

Jonah

Part 4 – “Repentance, Anger, and the Mercy of God”

After his ordeal in the belly of the fish Jonah relents and goes to Nineveh to preach repentance. The reference to Nineveh being a three day’s journey in breadth (3:3) does not mean that it required three days to cross it. Rather, it was a three day process for an official visit which would begin with meeting the king on day one. So, as was the custom of the day, Jonah would first have sought an audience with the king of Nineveh. Following that meeting Jonah would have then begun to preach to the city-dwellers. It was not uncommon in Hebrew narrative to describe the effects of an event and then the cause. The writer of Jonah follows that pattern by describing the response of the Ninevites (3:4-5) and then describing the king’s response (3:6-9) which almost certainly occurred first. The king responded to Jonah’s message which then spread throughout the city.

1. Nineveh’s Repentance

“The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

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” (**Jonah 3:6-10 ESV**).

Features of Genuine Repentance:

A) Repentance is the result of a direct confrontation with the Word of God.

- “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (**Romans 10:14-17 ESV**).

B) Repentance is the gift of God.

- “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (**Acts 11:18 ESV**).

C) Repentance is not a once-for-all act.

- While Christians are justified as a once-for-all act of God, the discipline of repenting from sin is something we need so long as we struggle with indwelling sin.

2. Jonah’s Anger

V. 1 – “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”

- The writer uses strong language to describe Jonah’s anger. The words translated “displeased” and “exceedingly” are related to a Hebrew word for “evil.” The clause translated “he was angry” reads literally, “it burned to him.”

- Jonah did not despise the fact that God is gracious and merciful. He despised the fact that God had chosen to be gracious and merciful to Nineveh.
- Jonah probably wanted God to destroy Nineveh for three reasons: (1) as a loyal nationalist, he despised non-Israelites (cf. [Jon 1:9](#)); (2) he believed that idolaters had forfeited any opportunity to be shown mercy (cf. [Jon 2:9-10](#)); and (3) the prophets Amos and Hosea had recently announced that God would sovereignly use the Assyrians to judge unrepentant Israel ([Hos 9:3](#); [Hos 11:5](#)) and take them into exile ([Amos 5:27](#)). If God destroyed Nineveh, Jonah reasoned, the Assyrians would not be able to destroy Israel.
- Vv. 3-4 – “*Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the LORD said, Do you do well to be angry?*”
- Notice Jonah’s despair. He would rather die than deal with the reality that God is merciful to the Ninevites. So, just as in the earlier example on the boat in the storm, Jonah seeks an ultimate escape from things that are too difficult for him to deal with. But we have already seen that he cannot escape God.
- Don’t miss God’s continuing mercy to Jonah. Jonah’s anger, despair, and unwillingness to accept that God differs from his personal preferences does not drive God away. Just as God is determined to show mercy to Nineveh so He is determined to keep this wayward prophet.

3. God’s Sovereign Mercy

V. 2 – “And he prayed to the LORD and said, *O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*”

- Jonah’s problem with God is not that He is merciful but that God is sovereign and free to show mercy to whomever He will. In this case God has shown mercy to a nation that poses a great threat to Israel.
- God’s mercy does not depend upon any merit in the one who receives it. Rather, God is sovereign in his mercy, granting repentance to whomever he wills.
- “For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills” (**Romans 9:15-18 ESV**).
- “One of Jonah’s quintessential problems is that he has forgotten God’s mercy toward him. Jonah is suffering from a memory problem. He too has experienced God’s mercy, but now he is ill-equipped to appreciate God’s mercy when he observes it exercised on someone else’s behalf.”
- Bryan Estelle from Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy (p. 126)

For Further Reflection:

1. What does God reveal about himself in this passage?
2. What is made known about man in this passage?
3. What do we find out about God’s redemptive work through Christ in this passage?
4. In what ways do you personally identify with Jonah?
5. From what do you need to repent?