

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.

PREPARING THE LESSON

- Refer to the *Townsend Press SS Commentary Teacher's Edition* for an additional lesson plan—with word studies, insights on teaching adults, learner matrices, etc.
- Review last week's student assignments ("Your Life" and Your World!").
- Thoroughly review your student book for your adult or young adult class.
- Please note that you have the option of using your subscription bundle supplements, i.e., Lesson Scenario, Student Activity Sheet, SSL-AAG.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

Living in peace with others usually requires a willingness to change. What can we do about personal actions that place us in harm's way? After hearing God's warning from Jonah, the people of Nineveh repented and God forgave their sins.

THE LESSON IN FOCUS

Chester Baldwin composed a song entitled "The God of Another Chance." The lyrics include "Some people say that we serve the God of a second chance; but since I messed that one up so long ago, I'm glad He forgives me again." Every Christian can identify with the message of these

song lyrics. We have all made mistakes, willingly or because of our own poor choices. Since accepting Christ as Lord and Savior, we have repeatedly struggled to please God in all of our ways. Even with good intentions, we must admit that our spiritual walk has not always matched our talk—but in repentance, we have joyfully discovered that God patiently gives us new opportunities to do what is right. Jeremiah wrote, “It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22-23). Nothing compares to the unspeakable blessing of knowing that God has forgiven our sins. God has always used imperfect individuals to accomplish His work on earth. One of these is the prophet Jonah. God called Jonah to preach a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, but Jonah resisted God and attempted to run from the assignment to which God had called him. God disciplined Jonah through a traumatic experience, which convinced Jonah to repent. Jonah yielded to God, and God gave him another chance to get it right.

THE LESSON IN CONTEXT

Jonah had the unique experience of being sent by God to minister to a foreign people who did not acknowledge God. The prophet is best known for his memorable assignment to minister in Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. God called Jonah to preach against Nineveh’s extreme wickedness. Instead of obeying, Jonah refused God’s commission and ran in the opposite direction. Jonah’s hatred for the Assyrians blinded him to the uselessness of trying to escape from an all-powerful God. Following his dreadful experience in the belly of the fish, Jonah had no choice but to surrender to God. Despite Jonah’s personal feelings of resentment for the Assyrians, God, in His love for all people, determined that Nineveh must hear His word and that Jonah would be His messenger. Jonah repented of his disobedience, submitted himself to God’s commission, and traveled to Nineveh to deliver the message that God had given him to preach.

OPENING INQUIRY (Choose from the items below.)

1. What basic task does God give to those He calls to deliver His Word? (verse 2)
2. How was Jonah’s second response to his commission different from his first?
3. What effect did Jonah’s message have on the various social segments in Nineveh?
4. What was God’s response to Nineveh’s repentance?

INSIGHTS

The book of Jonah is unique because it shares more of the prophet’s experiences than the content of his prophetic message. It is not the first time in Scripture that God would call a non-Israelite nation to spiritual accountability, but the book’s uniqueness is accentuated by its illustration of God’s great love and desire for all people to repent and be transformed by His grace. Rather than reject Jonah in exchange for a more willing servant, God lovingly disciplined the prophet, spared his life, and gave him another chance to do His will. The wickedness of Israel’s enemy, Assyria, is a well-documented historical fact. However, God’s love created an opportunity for this wicked, pagan city to repent and be spared of destruction. Those who have received the gift of salvation and experienced the peace of forgiveness should rejoice and thank God for His great love. God graciously receives gratitude that is demonstrated through obedience and love toward others.

EXPLORATION

This lesson illustrates that God extends grace and mercy to both saints and sinners, believers and unbelievers. Jonah’s story also emphasizes God’s loving desire that all people would repent rather

than endure the wrath of God's punishment for sin. Students are likely somewhat familiar with story Jonah, especially the account of his being swallowed by a large fish. Use this opportunity to emphasize God's decision to give His disobedient prophet the same opportunity He offered Nineveh—the chance to change for the better. Encourage your students to acknowledge God's willingness to extend mercy to those who deserve His punishment. The Ninevites were possibly the least likely candidates to respond to God's call for repentance. Ask the students if they are willing to let God use them to witness and touch the lives of the “least likely” in their own lives. Invite them to identify the “Ninevites” in today's world and to prayerfully consider how they might make a difference in their lives.

ADDITIONAL EXPOSITORY INSIGHTS FOR THE TEACHER

Commentary on 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.”

After Jonah's repentance and miraculous deliverance, God repeated His commission to Nineveh. The second time, Jonah willingly submitted to God's will. He went to Nineveh focused on delivering the exact message God had sent him to proclaim (verses 1-2). This message was divine in its origin and was not Jonah's idea, but God's. Those called to preach and teach His Word must seriously commit themselves to listening for God's voice and proclaiming only what He has said. Jonah headed to the great city of Nineveh according to his original instructions (verse 3). His response was evidence of genuine repentance in response to God's mercy. God sent Jonah on an outreach mission to a large city surrounded by concentric walls. The inner wall was 50 feet wide, 100 feet high, and had a circumference of 8 miles. Regardless, or perhaps because of the Ninevites' reputation for wickedness, God arranged an opportunity for them to repent. God is the sovereign ruler of the whole earth and all nations are subject to His divine authority. Jonah arrived in Nineveh and began preaching on the first day he entered the city (verse 4). His message of repentance was simple and direct: within forty days, Nineveh would be completely destroyed. This was the message God directed Jonah to proclaim to the inhabitants of Nineveh. There is no biblical record of Jonah's ministry in Israel, but his message in Nineveh was so powerful and effective that the entire city repented and turned to God for mercy. The good news for today is that regardless of any person's reputation, past deeds, or appearances, God freely offers any who will turn to Him the possibility of grace, mercy, and new life in His presence.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book's related biblical exposition section.)

- **Adult Question:**

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

- **Young Adult Questions:**

How can you explain Jonah's decision to run from God? Have you ever tried to run from something that God clearly told you to do? Explain your answer.

Commentary on 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."

The best news in the text is found in verse 5: "the people of Nineveh believed God." It is always good news when sinners choose to turn from their wickedness and believe God. Had Jonah gone to Nineveh in his own strength, the people would likely have rejected him, and possibly caused him harm. But by the power of God, the people of Nineveh received God's prophet, believed God's word, and humbled themselves to repent. One willing servant of God was able to lead the entire city to repentance. As proof of their sincerity, the people proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth (a common means of expressing grief, humility, and penitence in the ancient world). These Gentiles were more responsive to God's call for repentance than God's own people had been. For generations, God's people in Israel and Judah had resisted the word of the Lord and rejected His prophets. Yet, these pagans had dared to take God at His word. Even though their response may have been motivated by fear of destruction, the people of Nineveh gave the right response to God across every strata of society, from the greatest to the least. The king responded in the same way

his people had and even sat in ashes (dust) to show that he was contrite and believed Jonah's message (verse 6). His remorse and that of his nobles' prompted the issuance of a decree instructing the people to fast, wear sackcloth, urgently call on God, and give up their wicked ways (verses 7-8). The decree also included their livestock. In the Near East, this was another common practice used as a sign of people's remorse. Their contrition and humility caused God to withdraw His threat of destruction (verse 9). Earlier, God had given similar instructions to Israel during Solomon's reign. If they would humble themselves, pray and seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways, then He would hear, forgive their sin, and heal their land (see 2 Chronicles 7:14). The response of these Gentiles was a shameful testament against God's own people who refused to humble themselves before their own God. How does this lesson speak to modern believers who hear multiple sermons, week after week, and yet continue to live with disregard for God's holiness? When God's Word is rightly received, it has the power to soften the hardest heart. Whether out of fear or conviction, God's Word delivered through Jonah brought about a change in this cruel and violent nation.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book's related biblical exposition section.)

- **Adult Question:**

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

- **Young Adult Question:**

It only took one man (filled with the Word of God) to call a whole city to repentance. Discuss the power of God's Word today.

Commentary on 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.

In a bold expression of love and mercy, God directed His prophet Jonah to Nineveh to give the people an opportunity to change. When God saw their repentant hearts, He withdrew His threat of destruction (verse 10). Jonah looked with contempt upon the Ninevites— yet, one might ask what is worse than a prophet who refuses to deliver the Word of the Lord to those who desperately need it? God extended the same love and compassion He had shown to Jonah toward the wicked people of Nineveh. Sadly, later generations of Assyrians returned to a pattern of wickedness. One hundred fifty years later, the people fell back into sin and were conquered by an enemy nation. The good news, however, is that God never changes. He still extends His love and mercy to anyone who is willing to repent and be changed by His amazing grace.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book's related biblical exposition section.)

- **Adult Question:**

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

- **Young Adult Question:**

If you had to give a short testimony focused on God's grace and mercy, what would you say?

LIFE APPLICATION

- **Refer to Adult Book**

(See student lesson's "Your Life" section.)

—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.

(See student lesson's "Your World!" section.)

—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?

- **Refer to Young Adult Book**

(See student lesson's "Your Life" section.)

—When you find yourself walking in the sinful pathways, confess your sin, turn from your disobedience, and walk again in God's direction. God still offers His grace to those who come to Him in faith and repentance.

(See student lesson's "Your World!" section.)

—God called the people of Nineveh to give up their violence and evil ways. We live in a culture in which violence has become the new normal. Violence, like sin, comes from what is in the human heart. Change the heart, change the culture. Commit to praying for your local community; God still speaks peace.

NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

The lesson topic for Sunday, June 6, 2021, is "No Worries." The Devotional Reading is Ezekiel 34:11-16, the Background Scripture is Matthew 6:19-34, and the Printed Text is Matthew 6:25-34.

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank You, dear God, for daily allowing us the opportunity to change for the better. Fill our hearts with Your Word, daily convicting us to repent and renew our fellowship with You. Thank You for being the God of another chance. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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)