

CONTRITION AROUSES COMPASSION

JONAH 3

Recently, after reading through the Books of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament, I was struck by God's surprising response to the very worst king in the history of Judah. His name was Manasseh. He was an idolater and he set up idols and altars throughout the land. He practiced sorcery and witchcraft, shed innocent blood, and actually sacrificed some of his own sons to pagan gods.

But when God brought him to a place where he finally realized what he had done and how he had offended the Lord, we are told in Chronicles that *"when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. ¹³ He prayed to Him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God" (33:12-13).*

God was moved by his contrition—his overwhelming sense of guilt and sorrow for his sin. That contrition aroused God's compassion, and compelled God to forgive him. And this is not an isolated incident. God's compassion was also aroused by the contrition of Ahab, the most wicked king of the northern kingdom of Israel. It was aroused by the contrition of Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan king of Babylon, when he humbled himself before the Lord (Dan. 4:28-37).

We read about these evil men and the terrible sins they committed and the innocent blood they shed and some of us think, "Why would God be moved by their contrite hearts? Why not just pluck them out of their circumstances and drop them straight into the pit of hell where they belong?"

It's hard for us to understand the wideness of God's mercy. But it's because of that wideness in His mercy that He is so responsive to a contrite heart. A contrite heart is irresistible to Him! There is evidence in Scripture that He responds every time He sees it!

That's the theme of the passage we are looking at this morning. We are studying the Book of Jonah. In chapter 1 the LORD told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, and preach against their wickedness. But, in protest, Jonah ran away from the LORD because he hated the Ninevites and suspected that if he preached to them, they would be receptive to his message and repent of their sin, in which case God would be merciful and they would be saved. And Jonah didn't want them to be saved.

But after boarding a ship to Tarshish God sent a huge storm that threatened to break up the ship. Through a series of divinely orchestrated events, the ship's crew found out that the storm was sent by Yahweh because Jonah was running from Him, and that the only way they could be saved was by throwing him overboard. Reluctantly, they did, and the sea immediately became calm.

But God provided a great fish to swallow Jonah and preserve him. It was in the belly of the fish that Jonah came to his spiritual senses and resolved to obey God. When he did, God caused the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land, and we read in chapter 3, **verses 1-2**. *¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."*

I think it's fair to assume that God spoke to Jonah immediately after he was vomited onto dry land. In other words, Jonah did not have three weeks to recover from his PTSD after being held captive for three days and nights inside the belly of a fish. But Jonah had learned some things in those 72 hours, and he wasn't about to negotiate with God for some PTO.

When the two words translated, “Arise, go...” are used together like this there is a sense of urgency inherent in the meaning. It means “get up immediately and go now.”

When the Yahweh restates His command for Jonah to go to Nineveh, He includes the statement, “call out against it the message that I tell you.” This means nothing less than, “Say precisely the words I tell you to say.” Of course, Jonah already knew that it would be a message concerning their wickedness, but I doubt if Jonah knew exactly what those words were until he opened his mouth and started preaching.

Look at **verse 3**. ³ *So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth.* Nineveh was a walled city that had an urban perimeter of seven and a half miles. We know from chapter 4 that it had a population of 120,000 (4:11), and that in order for Jonah to proclaim the message to all of its inhabitants it would take three days.

But even though Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, considered the greatest city in that day, I don’t think its greatness in comparison to other cities is the emphasis here. *Exceedingly* can also be translated “to God” (e’lohim), thus, verse 3 could be translated, “Nineveh was an important city to God.” That interpretation fits the main theme of the Book of Jonah.

Look at **verse 4**. ⁴ *Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* God’s message to Nineveh was neither long nor complicated. In the Hebrew language it is only five words: “*Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” It was this simple, succinct, straightforward message that Jonah proclaimed throughout the city.

I imagine Jonah proclaiming this message while passing by a group of men huddled on the street corner or a group of vendors in the marketplace; I picture him going into the temples and the schools and the eating establishments and the places of business, making this announcement, and then moving on. I imagine him stopping to talk to people who were tending their gardens, or taking care of children, or doing their laundry. “*Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*”

And given Jonah’s sentiments about the Ninevites, I doubt very much that Jonah preached this message with much passion or persuasiveness. I’m quite sure he wasn’t trying to impress them with his oratory skills. Jonah simply said what God told him to say, no more, no less.

But there is something about the content of this message that was not lost on Jonah. It can have two entirely different meanings, both of which could be accurate. The word translated “overthrown” (hapak) can mean “turn over” or “destroy”. It is the same word used in Genesis 19 to describe God’s intention to destroy Sodom (19:13). This is what Jonah hoped God meant, and it is certainly how the Ninevites interpreted the message.

But the word “overthrown” can also mean “turn around” in the sense of having a change of heart. It is the word used when the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as king over Israel and God told a reluctant Saul that He would “overthrow” him by changing him into a different person (1 Sam. 10:6, 9).

So, there is a double meaning in this word, and, as I said, it is not lost on Jonah. He knew this word implied that God might destroy Nineveh *or* that the people might repent, in which case God would have a change of heart and be merciful and gracious. Jonah faithfully proclaims this two-edged message but hopes (as we shall see in chapter 4) that “overturned” means the former.

Verse 5a. ⁵ *And the people of Nineveh believed God.* The Ninevites did not interpret

Jonah's words as an empty threat or an angry rant by a political enemy who was nursing a grudge. They believed that Jonah's words were actually *God's* words—that God was speaking directly to them and that what he said would happen *would*, in fact, happen.

Think about this for a moment. These people were idolaters who worshipped many gods. Jonah represented *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, a nation they had subjugated, a nation they were oppressing, a nation that was far inferior to them in terms of power and grandeur and status in the world. Why would they listen to a prophet from that nation? Why would they believe a God that hadn't already demonstrated His power by subjugating *them*, or at least by performing some miracle that would prove He was sovereign?

Some have suggested that they believed because of the way Jonah *looked* when he proclaimed this message. They assume that after spending three days and nights in the acidic belly of the fish his skin and hair had been bleached white, or that he had ugly, oozing sores all over his body. In other words, they say that Jonah looked frightening and when the Ninevites saw him they freaked out because they thought he was a zombie or an alien.

That makes for interesting speculation, but that interpretation is a stretch. There is nothing in the text about Jonah's appearance, and so there is no reason to assume that his appearance had anything to do with their receptivity. What seems more plausible is that they intuitively knew that they were guilty of sinning against the Lord. And so, **verse 5b**. *They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.*

Fasting means to purposely abstain from food for a period of time that is usually pre-determined. The ancient Hebrew community fasted as a sign of repentance and brokenness before God. Fasting is part of most other religions, too, and in almost every religion, it has been the means of seeking God's mercy. That's exactly what the Assyrians were doing.

Putting on sackcloth was a traditional sign of remorse or mourning. Sackcloth would be equivalent to a gunny sack. It was made of goat's hair and was itchy and uncomfortable. When people wanted to express sorrow for their sin or for some great loss, they would wear sackcloth for a period of time.

This dramatic response by the people of Nineveh is astounding, especially because the text tells us that the response to Jonah's message was universal. Everyone, from the greatest to the least, participated in the fast and in wearing sackcloth, and this happened on the first day of his visit.

This is precisely the kind of heart transformation that *Yahweh* predicted through Jonah, and it can only be explained in supernatural terms. It wasn't the result of a dynamic preacher with a persuasive personality. It was purely and simply a work of God.

And it wasn't just the general population that was impacted by it. Look at **verses 6-9**. *⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ 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, ⁸ 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. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish."*

One would expect the king to be defiant upon hearing Jonah's message. But not only does he identify with the general population of Nineveh by covering himself with sackcloth and sitting in ashes, he demonstrates just how earnest he is by intensifying the fast that has already been pronounced. Not only must the people abstain from food, but from drink.

Moreover, the king issued a decree that even the animals must fast and be dressed in sackcloth.

This decree demonstrates the earnestness of the king. He and his nobles are fully convinced of their danger and want to ensure that every creature in the kingdom participates in their communal repentance.

Furthermore, the king adds a command for everyone to urgently call on God for their salvation, and to repent from their evil ways and from violence.

Finally, the king offers the possibility of hope. “Who knows” is an expression of humility. The king doesn’t know whether God will change His mind or not, but he does the only thing he can do for someone who believes that their destruction is imminent—he thrusts himself wholly on God’s mercy.

And look at God’s response, **verse 10**. *10 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.*

Chapter 3 concludes with God’s change of heart. He sees what the Ninevites have done to humble themselves and repent of their evil ways, and it arouses His compassion.

The basic meaning of the Hebrew word translated “relented” is “to have compassion” or “to feel sorrow.” It is also the same word that is translated “repent” when *people* are the subject of the verb. When *people* feel sorrow, it is often their sin that warrants the translation “repent”. When *God* feels sorrow, however, the word cannot mean “repent” since God does not sin. Rather, it indicates God’s compassion for the devastating consequences people must face as a result of their sin and His justice.

God’s compassion is what Jonah feared. Jonah knew that because God is sovereign, He could choose to be merciful instead of exercising justice. God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah saying, *“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it” (Jer. 18:7-10).*

This is the prerogative of a sovereign God, and it brings me to the first principle I’d like to highlight from Jonah 3. *God may choose to extend mercy and compassion to whomever He wishes to receive His mercy and compassion.* The enduring truth demonstrated in chapter 3 is that love is the primary attribute of God. Even though God is perfectly just, there are times when He is willing to change His mind and forego the administration of justice so that people can be saved.

Peter said, *“God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).* And God said through the prophet Ezekiel, *“For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone,” declares the Sovereign LORD. “Repent and live!” (Ezek. 18:32).* God’s love for the world may compel Him to change His mind even when justice requires severe punishment. God is sovereign. He is free to judge the wicked by strict justice and *not* forgive them. But He is also free *not* to judge the wicked by strict justice and to forgive them when they repent.

That brings me to the second principle. In His sovereignty, God chooses to work within the parameters of man’s free will. God will never force someone to repent; He will never coerce someone to turn to Him and cry out for mercy. He extends an invitation to do so; He certainly wants people to do so because He loves them and is not willing that any should perish. But God receives pleasure only when people exercise their free wills to choose Him

and obey Him.

You can force someone to obey, to submit, to go here or there, or to say this or that. But you cannot force someone to love. Therefore, though He is sovereign, God voluntarily chooses to work within the parameters of our free will. He won't twist our arms to make us honor Him or love Him, because that would bring Him no pleasure. He lets us choose Him, and when we do, He is pleased.

Finally, *God's compassion is aroused by the humble contrition of even the worst sinners*. Chapter 3 is not about the greatness of the Ninevites' faith; it is about the extravagance of Yahweh's love—a love that compelled Him to forgive those with contrite hearts, no matter how bad they were. What is more, He forgave them even though He knew that they would exercise their free wills to rebel against Him in the future.

Scripture reveals that the Ninevites did not remain contrite for very long. Which makes God's compassion all the more impressive. He knew that they would return to their wicked ways, yet His compassion was still aroused by their contrition, and He was willing to “overthrow their hearts”, forgive them and reconcile them to Himself, however short-lived their repentance.

If God is willing to do this for the Ninevites He is willing to do this for anyone. This includes terrorists and torturers and murderers and pedophiles and rapists and...you name it. And this includes that loved one of yours whose heart is presently hard, the one who is cynical, the one who is an atheist, the one who has cursed God. All God requires is that they humble themselves before Him, admit their wrongdoing, and repent of their sin.

Consider what David about God: *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:16-17).*

Compassion Aroused by Contrition

Jonah 3

Main Idea: God's compassion is aroused by the humble contrition of even the worst sinners.

The command restated (1-2)

The compliant prophet (3a)

The contrite city (3b-9)

A great and important city (3b)

Jonah's message (4)

Nineveh's immediate response (5)

Declaring a fast

Putting on sackcloth

The contrite king (6-9)

His response (6)

His proclamation (7-9)

Universal fasting and sackcloth

A prayer vigil

Renouncing sin and violence

The compassionate God (10)

Principles:

- God may _____ to extend mercy and compassion to whomever he _____ to receive mercy and compassion
- In His sovereignty, God chooses to work within the _____ of man's _____ will
- God's _____ is aroused by the humble _____ of even the _____ sinners