

A Tale of Three Cities

The Power of True Repentance

A Journey through Jonah: Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy

Texts: *Jonah 3:1-10 & Jeremiah 18:7-10*

Jonah 3:1-10 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."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.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!"⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.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."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.

Jeremiah 18:7-10 If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it,¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

Genesis 18:21 I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know."

Genesis 19:12-13, 24-25 Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city, bring them out of the place."¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it." . . . Then the

LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven.²⁵ And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.
2 Peter 2:6 if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly;

Isaiah 55:11 . . . so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Introduction:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” – Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

When Dickens wrote his famous novel in 1859, he wove a historical narrative around the lives and times of colorful characters living in two contrasting cities (London and Paris) situated in two different countries (England and France) with living out two different societal experiences during the events of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror that ended in 1794.

When Dickens wrote his *Tale of Two Cities*, England was enjoying a lengthy period of political stability, economic prosperity, and territorial expansion as a major European power on the international stage. France, on the other hand, was still reeling from the disastrous aftermath of the French Revolution. Napoleon had come and gone. The new monarchy has already experienced two revolutions before falling. The Second French Republic came about and a nephew of Napoleon was elected as its first president (in 1848).

In 1852, just seven years prior to the publication of Dicken’s famous work, Napoleon’s nephew declared himself Emperor effectively transforming the Second Republic of France into the Second Empire and throwing France into a period of political turmoil, economic stress, and social upheaval.

Watching all of this play out was a third nation – the United States of America. During the time frame which Dicken’s used for his novel, America had gained its independence from England

and formed a democratic Republic. During the years that followed, it experienced both ongoing wars as well as economic prosperity due to the advances of the industrial revolution.

Shortly after Dicken's published his *Tale of Two Cities*, the United States entered the most difficult, and bloody period of its young history – the Civil War. The nation was torn in two. The union was broken. Brother fought against brother. And the freedom hard won by the blood of her sons was tested to the breaking point. Almost half a million lives were lost on the blood-stained soil of the fields where battles were won and lost.

Dicken's novel weaves themes of social, political, and personal justice and injustice into a tapestry where personal vengeance is placed alongside personal sacrifice as an innocent man dies for the sins of another allowing peace to ensue between two hopelessly divided families that are the central characters of the book.

Dickens wanted his reader to understand that things are not always as they seem. Sometimes those who appear to be the most unrighteous and unjust become those who experience just mercy, while those who appear to want justice pursue it in ways that lead them away from the very mercy they most need and turn them into people who deserve, and experience the very judgment they wish for those who have acted unjustly or cruelly toward them.

Sometimes selfless sacrifice is required for justice to be served so that forgiveness can come, and mercy can flow.

This in essence is one of the most striking lessons in the book of Jonah. As we have seen, God decided to extend mercy to a people whose lives and history were marked by great wickedness and horrific violence against all the surrounding nations including God's chosen nation, Israel.

So shockingly offensive was this extension of mercy, that God's own appointed prophet questioned God's righteousness and refused to obey when God tasked him to take that mercy to Nineveh. The first two chapters of the book describe God's preparation of Jonah by pursuing His disobedient prophet and extending him gracious, unmerited mercy – the very mercy he was unwilling for God to extend to Nineveh.

In the first part of chapter three, by God's mercy, Jonah arrives at Nineveh and reluctantly announces God's message of judgment to the outskirts of this major metropolis. And stunningly, the people responded with a repentance that only God could have granted and enabled!

This is a story of God's gracious and merciful heart toward great sinners. It is also the story of the power of God's Word to bring about God's Work in the hearts of those to whom that word is sent. But God is up to something even greater – He is showing a nation what genuine national repentance looks like and what such repentance procures from His gracious hand. Which brings up the question raised in the title of this message – *what three cities are in view in Jonah 3 when mercy comes to Nineveh?*

First, two cities in the OT describe how God feels about wickedness and what happens when the inhabitants of those cities refuse to repent. Those cities are Sodom and Gomorrah.

Three texts help us make the connection between these two cities and Nineveh.

- Just as Sodom and Gomorrah's wickedness has come up before the Lord, so had Nineveh's (1:2; Gen 18:21). Genesis 18:21 *I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.*"
- Just as Sodom and Gomorrah had been overthrown by God in judgment, Nineveh was about to be overthrown for their wickedness (3:4; Gen 19:12-13, 24-25). Genesis 19:12-13, 24-25 *Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city, bring them out of the place. ¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it." . . . Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. ²⁵ And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.*
- The biblical writers consistently point to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a severe warning to other nations. 2 Peter 2:6 *if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly;*

The second city in view is Nineveh – by the end of this chapter, the inhabitants of Nineveh respond very differently than those of Sodom and Gomorrah – they repent! And as a result, they get a very different outcome. Instead of being overturned by the judgment of God, they turn away from their wickedness and violence and receive in turn the radical, unmerited mercy of God!

So, who is the third city in view? That city is Jerusalem. Almost 100 years after the events in Jonah 3, God sends them a prophet named Jeremiah to preach a very similar message of warning and to urge them to repent! What will Jerusalem do? Will she resist God and follow the ways of Sodom and end up being overthrown by God? Or will she remember the story of what happened when all of Nineveh repented and received unparalleled mercy from God?

Listen to the gracious words of assurance God gave His people through Jeremiah: *If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it,¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.* (Jeremiah 18:7–10)

Nor had God left His people wondering what kind of repentance leads to mercy – woven in the very fabric of their life as a nation were these words from Solomon: *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.* 2 Chron 7:14

True repentance requires four things: *Humbling oneself, seeking God's face (drawing near to him), praying (confession), and turning away from wickedness (repentance).*

If Israel would do these four things sincerely and genuinely, God said he would hear their prayers, forgive their sins, and refresh their lives as a nation.

And to provoke His people and stir them to repentance, God decided to give them a picture of what true repentance looks like and what it procures – by granting repentance and mercy to the last city on earth you would have ever expected to see either repentance or mercy – the city of Nineveh.

So, as we dive back into this text, there are five important observations we must make if we wish to understand how repentance and mercy work in the economy of God's sovereignty, justice, and grace.

I. The Means by which God Graciously Works (3:4)

Jonah began to go into the city, going on a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

A. By means of His authoritative Word – *"and he called out . . . Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

- The essence of all that happens in this chapter is found in the message God commissioned and commanded Jonah to deliver.
- The message was *authoritative* – it came from God (3:2).
- The message was *specific* – God is going to overthrow this city. Note the connection to what God did to Sodom and Gomorrah when they refused to repent of their wickedness which had come up before God (Gen 19:12-25).

- The message was *gracious* – God gave them forty days. Note the connection made with how God spared Israel when they committed idolatry and immorality with the incident of the golden calf – and because Moses interceded for them for 40 days and nights, God spared Israel and showed them mercy (Ex. 34:28).

B. By means of His appointed Servant – “Jonah began to go into the city”

- God sent them an official servant – a prophet named Jonah.
- God would later send another prophet greater than Jonah to preach repentance to Israel and to the nations (Mt. 12:41).
- And this morning, that great Prophet, Jesus, is speaking through His Word and by His servants to urge His people to live in conformity to His word and to repent when they depart from that Word.

C. By means of His enabling Spirit – “going a day’s journey”

- God told Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh.
- Nineveh was a great (large) city – it took three days to cover.
- We noted that Jonah was reluctant to go and even more reluctant to preach when he got there – the text indicates that he arrived, and instead of going throughout the entire city for three days, he preached for one day and then stopped.
- So how was it that the entire city heard? And even more stunning, how is it that they all repented – from the greatest to the least among them? And how is it that the message arrived to the King’s ear, pricked his heart, stirred his conscience, and moved him to deep personal repentance? And what would move him to make the stunning city-wide proclamation that ensued after he heard?
- There is only one answer – the Spirit of God graciously worked through the preaching of God’s Word and enabled all of these miraculous results!
- NOTE – any time we repent, it is because the Spirit of God did the same sort of miraculous, gracious work in our lives.

II. The Manner by which His Gracious Work is Obtained (3:5)

And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

So, what happened when the Spirit of God enlightened them so they could understand and the enabled them so they could respond to God’s message?

A. *They believed God's Word*

- They could easily have rejected Jonah's message as the raving of a stranger.
- But instead, they truly believed the word Jonah preached to them. Clearly, this is the work of the Holy Spirit who enlightened their blind eyes, enlivened their dead hearts, and enabled their bent wills to believe.

B. *They trusted in God*

- But what kind of belief did the Ninevites have? Was it merely that they gave credence to the warning and acted accordingly in an attempt to save themselves from the impending danger?
- Or was it something deeper? Was it in fact saving belief?
- Conservative commentators are divided on this point. Some believe that the Ninevites merely believed Jonah's words and responded accordingly. Others believe that the Spirit of God truly granted them saving faith and that these particular Ninevites were truly converted.
- Two texts lead me to the conclusion that their belief was true saving belief: *First*, this same verbal construction is used to describe the kind of belief Abraham had that was counted to him for righteousness/justification (Gen 15:6). *Second*, Jesus points to the repentance of these Ninevites as grounds by which they will rise up on the last day and condemn the unbelief of the Pharisees (Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:30-32).

C. *Their faith in God produced works of righteousness – they called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least among them.*

- Their faith in God was not the word-only-faith that James warns against (James 2:14).
- Rather it was a faith that displayed its authenticity through appropriate deeds of repentance (James 1:19-25).

III. The Manifestation which Verifies His Gracious Work (3:6-8)

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.

- What is the evidence that verifies the gracious working of God's spirit to help a person respond to God's Word and truly repent?
- Put differently, how do we know whether we are truly repentant over our sin or just momentarily remorseful over its immediate, painful consequence?

A. Humble Penitence (3:6)

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes

- The response of the King of Assyria (referred to here as the king of Nineveh to show the reader who was really sovereign over Assyria) is nothing short of stunning – especially given the reputation of the kings of Assyria for pride, arrogance, and violence.
- He came down from his throne, removed all the trappings of royalty, put on apparel of deep mourning, and joined the common people in the ashes – a sign of deep affliction and mourning.

B. Desperate Seeking (3:7-8)

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.*

- God told his people to humble themselves, to pray, and to seek his face (2 Chron 7:14) . . . and that is exactly what the King commanded every citizen of Nineveh to do.
- He called for an extreme fast – fasting was a sign of desperately seeking the attention and favor of God.
- He instructed them to cry out mightily – with all of their strength – to God.
- Clearly, they had some understanding of the identity of Jonah’s God. Like the sailors in chapter 2, they had heard of His mighty works and His victories over Egypt and Jericho. They were familiar with the might of David and the wisdom of Solomon. They had heard about Jonah’s God and knew that He was to be feared!

C. Genuine Repentance (3:8)

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

- Their great evil had come up before God (1:2).
- This great wickedness manifested itself in idolatrous worship, immoral living, and injustice through violence.
- And each of them was personally guilty – “that is in his hands”
- While this is a corporate or national call to repentance – the actual repenting has to be done by individual Ninevites.

- The Prophets are going to call the nation of Israel to corporate repentance but it will ultimately involve individuals who respond and repent. And that is true in our day as well.
- Corporate calls for repentance of necessity involve individuals who repent on a personal level.

IV. The Motive that stands behind His Gracious Work (3:9)

Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

- What is amazing about this statement by the king of Nineveh is that he does not presume God's mercy.
- He does not repent to manipulate God into granting mercy.
- He recognizes that regardless of what God decides to do, he and his people must repent – and they do.
- Often we use repentance as a last-ditch effort to get God to do more than forgive us. We repent to get God to do His job and show us mercy by not bringing the consequences of our sin upon us (c.f. Hosea 6:1-4).
- The king of Nineveh desired that God would relent and turn from His fierce anger so that they would not perish – but he acknowledges his request is entirely God's sovereign prerogative.
- In other words, repentance always results in forgiveness, but it does not always result in God relenting and removing the consequences.
- And thus, in his prayer, he demonstrates two important things that accompany true, genuine, heart-felt repentance:

A. Trusting in the Sovereign Wisdom of God – "Who knows?"

B. Resting in the Sovereign Goodness of God – "God may turn"

V. The Message that is taught by His Gracious Work (3:10)

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.

A. God hears our humble prayers – "God saw what they did"

- This is where repentance starts when God enlightens us and enables us to repent. Repentance starts with us coming to God with humble, contrite praying in which we confess our sin to God freely and fully.
- "Seeing" in this context involves more than just observing – it encompasses all that the Ninevites did – including their contrite praying.

- And that is where you and I must start when we sin – we must draw near to God (James 4:8) and the way in which we draw near is through humble, contrite prayers of confession! The kind of prayer that David prays in Psalm 32:5 when he states, *“I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”*

B. God sees our penitent repentance – “how they turned from their evil way”

- Genuine repentance goes beyond uttering contrite prayers of confession. It involves turning away from the wickedness that has come up before God!
- Listen to James describe this: *“Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.”* (James 4:8-9).

C. God graciously responds – “God relented of the disaster that He said he would do to them, and he did not do it”

- God graciously responds to the humble, contrite prayers and the genuine repentance of His people by forgiving them.
- James reminds us that “He will also exalt us in due time” (4:10).

D. God mercifully restores – “I will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14)

Conclusion:

God used the story of the violent overthrow and total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to warn Nineveh of what He was about to do to them on account of their great wickedness. And Nineveh repented and was spared!

Fast forward 100 years to the time God sent the prophet Jeremiah to another city whose great wickedness had come up before Him to the extent that He was about to overthrow them as He had done to Sodom and as He would have done to Nineveh had they not repented.

What would they do? How would His own people respond?

Listen to the incredible promise and warning He commissioned Jeremiah to declare to them: *If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do*

to it.⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it,¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. (Jeremiah 18:7-10)

So, what did the people, the priests, the officials, and King Jehoiakim do when they heard Jeremiah's preaching? Listen carefully to the inspired account:

Jeremiah 26:1-8 *In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came from the LORD:² "Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word.³ It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds.⁴ You shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you,⁵ and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened,⁶ then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.' "*⁷ *The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the LORD.⁸ And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, "You shall die!*

They took Jeremiah to the king and demanded that he put him to death. But some of the people were convicted by what they had heard and reminded the king, the priests, and the prophets of an earlier prophet named Micah whom God sent to Hezekiah with a very similar message – and instead of killing Micah and rejecting his warning, Hezekiah and all of Judah repented and God relented.

And thus they exhorted the King, the priests, and the prophets with these words: *Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves."* (Jeremiah 26:19)

Tragically, King Jehoiakim and the priests and prophets did not heed this warning. Instead, they killed another prophet God sent with the same warning (Uriah – 26:20-23, and would have killed Jeremiah had God not protected them.

Therefore, as a consequence of their arrogance, wickedness, and spiritual presumption – the armies of Babylon came and destroyed the city of David, the Temple of Solomon, and took the people of God away into captivity.

So . . . what are the lessons we should learn from all of this?

1. When God speaks to you . . . listen and respond.
2. When God's spirit convicts you . . . stop resisting and start repenting.
3. When God draws near to you . . . draw near to Him.
4. Recognize the difference between repentance and remorse and repent truly and definitively.
5. Value forgiveness from sin more than you value relief from consequences.
6. Endeavor with all your strength to restore broken relationships with God and others.
7. Don't take repentance for granted . . . instead, ask God to grant repentance to you!
8. Trust God's wise and gracious sovereignty with the results of your repentance!