

The Lord works true repentance **Jonah 3:1-5,10**

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Get up. Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh just as the word of the LORD had commanded. Now Nineveh was a great city to God. It required a three-day walk. ⁴ Jonah walked through the city for a day, and he called out, “Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!” ⁵ The men of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least. ¹⁰ When God saw their actions, that they had turned from their evil way, God relented from the disaster which he said he would bring on them, and he did not carry it out.

When you hear the name Jonah, what immediately comes to mind? Isn't it the miracle that God performed when a huge fish swallowed the prophet whole and kept him alive in the belly of that fish for three days and nights? That's usually what we think of when we hear the name Jonah. I would dare to say that there is an even greater miracle from the book of Jonah than when God saved his prophet from drowning with a great fish. I would even say that this miracle ranks up there among the greatest miracles found in Holy Scripture. That miracle is when the entire city of Nineveh turned to the Lord with repentant hearts. Besides an impressive miracle, our text provides an important lesson. It was a lesson the prophet Jonah needed to learn. It's a lesson we need to learn as well. It is a lesson in repentance. When we consider the message that God wanted Jonah to use and then think about the results God made happen, we have to admit that repentance is truly a miracle. For we learn that only the Lord can work true repentance in people.

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh at first. Nineveh was a great city. It is estimated that over a half million people took up residents in Nineveh at the time of Jonah. Seems like an impossible task for just one preacher. Plus consider that all of these people were heathen. They probably were not too interested in listening to some foreign preacher speaking against them and their city. Nineveh in fact was the capital city of Israel's #1 enemy to the north—Assyria. Jonah could not see bringing God's saving word to a people that he hated. So Jonah fled. He got into a ship and tried to sail as far away from Nineveh as he could get. But he didn't get far. God sent a violent storm and Jonah was to blame. Jonah instructed the crew to throw him overboard. And when they did the storm ended completely.

But what would become of Jonah? God would not let him drown in the sea. God used a great fish to swallow Jonah and keep him safe in its belly for three whole days. Finally, the fish spit him up on shore and Jonah found himself back where he started. *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Get up. Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”* God in his grace gave Jonah a second chance. And Jonah showed he had a change of heart as well. Forgiven by his Lord, he was ready to do what God wanted. Our text tells us this time *“Jonah set out and went to Nineveh just as the word of the LORD had commanded.”* Jonah had come to his senses. He knew he couldn't run from God. The Lord wanted him in Nineveh. To Nineveh he went.

We are told, *“Now Nineveh was a great city to God. It required a three-day walk.”* For three days Jonah journeyed through the streets of this foreign city. To a strange people in a strange land Jonah brought his strange message. He proclaimed: *“Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!”* Whether that is all he said, repeating it as he walked through the neighborhoods of Nineveh, or if that was just the main theme of his message, we don’t know for sure. But in those few words we hear the message God used to work true repentance in Ninevite hearts. The people of Nineveh heard God’s law: *“Nineveh is going to be overthrown!”* But they also heard the gospel: *“Forty more days.”* For the same amount of time that Jonah spent in the belly of that huge fish, he carried out his preaching tour in Nineveh. It was the message God wanted him to use so the Lord could work true repentance in Ninevite hearts.

Our Lord wants us to use his message today to bring people to true repentance. Sinful people cannot rouse true repentance within themselves. You can tell a child to say “I’m sorry” when he or she has done something wrong. But you can’t make them feel it. Only God can muster true sorrow over sin deep within our hearts. God does this through his message of law. With his law God shows you exactly where you stand with him. You don’t. You can’t stand before God because you have not loved him or your neighbor the way you should. You have failed to live as the child of God that he’s made you. For all eternity we should be sent away from God’s presence. He should have nothing more to say to us, which of course is the worst part of hell. When you take that message to heart and turn to your Lord for help, you will appreciate God’s other message of good news.

God showed the gospel message in the life of Jonah. Jonah definitely brought destruction on himself by defying God’s call. He should have drowned in the depths of the sea. But God graciously rescued him with a great fish. And following three days in the belly of that creature, God brought Jonah safely back to dry ground. Jonah was a sign that pointed to the salvation God would bring. Our Lord would later explain it this way: *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Matthew 11:40). Jesus used Jonah’s fish story to explain his victory over death. His three-day stay in a tomb would come after the most violent death. From a cross, Jesus experienced the punishment of hell. He faced the destruction that sin has brought on all mankind. He would take our place, suffer our punishment, and die our death. But after three days, he would be alive again. He would triumph over sin, death, and Satan. This is good news God uses to comfort sinners for whom God works true repentance. With his message of law and gospel our Lord still works true repentance in people today.

That message of law and gospel is what God sent Jonah to proclaim as he walked the streets of Nineveh for three days. Amazingly the people of Nineveh listened. With the message God wanted his prophet to use, God got the results he wanted when he worked true repentance in the hearts of the Ninevites.

Jonah proclaimed, *“Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!”* We are told, *“The men of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least.”* Can you believe it? Jonah is probably the greatest success story

of any missionary preacher. He preached for just three days. And the Ninevites believed him. They truly believed that they were going to be destroyed. The entire city from the most important to the very least took God's Word to heart. The verses around our text tell us that the news spread like wildfire all over the city. When the King of Nineveh got word that destruction was coming, he led every citizen in that city in a public display of repentance. They completely changed. They put on uncomfortable clothes called sackcloth—picture wrapping yourself in a burlap sack. They fasted going without food and water to show their sorrow over sin. They changed their wicked ways in the hope that God would have mercy on them. Some have questioned whether this was true repentance, or if the Ninevites just put on a show to avoid God's destruction. Our Lord Jesus can answer that for us. Right after he used the sign of Jonah to predict his own resurrection, Jesus said, *"The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonah"* (Matthew 12:41).

By the grace of God, it worked. *When God saw their actions, that they had turned from their evil way, God relented from the disaster which he said he would bring on them, and he did not carry it out.* God was not just impressed with their outward show of repentance by fasting and wearing sackcloth. He looked into their hearts and saw the true repentance coming from everyone in the city. Scripture tells us how angels rejoice over one sinner that repents. Imagine the angelic celebration that went on in heaven when the entire city of Nineveh repented. God in his grace decided not to destroy the city. Instead he chose to forgive them.

When the Lord works true repentance in people, he brings about the results that he wants to happen. That was the lesson the prophet Jonah needed to learn. After he finished his work and saw how God had compassion on the Ninevites, Jonah had a surprising reaction. We are told in the verses following our text. *But to Jonah all this seemed very bad, and he became very angry. He prayed to the LORD, "LORD, wasn't this exactly what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I previously fled to Tarshish, because I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and you relent from sending disaster. So now, LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live"* (Jonah 4:1-3). Jonah still needed to learn about the heart of God. The Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He doesn't want any to perish. He wants all to come to know the truth of his salvation. What was true for Nineveh in Jonah's day is true for us today. When it comes to dishing out forgiveness there is only one race of people that God cares to deal with. It's the human race.

When we consider the story of Jonah, we tend to remember how God rescued Jonah in the belly of a huge fish. But don't you think that the repentance and conversion of Nineveh has to be an even greater miracle. Half a million sinners heard the Word of God. They turned from their evil ways. They repented and the Lord forgave them. That's the kind of God we have. He works miracles in the hearts of sinners. When we use his message of law and gospel, God will accomplish the same results in us and the people in our lives. There's no other way but God's way. Only he can work true repentance in all of us.