

Week 4

GOD'S GRACE TO THE MOST UNDESERVING

Jonah 3:1-10

.....
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.
.....

(Jonah 3:10, ESV)

Introduction

It often takes something big to get our attention and force us to change. It takes a heart attack to force healthy eating and consistent exercise. It takes a marital blowup to force meaningful communication. It takes the loss of a job to reign in our careless spending. Though it would be better (or at least less painful) if we would learn through instruction, the sad truth is that it often takes a crisis to force change.

This passage describes what happens when Jonah, finally willing to obey the Lord, confronts Nineveh with a big threat of God's judgment. Fortunately, Nineveh responds with city-wide repentance and avoids God's impending wrath.

May God use this passage to help us become people who constantly repent, knowing that—because of Jesus—we will never face God's wrath.

Investigation

Read Jonah 3:1-10

1. What was Jonah's message to the people of Nineveh?
2. How do the people respond to the message? Why is this response significant?
3. What did the king of Nineveh call for people to do as a demonstration of repentance?
4. Were God's actions toward the Ninevites contingent on their actions? Why or why not?

Implication

1. Jonah must have been shocked to see the Ninevites respond so quickly and so thoroughly. Why are we sometimes surprised when God transforms people so suddenly?

2. Here we see the "bad news" of God's judgment as a key part of leading to repentance. What is the role of bad news in sharing the good news of the gospel?

3. Many Christians errantly think of repentance as simply feeling sorry for sinning. How is that different than what is described in Jonah 3?

4. What do you need to truly repent of? What will that repentance look like?

Other Issues

If God cannot change, what does it mean that he relented?

There are a number of places in Scripture where God said he would judge his people and then because of prayer or the people's repentance (or both) God relented and did not bring judgment as he had said he would. Examples of such withdrawing from threatened judgment include the successful intervention of Moses in prayer to prevent the destruction of the people of Israel (Ex. 32:9–14), the adding of another fifteen years to the life of Hezekiah (Isa. 38:1–6), or the failure to bring promised judgment upon Nineveh when the people repented (Jonah 3:4, 10). Are these not cases where God's purposes in fact did change?

These instances should all be understood as true expressions of God's *present* attitude or intention *with respect to the situation as it exists at that moment*. If the situation changes, then of course God's attitude or expression of intention will also change. This is just saying that *God responds differently to different situations*. The example of Jonah preaching to Nineveh is helpful here. God sees the wickedness of Nineveh and sends Jonah to proclaim, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). The possibility that God would withhold judgment if the people repented is not explicitly mentioned in Jonah's proclamation as recorded in Scripture, but it is of course *implicit* in that warning: the *purpose* for proclaiming a warning is to bring about repentance. Once the people repented, the situation was different, and God responded differently to that changed situation: "*When God saw what they did how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it*" (Jonah 3:10).

The situations with Hezekiah and with the intercession of Moses are similar: God had said that he would send judgment, and that was a true declaration, *provided that the situation remained the same*. But then the situation changed: someone started to pray earnestly (Moses in one case and Hezekiah in the other). Here prayer itself was part of the new situation and was in fact what changed the situation. God responded to that changed situation by answering the prayer and withholding judgment.⁵

⁵Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994). 164.