What is **evil**? How do you measure it? By comparing ourselves to white supremacists, an opposing political party, a friend, and if we're better than them—aren't we good and they evil? If so, that makes evil relative. What is evil to some will not be evil to another. Centuries ago Anglo-Saxon warriors would say no way to same-sex relations but yes to violence and murder. Today, a modern person says yes to same-sex relations but no to violence and murder. Who determines what's good and evil? The problem is that we use a horizontal scale of comparison. Evil is not fixed on a human scale; it's measured on a vertical scale. God is at the top, a fixed point of holiness, from which *he* (holy and pure) can determine what's truly evil. If you read through the book of Judges, we're continually told that Israel "did what was evil in God's eyes" over and over. Do you know what the evil was? Turning their back on God, like Jonah. Running away from him, not letting his message move through them). *They were to be a light to the nations, but instead they worshipped the same gods*. Is your back turned or are you face to face *with God*? If we're not facing God we're embracing evil.

The City Repents

The Word produces repentance of an **unimaginable scope** and unthinkable depth. The *whole* city repents, "*The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth*" (5). The greatest to the least. Noble and peasant, people and animals. City-wide repentance would have been inconceivable, even by ancient standards. You'd have to take the message to the king first, and go through the proper channels to get the Word out. But Jonah starts preaching a day's journey in, the city believes. Revival happens before the message even reaches the king, who proclaims a fast and repents. *What is repentance? It's not mere confession, acknowledging you've sinned; its turning from the thing and turning back to God. Here a whole city repents? Do you have faith enough for city to repent? What about faith for a neighborhood, a block, a neighbor? If you're not allowing the Word to come through, it won't reach others. You don't believe the Word. Its come to your door but not through you.* The Ninevites believed. God's Word reached their hearts. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says the Ninevites will rise up to judge Israel. Why? Because the pagans repented at God's Word when Israel refused to, *with the Word standing right in front of them*. The Word has come. The Word is here. Producing repentance of an unimaginable scope. The think a whole city is something? One day there will be people from every language. **Unthinkable depth**. The Ninevites had quite a reputation. Even the king admits this when he calls them to repent of their "evil ways and the violence of their hands." The term "violence" designates the arbitrary infringement of human rights. Random killings, racism, torture. The Assyrians were known for their cruelties. And who repents and turns to God? The Assyrians Ninevites! Among the most cruel, least likely. God can soften the hardest heart. He can deal with any evil. He can forgive any sin, change any soul. But you have to turn. If you've received the message of Jesus, and said I follow you, then he has called you to share his message of judgment and salvation. I recently told my kids about a mission trip I took to Costa Rica, where I traveled up a mountain and spend the night in the little town of Jesus Maria. I woke up in the middle of the night by something flying over my head; it was a bat in the house. When I woke up and walked out the

backyard, I saw thick, tall jungle as far as I could see and scores of monkeys in the trees. My kids asked, why were you there? I went door to door telling people about Jesus and some put their faith in him. How did they do it so quickly? Well, I told them God was going to judge all humanity and send us to hell if we didn't repent and put faith in Christ. My son laughed, of course they would—who wouldn't want to avoid hell? It got me thinking. In the name of love, have I been too soft on God's judgment? If my neighbors are going to face the judgment of God, don't they have a right to know? And if I know how to escape it, and didn't tell them, wouldn't that be a horrific act of hate? *A lack of evangelism is a lack of love.* When we choose not to act, to allow the Word to come us, we are in essence saying, "There's no hope for *you*. You are too brainwashed by secular society." Well how did you get saved? You think your secular neighbor is hard, just think about sharing with violent Assyrians. God's grace can change a murderer's heart; *his truth can reach unthinkable depths.* *How did they change?* I want to draw your attention to three things. They fasted, cried out, and turned away. **Fasting** is an act of humility. It is stripping away comforts to get underneath God and hear from him. They display their humility by putting on sackcloth, a coarse cloth usually made of goats hair worn around the waist directly touching the skin to induce discomfort. Comfort threatens faith because it distracts us from the glory of God with trinkets like a new restaurant, movie, phone. We can easily waste our awe on those things. Did you hear about that new restaurant, see that new app, while the Word of God lingers at our door. *Fasting fosters humility.* Next, they **cry out**. When the Word comes to them they don't just sit there and agree with Jonah. Yeah, you know I am evil and I probably should repent. They cry out *mightily*. When do we cry out in life? When we get hurt, when we think there's a car about to hit us, when we see a threat and we want to avoid it. *Cry out to God to avoid the threat of his judgment, the danger of spending your life on your glory not his.* To *him* be glory *forever*. Finally, they *turn away*. It's not an emotional moment, a mere confession. They change. They turn. That's repentance. It's going the opposite direction of your indifference to God, allowing his message to move through you. Maybe you think your besetting sin is too hard to break? The Ninevites dropped their violent reputation and gained a new one. If they can change, we can change. How?

God Relents

3:9 "*God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.*" They don't say, he know he will relent, let's sin so grace may abound. They do not presume on the *sovereign God*. They hope; they turn without a promise of forgiveness—relenting or no relenting—because they know it's the right thing to do. To own up to God. We're told God sees: *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened* (3:10). Though he would have been right to drop the hammer of justice on us all, the hammer falls on his Son. Justice is served. Evil is overturned; sin paid for...not by *us* but *by the innocent Son of God*. Now that's compassion. And this is exactly what Jonah feared would happen, "*I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love*" (4:2). Do you know the gracious God? Really know? *Because those most acquainted with grace are least likely to take it for granted and most likely to give it away.* Don't let the Word of God stop at the door of your heart. Let it in, let it produce repentance, and move out, alive, into the lives of others. What could happen if we did?