

## Jonah 3: Turning Points

There is a famous saying, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." Some people marry each other without really knowing each other - they marry in haste, too quickly. After they get married and discover what each other is really like they feel like they have made a terrible mistake - they now have a long time to regret what they have done, perhaps until they divorce each other or maybe until the day they die.

In this chapter there is no repenting at leisure. God has closed off all the exit routes for Jonah, as Jonah well knows following the amazing experience described in Chapter 2, concerning how Jonah was swallowed and spat out by the great fish. Because there is no backing out, we now see Jonah turning himself around, that is, repenting and heading for Nineveh to do what God had told him to do.

There is certainly no repenting at leisure for Nineveh. What is Jonah's message? As verse 4 informs us, Jonah called out, "*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*" The Ninevites, including the king, realize they are standing on the very brink of destruction. Repentance must happen now, before it is too late.

Jonah 3 is full of remarkable repentances. Jonah's repentance is remarkable given what God did to make him go to Nineveh. Nineveh's repentance is remarkable - a whole pagan city listening to a foreign prophet and calling out mightily to the God of Israel. But remarkable as these two instances of repentance truly are, they are trumped by the third example of repentance we encounter in this chapter - the repentance of God himself. Yes, don't miss this! The very climax of this chapter concerns God's own repentance, extraordinary as this may sound. So in verse 10 we read: "*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*"

Let's consider each of the three instances of repentance or "turning points":

- Jonah's Turn: Jonah's Material Repentance
- Nineveh's Turn: Nineveh's Moral Repentance
- God's Turn: God's Merciful Repentance

### Jonah's Material Repentance

Chapter 3 begins with Jonah again commanded to go to Nineveh, located near the modern Iraqi city of Mosul on the east bank of the Tigris River downstream from the Kurdish foothills. The name Nineveh is possibly derived from the Semitic word for "fish", namely *nanu*. In the ancient world the pictogram or hieroglyph used to symbolize Nineveh was that of a fish inside a house. So God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, the house of the fish. Where did he end up when he refused? Being housed by a great fish. Observe too that in Chapter 3 the mention of three days journey in Nineveh recalls the three days and nights Jonah spent inside the great fish.

God had a tremendous sense of humour when he arranged for Jonah to be swallowed by a great fish. So now we read:

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying:

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

The emphasis here is NOT on Jonah himself. What is the key phrase? “The word of the LORD” - “The word of Yahweh.” It is not Jonah in the driving seat. It is “the word of Yahweh” that is doing the driving. It is not Jonah’s own decision to obey God that matters. Rather, the word of Yahweh is irresistible. God’s word will accomplish its purpose. The word of Yahweh catches up Jonah in its mighty current and takes him to Nineveh, even against Jonah’s own desire and will.

Why did God choose to use a prophet like Jonah to carry out this task, a man who hated Nineveh and wanted to see it destroyed? God chose Jonah precisely because he hated Nineveh so much.

The Navigators is a well-known Christian disciple-making organization, with ministries in many nations. For many years the National Director for Japan was a man named Bob Boardman. He spoke with a whisper because he had been shot in the throat by a Japanese bullet during World War II. After the war Boardman told the Lord he was willing to go anywhere in the world to serve him, except Japan. He hated the Japanese, especially after the atrocities and barbarity committed by the Japanese during the war. Where did God send Bob Boardman? You’ve got it! He sent him to Japan and he even ended up marrying a Japanese woman.

Humanly speaking, Jonah had good reason to hate Assyrians, the people who lived in Nineveh. Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II. The Assyrians had already sent raiding parties into the Northern Kingdom where Jonah the Galilean lived. The ancient world was a cruel world, but even in that world the Assyrians were known as the most cruel and barbaric people of all. For example, one of their methods of execution was to first dismember a victim, cutting off hands and feet, then impaling the person on a pole, through the sides, rectum, vagina or through the mouth and then to leave him or her to die slowly. Indeed, the Assyrians treated mass torture as a basic tactic for winning battles, having public torture sessions involving 25-100 victims at a time, seeking to utterly demoralize their enemies.

Some of Jonah’s own people had doubtless been butchered like this. Further, while the book of Jonah describes Nineveh as a great city it is nothing compared to what it was to become later. In Jonah’s day the Assyrian empire was growing in power and it didn’t take a great political brain to see that unless Nineveh was stopped the Assyrians would wreak even greater havoc in Jonah’s homeland. Indeed, in 722 BC, around 60 years after Jonah went to Nineveh, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom and

ten tribes were permanently removed from Israel. So Jonah felt he had good reasons for loathing the Assyrians and for desiring the utter destruction of Nineveh.

As Chapters 1 and 2 make plain, when Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord and headed for Tarshish he was not committing apostasy. He was not refusing to worship God. Further, there was nothing lacking in Jonah's courage. He did not run because he was afraid of being tortured to death by the Assyrians, as valid as such a fear would have been. But, as he explains in Chapter 4, he anticipated that God would show compassion on the Assyrians. Why otherwise would God bother to send him to Nineveh at all? After all, when other prophets uttered oracles of judgment on other nations they always did it from within their own borders. None of them were sent to the foreign nation to declare such prophecies. Also, Jonah knew that God's stipulation of "forty days" indicated that this was really a time of testing. So why had Jonah headed for Tarshish? Because what he found intolerable about God was God's capacity to have mercy and compassion on the barbaric Assyrians.

I asked an Egyptian Christian what he thought about the recent unrealized threat by Terry Jones that his church, Dove World Outreach Center, would burn Qur'ans on September 11. He said he fully agreed; that all Qur'ans in the world should be burnt. He and his family had fled to Australia to get away from Muslims who had terribly mistreated Christians for centuries. I know Egyptian Christians who are not like this man, but this particular man would love to see Muslims humiliated and I am confident that he would be cheering if a nuclear bomb wiped out Mecca tomorrow, even if it involved the annihilation of millions of Muslims.

You may not have suffered what this man has suffered and what many Christians have suffered and are suffering at the hands of Muslims in many countries around the world. In our multicultural city there are many churches that are opening doors not only to the Anglo-Celts that have traditionally attended them, but also to people from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. But many Western Christians, perhaps unconsciously, though often quite deliberately, shy away from having anything to do with Muslims and seeking to reach out to them. There is a Jonah in all of us, an attitude deep down inside us that we often don't realize is even there, which is saying in effect, "As far as I am concerned those people can go to hell!"

### **Nineveh's Moral Repentance**

In the book of Jonah you will have noticed that over and over again Nineveh is called "that great city." In 3:3 we are informed: "*Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth.*" The last verse of the book informs us that there were 120,000 people in the city proper, though archaeologists have estimated that there may have been 600,000 living in the greater Nineveh area.

120,000 doesn't sound that much of a population. It is the size of Cairns in Queensland. The population of the world today is over 6 billion persons. We don't know what the world's population was in Jonah's day. One common estimate is 50 million. But, if you

had been alive in Jonah's day you would have rightly thought 120,000 inhabitants made Nineveh a massive city. By the standards of the time it was.

Imagine that you are called to go to Cairo, a city of 23 million people. You enter the city and start crying out that in forty days it will be wiped out. Would you expect President Hosni Mubarak to repent, along with the whole city? That's what makes the repentance of Nineveh so remarkable - even by the standards of the ancient world it was unimaginable that such a thing would happen.

We are not to think that the Ninevites suddenly became fully-fledged worshipers of the God of Israel. Their moral repentance was genuine. They cried out mightily to God and even covered their animals with sackcloth to symbolize the completeness of their repentance. Yet this moral repentance falls far short of Christian repentance. Jesus preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17). Jesus did not call for the kind of moral repentance that is motivated by wanting to avoid disaster in this world, but for the kind of repentance that involves bringing one's entire life under the dynamic rule of God, for both now and eternity.

#### **The Merciful Repentance of God**

Jonah's material repentance and Nineveh's moral repentance are remarkable enough, but they are overshadowed by the greatest repentance of all - the repentance of God. Repentance means turning. Jonah physically turned around and went to Nineveh as commanded. The Ninevites turned away from evil ways and violence and turned to call out mightily to the God of Israel. But it really gets your spine tingling to see God himself turning, turning away from his commitment to destroy Nineveh: "*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it*" (v10).

The Bible often speaks of God repenting. Jonah 3:10 particularly recalls Exodus 32, while Moses was on the mountain talking with God, the people of Israel made and worshiped a golden calf. The wrath of God from which the Ninevites need to be delivered in Chapter 3 corresponds to the raging storm of Chapter 1 and Jonah 3:9 recalls Exodus 32:12 when Moses called upon God not to pour out his wrath on his people. The Lord told Moses that he was going to destroy the entire nation for what they had done and start to rebuild the nation from scratch through Moses himself. Moses then cried out to God not to do this. In verse 14 we read: "*The LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*"

Of course, God knew beforehand that he would not end up destroying Israel just as he knew beforehand he would not end up destroying the Ninevites. But God's sovereignty is complex. It doesn't mean everything is cut and dried. God has so made us that we are able to influence what he does by our prayers, as in the case of Moses, or by our actions, as in the case of the Ninevites. And all of those ways in which we influence God are all factored in by God so as not to compromise his sovereignty in any way, difficult as it may be for us to understand how he pulls it all off.

The book of Jonah tells us something fundamental about the character of God. This is how Peter puts it: "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*" (2 Pet 3:9).

The Ninevites were told that in 40 days they would be destroyed because of their evil ways. In Matthew 12 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; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here.*" Jesus, who is God himself, calls you to repentance. Unless you turn your entire life around and put it in Jesus' hands then you are standing on the brink of destruction. The Ninevites will add their voice to those who will demand your damnation on the Day of Judgment. Jonah was spared Assyrian cruelty, but Jesus was publicly tortured to death and he submitted to this for you, demonstrating God's love, mercy and compassion.

Such is the depth of God's grace that he is able to remove the unforgiving Jonah from your heart and mine. May the Lord use us to reach people whom Christians fear and sometimes hate.