

Repentance and Relentance

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Date: 18 January 2026

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[0:00] One of the great things about being on break was the chance to spend more time with the kids.! One of the downsides was spending more time with the kids because they took the opportunity to remind us of all our past failures, including mine, like the time when Michelle cooked a vegetarian lasagna, which was nice, but there's no meat, right?
And I like my meat, and so I protested and then actually went off up to Shopping Town and got a beef burger from Grilled. Needless to say, that did not go down well.
And so I deserved the silent treatment for the rest of the night, but when I came back, I repented and Michelle kindly relented and continued to speak to me.
Well, that's what Jonah 3 is about today on a much bigger scale. It's about Nineveh's repentance and then God's relentance.
Someone told me that relentance is not a word, but I looked it up, and apparently AI says it's a rarely used noun related to the verb relent, and the meaning is right at the end of that sentence.

[1:11] It means to show mercy, and so if AI says it, then it must be true, right? We're going with it. But again, that's what Jonah 3 is about today. But before we get to Nineveh's repentance and God's relentance, the chapter starts with Jonah's fresh start.
So at point one, verse one and two. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I gave you.
Here we see a fresh start because God's word is coming to Jonah a second time. And so it's like take two.
And God says to him, go to the city and proclaim the message I give to you. And that message, as we'll see, was a warning that in 40 days God will judge them for their evil deeds, which they knew they were guilty of.
But as I said, this is Jonah's fresh start. You might remember the first time. Do you remember the first time God's word came to him?

[2:17] Chapter one, verse one and two. Jonah fled. He disobeyed and fled. And then in chapter one, he was thrown overboard in the storm. Do you remember? Then last week, as he sank down, drowning, God saved him by sending a big fish.
And last week, we saw while he was in the fish, Jonah prayed and praised God for that salvation. A salvation that was all God's work through this fish.
As Jonah said at the end, towards the end of chapter two, which you can see in your Bibles there, a salvation comes from or belongs to literally the Lord. It's his work. It's all his doing.
It belongs to him. Just like it's all God's work as he saves us, not through a fish, but through Jesus. And at the end of chapter two, at God's command, the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land, a kind of resurrection, if you like, from the belly or the tomb of the fish.
In other words, this was a fresh start for Jonah, even if he didn't smell fresh from being inside that fish. And this second time, he obeys.

[3 : 27] Verse three, 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. Jonah began by going a day's journey into that city, proclaiming, here's the message, the warning, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown, judged.

So here, Jonah, instead of disobeying and fleeing like he did in chapter one, he obeys and follows God's command. And we see here that his obedience to God is a right response to his salvation from God.

Jonah is saved last week by the fish. And so he obeys this week. And yet, it's not quite a wholehearted obedience, as we'll see next week.

Yes, he obeys and he proclaims the message, goes to Nineveh and proclaims. But it seems he does so begrudgingly, because next week, at the beginning of chapter four, he complains to God about what happened.

The fact that God forgave them seemed very wrong and he became angry. And in verse two, chapter four, verse two, next week, he says, this is why I tried to forestall, you know, that is, you know, wait it out by fleeing to Tarshish in the opposite direction.

[4 : 50] He didn't want to go to Nineveh, not because he was scared of Nineveh, but because he knew what God would do and forgive Nineveh. He goes, I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, and a God who relents from sending calamities.

You see, Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, because he didn't want to see Nineveh forgiven. And so even this week, as he's going to Nineveh, he still has this attitude in his heart that we see next week.

In other words, it's not wholehearted obedience. It's begrudging obedience. And I think this is something that we can sometimes relate to, can't we?

You know, do you find yourself obeying God, but kind of begrudgingly, you know, you're forcing yourself to do it, but you don't want to, oh, I suppose I should go to church today, even though I'd rather do all these other things.

Or I suppose I should forgive that person, even though I really don't want to. Or I suppose I should serve or give sacrificially, even though I'd much prefer to do it comfortably.

[5 : 56] We can be like Jonah here, can't we? We obey in response to our salvation, but sometimes we do so begrudgingly rather than wholeheartedly.

And yet wholehearted obedience to God is the right response to our salvation from God. And just in like a chapter one, where the sailor's reverent fear kind of shows up Jonah's lack of reverent fear, so here in chapter three, Nineveh's wholehearted repentance shows up Jonah's, well, lack of wholehearted obedience, which brings us to point to Nineveh's repentance.

Verse five, the Ninevites believed God, a fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth as a sign of repentance.

Now this verse seems to summarize Nineveh's response, which begins by believing God's word. They believed God would judge them in 40 days for their evil deeds, which, as I said before, they knew they were guilty of.

And so they repent. And their repentance is rather amazing for a few reasons. I mean, first of all, notice that they all repent from the greatest to the least, it says.

[7 : 21] That's pretty amazing, isn't it, for such a big city? In fact, in verse four, Jonah's actually only gone one day's walk into the city, one day out of three days, and yet the word has spread, and they've all already repented.

He's still got two days to go. That's pretty amazing. What's also amazing is that their repentance is wholehearted, which is fleshed out by focusing now on the king or leader of Nineveh, the one who sets the tone for everyone else.

And so verse six, when Jonah's warding 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.

This is the proclamation he issued to the city. 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, 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. Who knows? God may yet relent, and with compassion turn from his fierce anger, so that we will not perish, he says.

[8 : 38] Notice here that their repentance firstly involves a humble remorse, which is symbolized by putting on sackcloth. Not only does the king do it, but verse eight, everyone does it.

A sackcloth is like a hessian bag, which is not the height of fashion. It's kind of like the lowest of fashion, but that's the point. The humble garment is meant to symbolize their humbled hearts, their humble remorse, that they are sorry for their sins.

It's meant to reflect this kind of attitude on this statue here, that they were sorry for their sins. In fact, in verse eight, even the animals put on sackcloth, did you notice?

Which is a bit of a comical thought. I mean, can you imagine a cow putting on sackcloth like this? But it's actually meant to show how wholehearted their humble remorse was, that even their animals participated in it.

You see, their repentance involves humble remorse, but also a heartfelt plea. In the middle of that slide on the screen, towards the end of verse eight, it says, let everyone call urgently on God.

[9 : 57] The word urgent is mightily. This is a heartfelt thing. And their cry is presumably a plea for mercy and grace.

Mercy, technically, mercy is not giving them the judgment they deserve, and grace is giving them the forgiveness they don't deserve. That's the technical difference, but there's obviously overlap there.

And so we've got humble remorse, heartfelt plea, but also towards the end of verse eight, there's a habit change. That is a change in behavior. Verse eight, let them give up, literally turn from their evil ways, their ways, their behavior, their habits.

This humble remorse, this heartfelt plea, and this habit change, all sound like our second reading. It's wholehearted repentance, isn't it? Which for such a wicked city is amazing.

At one level, more amazing than Jonah's last week. Jonah was one man who disobeyed once, and still didn't really show wholehearted obedience, but here is a whole city who is completely wicked from chapter one, and yet all of them, from the greatest to the least, show this wholehearted repentance.

[11 : 22] In fact, they repent without even knowing if God will forgive. Verse nine, do you notice what the king says? Who knows? They don't know. God may yet relent, and show mercy, and grace instead.

And this should encourage us, I think, not only to repent ourselves, which we'll come to later, but to keep praying for those who have yet to repent.

I mean, Nineveh was the last sort of city you'd ever think would repent and believe God's word, and yet they did, didn't they? And so if they did, then anyone can.

No one is beyond saving, and so don't give up praying for those family and friends, you know, who have not yet repented. For if Nineveh repented, then anyone can.

Well, Nineveh's amazing repentance is then followed by God's amazing repentance. Point three, verse 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.

[12:41] Here is God's amazing repentance. When I was on holidays around this time last year, I was actually pulled over by the police.

That got your attention? Yeah, yeah. And it seems they checked my number plate, and I was driving my car unregistered. You see, I completely forgot to renew my rego the week before, and when they told me, because I didn't know why they pulled me over, when they told me, I humbled myself with remorse.

I gave a heartfelt plea saying that it was an accident, and I started a habit change. Immediately, I grabbed my phone and went on to Vic Rhodes and started to try and renew my rego right there and then.

In other words, I repented, and they amazingly relented. They did. They showed mercy by not giving me the fine I deserved and showed grace by giving me another chance I did not deserve.

And I found that amazing because you don't normally hear of police doing that, do you? After all, their job is to police people who break the law, right? And I did.

[13:47] Inadvertently, I did. So their job gave me a fine that they'd just be doing their job. And so it was amazing, both in terms of being surprising and undeserving.

And yet, God's relentless is even more amazing. Not because it's more surprising, after all, remember? Jonah knew that was going to happen next week in chapter 4.

He goes, I knew you'd do that. I knew you were a compassionate God. Complaining about God's compassion, we'll come back to that next week. So it's not more surprising, rather, it's more undeserving.

I mean, Nineveh was a really wicked city, and so they really deserved punishment. And yet, God still relented. In other words, since Nineveh was really guilty, God's relittance is really amazing.

And this shows us that God loves to relent when people repent. If you like, God's relittance is wholehearted. He loves to do it.

[14:52] How good is our God? In fact, God loves to relent so much so that He sent His only son, Jesus, so He could relent when we first repent.

God can't go unpunished because that would not be justice. If judges in the Melbourne court had criminals turn up and they said, oh, don't worry about your crime, just go away, enjoy your life, there would be an uproar because it wouldn't be justice.

God cannot let sin go unpunished, it would not be justice. Those police who let me go technically did not uphold justice because they let my crime go unpunished.

I didn't tell them that at the time. I just said, thank you. But God sent His only son, Jesus, who willingly died the death we deserve, who willingly took our punishment so that God could both show justice for sin, our sin, punish it, but also at the same time show mercy to us when we repent.

because we may not be as wicked as Nineveh, but our sin is still against God. And so it's way worse than we often realize. And so we do deserve punishment that will come not in 40 days, but on the last day, judgment day, when we'll all have to give an account to God.

[16:17] But God loves to relent, to show mercy and declare to us now that we are free from punishment that will happen later on that day. So the question for us then is, will we take hold of God's relittance in Christ?

How? Well, firstly, if you are not a Christian, by believing God's message about Jesus and repenting like Nineveh. And then you will receive God's relittance in Christ.

You'll receive mercy. For if you repent, God will relent. And unlike the king of Nineveh, we can know this. Remember the king of Nineveh said, who knows God might relent?

Well, we know God will relent. Because Jesus has already died for our sins. And if he's already died for your sins, then it's like God is simply waiting to apply his repentance to your account.

Waiting to show you mercy and declare you free from punishment the moment you believe his word about Jesus and repent like Nineveh.

[17:31] And so will you. in fact, he won't just show you mercy by not giving you the punishment we deserve, he'll also show you grace by adopting you and giving you new life into his family, which we don't deserve.

Back in 1995, 15-year-old Raymond Johnson participated in a drive-by shooting in Denver, US, just 15 years old. One of the bullets he fired hit and killed a three-year-old boy called Cason Evans.

Raymond was sent to prison and after some years he repented and sought forgiveness from Cason's mother, Charletta. Now he did not deserve forgiveness, but over time Charletta came to forgive him.

And in 2019, Charletta even adopted him because he had no parents, adopted him into her own family. Can you imagine that? Adopting the man who killed your own son so that he would become your son.

And back in 2021, Raymond started to serve out the rest of his sentence, but in 2021, so not that long ago, he was released and went to live with her. That's amazing grace, isn't it?

[18:51] But that's what God has done for us. He not only shows amazing mercy by declaring us free from the punishment we deserve, he then shows us amazing grace by adopting us and giving us new life into his family that we don't deserve.

All the moment we believe in Jesus and repent like Nineveh, and so again, will you? And for us who have already, who are Christians, then we are to continue to repent like Nineveh.

And not so that we receive God's repentance for the first time, we already have, but so that we can enjoy it and the assurance of forgiveness that comes with it.

You see, for us Christians, God has already applied his repentance towards us in Jesus. God has already declared us free from punishment now that we can stand confidently later on judgment day.

as our last hymn will say, there's now no condemnation do I dread because I've already got the declaration that I'll be free from it.

[20:00] And if we are free from punishment for sin, then the only other option is forgiveness. In other words, God's repentance comes with the assurance we will continue to be forgiven.

As James says in our second reading, come near to God in repentance and he will come near to you in forgiveness. But to enjoy all that, to feel the warm embrace of that, we need to continue to repent and ask for that.

And we need to because we still sin, don't we? Or is that just me? And so we need to continue to repent like Nineveh with a humble remorse, a heartfelt plea, a habit change, that we might continue not to receive God's repentance but to enjoy it and the ongoing forgiveness that comes with it.

But we're also to continue to repent like Nineveh so that we don't take God's mercy and grace for granted. After all, we hear about God's grace so often, don't we? We heard about it last week with one disobedient man, Jonah, and we see it even more so, I think, this week with the whole city of Nineveh.

Yet hearing about it so often means we can lose its amazingness, can't we? But if we take time to repent with that humble remorse that reflects on the seriousness of our sin, that it is against God, then we'll see God's grace is still amazing, that he continues to forgive us for it.

[21:37] I went to the CMS conference last week and the speaker had lots of great lines and one of them was something like, when we downplay our sin, we downplay our saviour.

You see the logic there? In other words, if we treat sin like it's nothing, then we're basically saying Jesus didn't save us from much of anything.

And God's grace, well, it isn't really all that amazing. But if we take time to repent with that humble remorse that acknowledges the seriousness of our sin, then we'll still see the greatness of our saviour and the amazingness of his grace towards us.

We still sin, so we're to continue to repent like Nineveh, with a humble remorse, a heartfelt plea, a habit change, and that we might continue to enjoy God's repentance with its ongoing forgiveness, and that we might continue to see just how amazing God's mercy and grace still are.

In short, will we continue to show wholehearted repentance in light of God's wholehearted repentance towards us in Christ? Let's pray we would.

[22:53] Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you that when people repent, you love to relent and show mercy.

Indeed, we thank you that you've already shown your repentance towards us in Jesus the moment we believed in him. But help us who believe to continue to repent.

That we might not receive your repentance, but enjoy it. Enjoy the ongoing forgiveness we have in Christ. And help us not to take your grace for granted.

We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.