

Have you ever been given a do over when you did not deserve one? Maybe your teacher gave your paper an F and told you to try again. Maybe you did a job that was far short of your best, and you felt guilty and went back and did it right. Or maybe you seriously offended someone, but they forgave you and gave you another chance at the relationship. That is where Jonah is at this point in his relationship with God. He realized his mistake, had a change of heart, and set out to put things right.

Standing on the shore of the Mediterranean covered in fish puke, Jonah has been given a “do over.” He took a sin detour thinking he could get away from God’s presence. After three days in the fish belly fighting to survive and finally coming to the end of himself, he forsook the vain idol of hope in this world and embraced again the steadfast love of God. You could say that, like the prodigal son, he finally came to his senses (Luke 15:17<sup>1</sup>). It was then that he heard a repeat of the original commission to go and preach to Nineveh. The grace of God had given Jonah a second chance. He believed by faith that he will survive to worship God in the temple in Jerusalem once he completes the mission. After travelling hundreds of miles, he entered the imposing city of Nineveh’s with its hundred-foot-high walls. Walking a day into the city he began to proclaim the words God gave him. “Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed!” To his surprise the people of Nineveh believed God, which is something we pray will happen in our own nation.

*<sup>6</sup> The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.* Jonah 3:6 Every class of society put on sackcloth and fasted. It was reported to the king of Nineveh, and he joined the people donning sackcloth and sitting in ashes.

The fact that they believed God is a work of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes for reasons only known to God, He will bring conviction on an entire area. We refer to those times as great revivals. The recent film, *Jesus Revolution*, tells of one that happened in our lifetime. These events usually are preceded by a falling away in which evil seems to be overwhelming. A Christian producer made a video series of these events around the world in our day in Fiji, Cali Columbia, and other places. The results were that many people in each area turned to Christ and gave up their addictions and resolved differences. Crime drastically dropped. God’s blessings become obvious. And yet, historically the areas that experience revival often revert to their old ways after a generation or two. **Each generation must have its own relationship with Christ.** We can teach our faith to our children, but they must personally receive it and decide to walk in it.

When you read through the history of the Israelites, you sometimes see a king leading the people into wickedness, and sometimes you see the people rejecting the leadership’s idolatry. There are a few times when a king will bring a great reform. In the case of Nineveh, everyone had the sense of the urgency of the need to repent.

Jonah never made it to the king’s presence. Word reached the king of the prophet’s message and how the people were responding. To leave his throne and sit in ashes (sometimes translated as dust) and wear sackcloth was an extremely humbling act, for this king who would have been the king of all Assyria. As we are not certain of the date, we cannot be certain which king this was. My guess is that it was Asshur-nirari. He realized that nothing else mattered, not his dignity, possessions, or power. He is in the position of Jonah when Jonah told the mariners to throw him into the sea. The fate of his

own life and that of those he reigns over is dependent on urgent action requiring a complete change in their ways.

*<sup>7</sup> 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;* Jonah 3:7 The king issued an edict and sent it throughout the entire city. Everyone was to fast from food and water, cover themselves in sackcloth, and call out mightily to God (Elohim). It appears that Jonah did not proclaim the God of Israel, YHWH, except to the mariners. Both Jews and some of the surrounding areas referred to the all-powerful creator as Elohim. That is the name they called out to. Though they were polytheistic, they recognized there was one supreme God Creator.

Some critics of the Bible say that the fast was called for in verse five, and then in this verse the king proclaims a fast. They claim the text is out of order. But Hebrew authors often write of the results followed by how the results came about. Sadly, even some who claim to be scholars are either ignorant of this as well as other Hebrew writing methods, or they choose to be deceptive just to be critical and cause doubt.

Jonah did not name the sins of which they needed to repent as far as we know. The conviction of the Spirit would identify those sins. Most people know already what wrong they are doing. If we take time to be still before the Lord and ask what it is we have been doing that displeases Him, we will find it is often already on our mind (Romans 2:15<sup>ii</sup>). Our conscience lets us know. The Scriptures let us know. The Spirit will bring things to our mind or show us how things we have been justifying are worse than we would like to think. Repentance is not just a sorrowful heart, but as the king said in the previous verse, it is a sorrow that results in a turning from evil ways. **A true change of heart will result in a difference in the way one lives.**

In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter ten verse thirteen he quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel writing that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Joel 2:32a<sup>iii</sup>; Romans 10:13<sup>iv</sup>). That does not mean to say God's name just right. It means to cry out to His attributes represented by His name, attributes such as mercy, grace, and steadfast love. That implies we recognize that we need mercy. In other words, that our behavior has offended God. Both the donning of sackcloth, which is a course uncomfortable material, and abstaining from food and water, were signs of repentance, remorse over their behavior. It was a display of how truly sorry they were. It is a recognition that they had been ungrateful for all the undeserved blessings.

Nahum would later prophesy that part of that behavior was their brutality toward others, their lack of value for human life (Nahum 3:1-4<sup>v</sup>). The king's edict gives evidence that violence was one of the main issues. He covers the rest with the broad expression of "evil ways."

A prayer is circulating on the internet that was reported to be that of Minister Joe Wright opening the new session of the Kansas Senate. I could not confirm it was the case, but I think most of us would agree it covers the state of our nation.

"Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and to seek your direction and guidance. We know Your Word says: 'Woe to those who call evil good', but that is exactly what we have done.

We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We have ridiculed the absolute truth of Your Word and called it Pluralism. We have worshiped other gods and called it multiculturalism. We have endorsed perversion and called it alternative

lifestyle. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self-esteem. We have abused power and called it politics.

We have embezzled public funds and called it essential expenses. We have institutionalized bribery and called it sweets of office. We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment. Search us, Oh GOD, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Amen!"

President Lincoln asked the senate to adopt a day of prayer and fasting. This was the beginning of their resolution: *It is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.*

*And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!*

*It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.*

It seems impossible for such an edict to be honored in our day, but if the Spirit of God comes upon the nation like it came upon Nineveh, it is certainly possible.

*<sup>8</sup> 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.* Jonah 3:8 Sackcloth was the dress of slaves and the poor. It was made of camel or goat hair. It was the dress of those in mourning. Prophets wore it as well, perhaps mourning for the sins of the people and to identify with the poor. The Ninevites and their animals were to wear it as a sign that they were slaves of the all-powerful creator God and were guilty before Him of evil and violence.

Another Hebrew way of expression is to mention the general and then the specific, which in this case is *“evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.”* The general term “evil” is all acts that violate conscience and acceptable behavior. “Violence” was the specific behavior. The word comes from a Hebrew word that means defiance of the law by one too strong to be held to account. It meant more than physical violence. It was used

by Sarah complaining that Abraham protected Hagar thus taking from Sarah her rights as wife. In that case it was translated “wrong” (Genesis 16:5).

For the Assyrians this may have implied how they were violating the accepted norms of the known world in the way they treated their conquered enemies. Their means of torture was part of the psychological warfare which caused other nations to fear them. This is the case of the powerful dealing with other people as inferior to themselves. Nazi Germany exemplified this type of “violence” in the way they treated the Jews and their attitude of being the superior race. Evolution promotes this view and was used by Hitler as a reason for purging out inferior races. This sin creeps into our lives when we are prejudiced toward another race because of attitudes of our parents or personal experiences with someone from that race or merely pride in one’s culture.

It was a common practice of the time to include domestic animals when fasting. It sounds strange to us, but from the perspective of animals being the most important possession and useful to serve them, it was showing they were submitting their animals in servitude to God as well.

*<sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.*” Jonah 3:9 This is the last part of the king’s edict. It brings up a theological conundrum. What we know of God comes from the revelation of His character in Scripture and the accounts of His words and actions. Can man change God’s mind? The Scripture clearly tells that God knows the end from the beginning. The revelation from Moses is clear on this matter. *<sup>19</sup> God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?* Numbers 23:19 Is the king of Nineveh right in saying that God may relent and turn from His fierce anger? The next verse reveals that his hope was well founded. So how are we to understand the apparent contradiction?

Scripture helps us understand Scripture. Listen to what God spoke through Jeremiah. *<sup>7</sup> If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup> 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.* Jeremiah 18:7,8 As explained in a previous message, the warning of a set period of time before destruction implied there was time to change their ways. It may be that there was more to Jonah’s message. Verse five may just be a summary of the main point. He may have preached that there was still hope if they repented.

God knew they would repent. Jonah suspected they would repent (4:2<sup>vi</sup>). We will see that in the second verse in the next passage. His warnings are what would happen if we do not change. So, from our human perspective it seems God changed his mind. The next verse even tells us **God relented, and yet that was what He knew they would do and how His Word declares that He will respond.**

This is similar to predestination and freewill. God gives us the freedom to choose and yet He knows the choice we will make because He exists in the eternal now with all of time before Him. It is for our sake that He warns and invites. It is only our limited understanding and unfamiliarity with the timeless realm that sees these things as contradictions. Would God have destroyed Nineveh if they continued in their wicked violence. Yes! Yet God knew they would change their ways. His warning was an invitation to change. Will you and I perish if we did not repent and accept the forgiveness Jesus merited for us? Yes! But His invitation to repent was accepted by us just as He

knew it would be. This does not limit freewill or enslave us to predestination. It merely reveals the wonder of a God outside of time.

*<sup>10</sup> 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 3:10 This sentence is written in a Hebrew style of poetry: God saw what they DID-How from their EVIL-they TURNED-God TURNED -From the EVIL He had planned for them-And DID it not. Evil in the second case is a different word usage from the first usage as God is never immoral (James 1:13<sup>vii</sup>). In the second case the ESV translation “calamity” is an appropriate translation of the same word. It is like our word “bad.” Bad might imply evil or it can simply mean negative consequences. The second use of “turned” in this case is a different word from the “turned” in the first usage as it implies compassion and change.

The fruit of true repentance was evident in how they turned from evil. **If there is no turning from evil, there was no genuine repentance. The sackcloth and fasting meant nothing if their ways did not change** (James 2:26<sup>viii</sup>).

From our human perspective, God relented or turned from the disaster He said He would do. The Hebrew word for “relented” has 29 different translations. So, we with analytical western minds would like to nail this down to one specific meaning and see a contradiction, but it is perfectly in accord with the nature of God and what God said through Jeremiah that He would do.

But there is one more problem that is important to address. Can sins be wiped away simply repenting and changing our ways? Can we be good enough to cover all the wrongs we have done? What court would tell a person who committed first degree murder that he can go free because he changed his ways and stopped murdering people? If God is just, then there had to be a penalty for all the violence the Ninevites had done.

This is where we again look to the timelessness of God. 700 years later, Jesus would die for the sins of mankind. Every repentant soul who changed their ways throughout time had their sins’ penalty paid on the cross, past, present, and future (Hebrews 9:26<sup>ix</sup>). They looked to Elohim, God the Creator, and He provided a means for their salvation, just as He did for Abraham and David (See Romans 4) as well as for you and me. For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:13<sup>x</sup>).

This was Jonah’s story as well. He rebelled against God and did evil. God brought calamity on him and took him to death’s door and Jonah turned from his evil. The compassion of God brought him to the shore so he could live out that change.

It is the story of everyone who has been willing to see how rebellious and selfish we are and turn from our evil ways. God brings the storms to turn us. If we repent and turn, if there is a change, then God relents from carrying out His righteous judgment He would be bound by His nature to inflict upon us. But we must never forget that it was only possible because Jesus willingly took upon Himself what we deserved. The Ninevites did not know that. I do not think Abraham or David understood that, but we do. How grateful we should be that Jesus demonstrated the great love of God, the greatness of His compassion, by taking on Himself what we deserve (Ephesians 1:7<sup>xi</sup>).

Nineveh was spared. But there is a warning here for us. A little over one hundred years later, Nineveh would be completely wiped out. It failed to pass on to future generations the need to turn from evil ways. What a warning to us to be sure that we are faithful to teach our children and our children’s children that God is just. We will pay for our sins, or we will accept that Jesus did so for us and change our evil ways.

## Questions:

- 1 Review what has happened to this point in Jonah.
- 2 Why did they believe Jonah's message.
- 3 What was required to avert being overthrown?
- 4 What was their sin? How do we express the same sin?
- 5 Review the points in Joe Wright's prayer.
- 6 Review the Lincoln proclamation to fast and pray.
- 7 Can man change God's mind?
- 8 Is God sovereign or do we have freewill?
- 9 Is repentance alone enough to save us?
- 10 What is the warning from history?

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### <sup>i</sup> **Luke 15:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!

### <sup>ii</sup> **Romans 2:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

### <sup>iii</sup> **Joel 2:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

### <sup>iv</sup> **Romans 10:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

### <sup>v</sup> **Nahum 3:1-4 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder— no end to the prey! <sup>2</sup> The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! <sup>3</sup> Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end— they stumble over the bodies! <sup>4</sup> And all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms.

### <sup>vi</sup> **Jonah 4:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> 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.

### <sup>vii</sup> **James 1:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

### <sup>viii</sup> **James 2:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

### <sup>ix</sup> **Hebrews 9:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

### <sup>x</sup> **Romans 10:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

### <sup>xi</sup> **Ephesians 1:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,