

Does God relent?

Jonah 3:6-10

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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.

Imagine if you don't have the word *grace* or *mercy* in your vocabulary?

I was reading about a Gospel ministry in Asia where a particular people group does not have the word *grace* in their language. So, as the article said, the Bible translators were struggling to find a word close to the word *grace* in their native tongue.

Let's say you go to the store and want to buy a carton of milk. You have exactly five dollars but when you ring it up, the cashier says you owe five dollars and one cent. But the cashier lets you have it because you don't have the one cent at the moment. That is a small *grace*.

What if you accumulated a large debt amounting to thousands of dollars? It would be difficult to find *grace* to clear that kind of debt if you make only a few dollars.

What if, every night before you go to bed, you received a subpoena or a court order of a report of every sinful and rebellious thought you have had, every unwholesome word you spoke, every action or deed that was not pleasing to God? And the report says, you have forty days to pay up a huge amount or face the death sentence. Signed by the Supreme court. You'd probably take that report very seriously.

This was the case with the city of Nineveh. The report of their evil deeds or sin had reached God's desk. Perhaps, in God's own reporting system, God wanted a list of the major violators of his law and Nineveh topped the list at that time. God sends Jonah to give them a notice. A notice of disaster. In forty days, your city will be overthrown. And we saw the response of the people of Nineveh to that notice. Two very specific responses – *First response* - They *believed* God (everyone from the greatest to the least.

Second response - They *confessed* their sin by calling for a fast and put on sackcloth.

Fasting and sackcloth was symbolic of self-abasement, mourning for the dead or repentance.

When Jacob was told that his son Joseph had died, he put on sackcloth to show this grief (Genesis 37:34). When Mordecai was told that the Jewish people would be destroyed, he put on sackcloth and ashes along with others (Esther 4:3).

Putting on sackcloth meant putting off normal clothes and putting on a robe made of goat's hair or fiber. Surely, the people of Nineveh took Jonah's words seriously. So, the fasting and sackcloth in Nineveh's case meant they publicly acknowledged their sin. It was also indicative of a distress, turmoil and grief inside because of the impending disaster.

And as they begin this confession, the news reaches the leader of the city. And what does he do?

Let's look at verses *six* through *nine*.

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If there is one word to describe what the people and the king of Nineveh did, it's the word *repentance*. Repentance is a word that is used very rarely in some churches today. Some churches have altogether abandoned the word. But without repentance there is no true Christianity. Jesus himself said "unless you repent you will perish" (Luke 13:5).

What is repentance? It is simply a change of mind.

Before, we look closer at this text, let's see what repentance is not.

(Thomas Watson has a really good paperback if you want to know about repentance). I have gleaned from his wisdom in these marks of repentance. Thomas Watson says, "where there is no sight of sin, there can be no repentance".

1. Repentance is not changing course in response to fear or terror.
 - a. Surely, the people of Nineveh were afraid of the judgment of God. The people in the ship were afraid of God's wrath when he hurled the storm. However, that does not imply they were sorry for their sin.
2. Repentance is not making resolution against sin.
 - a. Every year people you see making resolutions at the beginning of the year. That's because they probably see the loss with making wrong decisions, wrong choices and what have you. Sin must be seen as sin first not just something that results in a loss or pain.
3. Repentance is not trading old sins for newer ones.
 - a. There are people who will leave old sins but may embrace new sins. That is not repentance.

So, what does repentance look like?

I have *six* marks of repentance to consider:

Repentance is first seeing your own sin. It is that moment when you "come to yourself". When Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son, there was a moment of reckoning for the second son. This man demanded his father's money, spent all his father's money on reckless living. And when all his money was gone, he was living in a pig pen. Eating the pods of pigs. And there came that moment of repentance. This man said saw his own foolishness, his own pride, his own disrespect towards his father and the behavior that followed. He said "I will go back and tell my father I have sinned against him and God".

The king of Nineveh came to the realization that he was responsible for all the evil and violence his people had done. Perhaps, he himself had done evil. He took responsibility for himself and for others as well.

Verse 8 "*Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands*".

Repentance is first seeing your own sin.

Second mark of repentance:

Repentance is having sorrow for your sin.

The king of Nineveh heard about the city and they began fasting and putting on sackcloth. And the king took it up even more seriously. Look at verse six.

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 fasting, the sackcloth and the ashes indicate an inward sorrow and anguish for sin.

In the Gospel of Luke, we see a woman who finds her way into the home of a Pharisee. And what does she do? She sheds tears of sorrow and she wipes the feet of Jesus with her tears. Jesus is pleased with such godly sorrow. (Luke 7:44).

Repentance is having sorrow for your sin.

Third mark of repentance:

Repentance is voluntary confession of sin.

You see all that Jonah did was deliver the message that God told him for Nineveh. But look at the response. Their repentance wasn't forced or imposed on them. They volunteered to repent. The king called for a national confession.

Verse seven. ⁷ *And he (the king) 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 them call out mightily to God. The king called out to God and being the representative of his people, he tells everyone that this is the right thing to do.*

The thief on the cross said this about himself, "*we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds*" (Luke 23:41).

Repentance is voluntary confession of sin.

Fourth mark of repentance:

Repentance is shame for sin.

We don't see this explicitly but you see it the actions – the fasting, the sackcloth and ashes are indicative of shame for sin. You wouldn't expect a king to be found in such condition. But this man humbled himself. Self-abasement is the mark of repentance. Blushing for sin is a mark of repentance.

Repentance is shame for sin.

Fifth mark of repentance:

Repentance is hatred for sin.

You see this again in verse eight that the whole city saw that their violence was the problem. God is grieved when he sees the evil and wickedness of man. (Genesis 6:5-6).

Sixth mark of repentance:

Repentance is turning from sin and hoping in God.

This is the final mark of repentance. The people of Nineveh really saw that they need to turn the opposite way. They lived committing violent deeds. Now, they see that they need to forsake their sin. The prodigal son turned from his old ways and returned to this father.

Look at verse nine.

⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

In verse five, they believed God. Now they hope in God. They don't know if God will relent. They believe the words of Jonah that God will surely destroy their city. However, they have nothing to lose by repenting and doing what might get God's attention.

You see the people of Nineveh doing three things – They believed God. They called out to God. They hoped in God.

Jesus commends the people of Nineveh for their repentance.

So, the people of Nineveh repent. And what happens as a result?

Verse ten.

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.

You want to what moves God? You want to see relent? Its brokenness and a contrite spirit on the inside. When the people of Israel made a golden calf, God was angered and wanted to destroy them. And yet Moses pleaded with God. And God heard the mediator Moses and spared Israel.

"And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. Exodus 32:14.

We have a greater mediator than Moses. Jesus Christ, the Son of God absorbed the fierce anger of God upon himself. The fierce anger that you and I deserved was put on him. And because of Jesus Christ, all your sins are forgiven. And why would you want to walk in ways that dishonor him.

----- Discipleship Questions-----

MESSAGE SUMMARY: **Does God relent?** Jonah 3:6-10

HEAD: These questions help you examine the truth of God's Word.

1. What are the marks of true repentance? Go around and share. 1 Kings 8:46-47, Luke 15: 17-18, 19: 8, Psalm 38: 18, 51:3, 17, 126:5, Acts 2:37, 1 Corinthians 11:31,

HEART: These questions help you wrestle with what you believe.

2. What can we know about God's nature in response to a repentant heart? Psalm 34:18, 51:17, 147:3, 2 Kings 22:19, Isaiah 57:15
3. What is God convicting you of and to believe in light of this message?

HANDS/HABITS: These questions help you bring the truth into your everyday life and develop behaviors that change your habits.

For personal reflection: What can we learn from Nineveh's response to God? What will you do about it?