

## LESSON 13

May 30, 2021

Unit III: Courageous Prophets of Change  
Changing for the Better

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Jonah 2

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Jonah 3

**PRINT PASSAGE:** Jonah 3:1-10

**Key Verse**—God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God *repented* of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. (Jonah 3:10, KJV)

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When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he *relented* and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. (Jonah 3:10, NIV)

### Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Survey Nineveh's response to Jonah's message.
- Sense how the people of Nineveh felt after hearing Jonah's message.
- Engage in repentance and right behavior after hearing God's warning.

### KEY TERMS

**Ninevites (verse 5)**—Hebrew: *Nineveh* (nee-nev-ay'): inhabitants of Nineveh, which is the capital of Assyria; "people of Nineveh" (KJV).

**Relented (verse 10)**—Hebrew: *nacham* (naw-kham'): was sorry, compassionate, moved to pity; consoled oneself; "repented" (KJV).

**Sackcloth (verse 5)**—Hebrew: *saq* (sak): something worn as a sign of mourning and humiliation.

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history and even today, many whom God has called to ministry have been reluctant to say yes. Some are shy or intimidated about facing people, several resist for fear of failure or because of personal challenges and limited abilities, while others object on the basis of conflicting ambitions or priorities. Many have tried to delay saying yes, hoping that perhaps they had misunderstood God, or that perhaps He would change His mind. Jonah was the first biblical prophet to be sent with a message of repentance to a foreign people who did not recognize the God of Israel as their God. Jonah made the huge mistake of thinking he could cancel or withdraw from his divine assignment by physically running in the opposite direction. Jonah's problem with God's call was not concern for what others would say or think of him. The Ninevites were widely known for their wickedness. Jonah's angry refusal to preach to them was based on his prejudice toward them. Jonah learned the hard way that God's love was not just for Jews alone—it extended to everyone. In His mercy, God forgave the Ninevites for their sin, just as He forgave Jonah for rejecting his assignment.

## **THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT**

Jonah prophesied during the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. The military weaknesses of both Syria and Assyria had allowed Jeroboam to enlarge Israel's northern borders to where they had been during the reigns of David and Solomon. Spiritually, Israel was characterized by religious insincerity, poverty, and injustice. Jonah was not called to address these sins of Israel but to an evangelistic mission to Nineveh, an Assyrian city God had chosen for destruction because of the sins of the people. In Jonah we see a rebellious prophet running from God's will. Jonah learned that God cares for the people we tend to hate, overlook, or deem unworthy of His grace and mercy. God is able to accomplish His eternal purposes on the earth, even when those He chooses to use are reluctant and unwilling. The clear message of the book of Jonah is God's incredible love for the world, His desire for all people to turn from their sin, and His readiness to forgive all who genuinely do so.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT**

### **"Another Chance" Obedience**

(Jonah 3:1-4)

#### **KJV**

AND THE word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying,

**2** Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.

**3** So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.

**4** And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

#### **NIV**

THEN THE word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

**2** "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

**3** Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.

**4** Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

The introductory words of Jonah 3 are almost identical to those in Jonah 1:2. This similarity is an indication that God had given Jonah another chance to fulfill the mission He had commissioned him to do (verse 1). Jonah's assignment remained the same; he was to go to the great (large) city of Nineveh and proclaim the message that God would give him (verse 2). The only difference in his two commissions was Jonah's response to them. This second time, his response was immediate obedience (verse 3a). Jonah mentioned again the great size of this city and emphasized the amount of time it would take to go completely through it (verse 3b). God's concern was not its physical size but the spiritual condition of its large population. The message God gave Jonah was immediate, short, and to the point. Within forty days, Nineveh would be completely destroyed (verse 4). God's willingness to grant Jonah another chance to fulfill his assignment reveals something specific about His character. He allows those He calls the opportunity to redeem themselves and complete the tasks He has for them. Those who fail God, as Jonah did, may have to experience His discipline for their disobedience, but when they repent, God restores, forgives, and may choose to recommission them.

## What Do You Think?

In what way was Jonah's recommissioning an act of grace?

## Wholesale Repentance

(Jonah 3:5-9)

### KJV

**5** So the *people of Nineveh* believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on *sackcloth*, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

**6** For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

**7** And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:

**8** But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

**9** Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

### NIV

**5** The *Ninevites* believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on *sackcloth*.

**6** When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

**7** This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

**8** "But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

**9** "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

One might imagine that any prophet representing an unfamiliar God in a foreign city would certainly be ridiculed or ignored by its residents. This was not the case in Nineveh. The people who heard Jonah were convicted and humbled his message—they repented and believed God (verse 5). As evidence of the genuineness of their conviction, they fasted and put on sackcloth. These were outward signs representing an inward change. According to God's purposes, all the people of the city, from the greatest to the least among them, demonstrated their conviction of sin and the desire for God to turn His anger from them. This dramatic display of humility and contrition over the news of pending destruction even affected the king (verse 6). The king and his nobles issued a royal decree instructing the people to fast and wear sackcloth, to include their animals as well (verses 7-8). The hope was that God would relent of His judgment, turn from His anger, and spare the city (verse 9). The reaction of the king and the people was startling, considering the extreme cruelty of the Assyrians. It is interesting to note how quickly the citizens of Nineveh responded to God's message and repented in contrast to Jonah's delayed obedience to accepting the assignment in the city. Jonah had to experience God's discipline before he repented and obeyed. These pagan people (who did not know His God) heard a few weeks of sermons from Jonah and responded favorably to God. Think about the implications for Christians and others in

our generation. We have heard hundreds of sermons, lessons, and lyrics based on the Word of God, yet many still have not repented and given themselves totally to God. The experience in Nineveh revealed to Jonah the extent of God's love and grace. God's grace delivered him from the belly of the large fish. God could have let Jonah die in the sea when he was so determined to escape God's will for him, but God spared Jonah and gave him another chance. Because of His love, God extended the same grace to a people who did not deserve it—proving His desire for all people to turn to Him and be saved.

### **What Do You Think?**

What is the evidence that an act of repentance is internal and not external?

### **Wholesale Forgiveness**

(Jonah 3:10)

#### **KJV**

**10** And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God *repented* of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

#### **NIV**

**10** When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he *relented* and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Jonah's message may have included specific conditions for Nineveh to avoid God's impending judgment against them, but the text does not share the content of Jonah's message. While the details of the message are unknown, one thing is clear—that God's decision to send Jonah to Nineveh was an act of mercy. God told Jonah what to say, knowing that his message would convict and move the people to repentance. God's response to their repentance in response to Jonah's preaching was to relent from His threat of destruction (verse 10). There is no need to question whether or not the people's repentance was genuine—it apparently met God's approval because it moved Him to spare an entire population of people who had sinned wickedly against Him. God had spared Jonah when he hadn't deserved it and, by His mercy, He had chosen to spare Nineveh. The mercies of God are always undeserved; His grace cannot be earned. God will, however, respond to a contrite and broken heart that genuinely repents and turns to Him for forgiveness and restoration. God's willingness to show compassion on a foreign people as wicked as the Ninevites proved that His later judgment against Israel could also have been averted by a simple willingness to repent. God is still ready and eager to forgive and restore those who choose to receive His Word with full-hearted obedience. He offers us many chances to set things right with Him.

### **What Do You Think?**

What are some hindrances that prevent people from responding quickly to God's Word?

### **A CLOSING THOUGHT**

While we often say that God is the God of another chance, we must remember that our opportunities to repent are not endless. God's grace toward Jonah and His plan to reach the people of Nineveh demonstrate His patience with sinners and His disobedient children. God is good, but we should not continue in sin because we presume that He will not judge us.

## **YOUR LIFE**

God's Word teaches that God's love for the world prompts His desire to enjoy a relationship with everyone He has created. God takes no delight in the punishment or destruction of the wicked. A deeper realization of God's love for others should draw us to a renewed commitment to being channels of His love. As we love those whom God loves, we show our gratitude for the grace that we have received from His hand.

## **YOUR WORLD!**

This lesson challenges believers to overcome their prejudices and stereotypes and to take the message of salvation to others, regardless of our assessment of their willingness or worthiness to receive it. We must freely extend to others the same grace and kindness that God has extended in saving us. How actively engaged is your church in evangelistic outreach? Generally speaking, is the scope of your church's outreach ministry broad enough? Are there any groups of people who would feel unwelcomed in your sanctuary? Who are they? Consider this: if God had limited His evangelistic reach, where would you be?

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Father, give us a heart like Yours, one that grieves for lost souls and graciously provides opportunities for them to enjoy a relationship with You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **CONCLUSION**

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

In preparation for next week's lesson, read the lesson's Background Scripture of Matthew 6:19-34. The topic for the lesson is "No Worries." The lesson focuses on the fact that our sovereign God generously supplies all our needs.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

**(May 31–June 6, 2021)**

### **Why Do You Worry?**

MONDAY, May 31	"Worried? Seek God's Counsel"	(1 Samuel 9:5-10)
TUESDAY, June 1	"God Cares for His People"	(Ezekiel 34:11-16)
WEDNESDAY, June 2	"Rich? Set Your Hope on God"	(1 Timothy 6:17-19)
THURSDAY, June 3	"Enlarge Your Faith Practices"	(Matthew 17:14-20)
FRIDAY, June 4	"Overcome Worry through Faith"	(Luke 12:22-34)
SATURDAY, June 5	"Serve God with Your Whole Heart"	(Matthew 6:19-24)
SUNDAY, June 6	"Live Worry Free Every Day"	(Matthew 6:25-34)