

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 of Jonah, what immediately comes to mind? Isn't it the miracle that God performed when a huge fish swallowed Jonah whole? And then God kept Jonah safe in the belly of that fish for three days and nights, until it spit Jonah up on shore. Isn't that what we think of when we hear about Jonah? I dare say that an even greater miracle from the book of Jonah occurs a little later in the book. That miracle is when the city of Nineveh turned to the Lord with repentance. Besides an impressive miracle, the Scripture before us 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 God wanted Jonah to use and think about the results that God wanted to happen, we have to admit that true repentance is a miracle only God can work. So we see how God works true repentance in people.

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was a great city. It is estimated that over a half million people took up residence in Nineveh at the time of Jonah. That seems like an impossible task for just one preacher. Plus consider that all of these people were heathen who probably were not too interested in listening to some foreigner preach against them and their city. Nineveh was also the capital city of Israel's #1 enemy to the north. It was the capital city of Assyria that God would later use to destroy Israel. Jonah could not see bringing God's saving word to a people 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 too far. A violent storm erupted, and Jonah was thrown overboard. But instead of drowning, 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.

That is where our text begins. *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.”* Here we witness a prime example of God's grace. God had changed Jonah's heart. He was now ready to do what God wanted. God forgave his runaway prophet. God then offered Jonah a second chance to serve him. Our text tells us, *“So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh just as the word of the LORD had commanded.”* Jonah had come to his senses. He couldn't run from God. God 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 walked through the streets of this foreign city. To a strange people in a strange land Jonah brought a strange message: *“Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!”*

Whether that is all he said as he walked through the neighborhoods of Nineveh or it that was just the theme of his message, we don't know. But in those words we hear the message God wanted Jonah to use to work true repentance in the Ninevites. Jonah preached law: *"Nineveh is going to be overthrown."* He preached gospel: *"Forty more days..."* For three days Jonah roamed the streets of Nineveh proclaiming God's message of law and gospel. It was the message God wanted him to use so the Lord could work true repentance in the hearts of these heathen Ninevites.

Our Lord wants us to use the same message today to bring people to true repentance. Sinful people that we are, we cannot rouse true repentance within us. You can tell us child to say, "I'm sorry," when he or she has done something wrong. But you can't make them feel that way. Only God can muster true sorrow over sin deep within our hearts. God does this through his message law. With his law God shows you exactly where he 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 he has made you. As a result you are going to die. You brought upon yourself an eternity away from him. That means suffering for all eternity for all your wrongdoings. Nineveh wasn't the only city God's destruction. Try Winona. Try Fountain City, Cochrane, Buffalo City, and the community in which you live. Only when you take that message to heart and turn to your Lord for help, then you will appreciate God's other message: His message of gospel.

God showed the gospel to Nineveh 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. After three days in the belly of that fish, God brought Jonah back safely to dry ground. Jonah was a sign that pointed the Ninevites to the salvation God would bring them. Our Savior explained 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 the grave came after a violent death on a cross. Jesus suffered the punishment of hell there for everyone—eternal separation from God. Hanging from that cross, Jesus would face the destruction that sin has brought us all. He'd take our place, suffer our punishment, and die our death. After three days, he'd be alive again to triumph in victory over sin, death, and Satan. That is the gospel message God uses to comfort repentant sinners. With his message of law and gospel God can work true repentance in all people.

God's message of law and gospel is what God wanted Jonah to proclaim as he walked the streets of Nineveh for three days. *"Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!"* Jonah shouted. And amazingly the people of Nineveh listened. Since Jonah used the message that God wanted, the Lord got the results that he wanted as well when he worked true repentance in the Ninevites.

After Jonah proclaimed God's message, "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. For just three days Jonah preached law and gospel to the Ninevites and the people believed. They believed that God was going to send destruction their way. The entire city, from the most important to the least significant took God's Word to heart. As we read earlier the verses around our text we saw how the news spread like wild fire. When the King of Nineveh got word of the coming destruction, he led everyone in the city in a public display of repentance. They completely changed. They put on uncomfortable clothing called sackcloth. They went without food and water and showed true sorrow over their sins. They changed their wicked ways in the hope that God would have mercy on them. Some have questioned whether this was true repentance. Or were the Ninevites just putting on a show to avoid God's destruction. Our Lord Jesus can answer that for us. *"For just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. But one even greater than Jonah is here"* (Matthew 12:40-41).

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 by their outward fasting and their wearing of sackcloth. He looked into their hearts and saw true repentance from everyone in the city—from the greatest to the least. Scripture tells us how angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner that repents. You can just imagine the angelic celebration that went on when the entire city of Nineveh repented. God in his grace decided not to destroy the city. He chose instead to forgive them.

When the Lord works true repentance in people, he brings the results that he wants to happen. That was a lesson that Jonah still needed to learn. After he finished his work and saw how God had compassion on the Ninevites, Jonah had a surprising reaction. We heard earlier in our Scripture reading, *"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'"* (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 the Ninevites in Jonah's day is true for us today. When it comes to dishing out forgiveness for people, there is only one race God cares to deal with—the human race.

When we consider the story of Jonah, remember how God rescued him in the belly of a huge fish. What a miracle. But don't forget the miracle of the conversion of Nineveh. Half a million people heard the word of God. They took it to heart. They turned from their evil ways. They repented and the Lord forgave them. That's the kind of God that we have. And when we use the same message God has given us, God can accomplish the same results for the people in our lives. There is no other way but God's way. For only the Lord works true repentance in all of us.