

Man Turning

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Go ahead and flip to Jonah. If you do not have a Bible, we'd love to give you one. They are in the back on the table.

English Standard Version is what we're in today. And continuing through Jonah. So if you get into the big prophets and keep turning to your right.

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah. I have grown to love our friend in so many ways. And grown to love what God has for us in these verses.

So Jonah, chapter 3. So two more weeks in Jonah. Look with me. Chapter 3. This is the Word of God.

[1 : 05] Verse 1. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time. Saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

So Jonah rose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. Three days' journey in breadth.

Verse 4. Jonah began to go into the city. Going a day's journey. And he called out. Yet 40 days. And Nineveh shall be overthrown.

And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.

Verse 6. The word reached the king of Nineveh. And he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself in sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

[2 : 11] And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh. 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. 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. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

Verse 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. That is the authoritative, sufficient, inerrant word of God that we need to hear this morning.

[3 : 22] I believe that God has set aside for us. English philosopher Jeremy Bentham died in 1832.

He gave all his money and possessions to the University College Hospital in London with one surprising and odd condition. He stated that his body should be dissected, dissected, and then his skeleton put back together and preserved and clothed so that he could attend all the board meetings of the University College Hospital in London in future years.

Years. To this day, prior to the start of each board meeting, Jeremy Bentham is rolled into the meeting, decked out in his 19th century clothing.

And when he arrives, the chairman announces, Jeremy Bentham, present but not voting. Present but not voting.

Voting. Sadly, present but not voting could describe too many people in churches today.

[4 : 40] They're present. They're going through all the motions. They go to church. They hear the word. They smile and shake hands. They even give a little. But they're not voting.

They're not responding. They're not all in. They have little sense of the greatness of God and the rush of living all out for Jesus Christ.

They have little longing after holiness without which Hebrews says we will not see God. They have little taste for these things because the word and God's promises seem so distant, so weak, so unreal.

The real things they believe are the things all around us. The many crises we're facing right now as a nation. The stack of bills that are there and keep coming. The yearning for something great like a sunset.

A deep friendship. A satisfying meal. Or the shadows of pain that never seem to leave. That leave them not responding. Responding.

[5 : 45] Or perhaps the bore of a life that feels more like same old, same old of Groundhog's Day than the adventure of Ghostbusters. Those are the real things.

And those are the things God seems so out of touch with. Church seems like white noise. Seems irrelevant. Lulls us to sleep.

I dare say if we're honest, we're tempted in the same ways. We can be present going through the motions because church is what we're supposed to do. We can be content with yesterday's graces and the obedience of years ago.

We can be all right with the staleness of our present faith. We can be okay with the feeling that God is far away and on the margins of our life. He's great.

He's just out there. We can go so long without tasting his goodness that we can't remember what it feels like and wonder if it's worth fighting for.

[6 : 47] We can stumble in the same ways that those around us do. Chasing the wind. Grasping for things to satisfy. Running after wells that are empty. We can begin to believe spiritual emptiness is okay.

That the feeling that our prayers don't reach beyond the ceiling is common or normal. How do we get back?

How do we wake up? How do we begin to feel again? 1517 Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg, Germany.

And the very first theses, the very first proposition was, When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

When he nailed it, he said, Repent. He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

The way back is by turning. Continuing to turn.

[8 : 00] Continuing to refuse to settle. Continuing to choose to turn again and again. And what Luther was saying is the Christian life is a life, a continual turning. That's what repentance is. It's turning to the Lord.

This morning as we turn to the story of Jonah, the word comes to him a second time. And this time, it takes him all the way to Nineveh and he obeys. And as he does, all the attention shifts from Jonah, again, to the people.

And the way they turn to the Lord. So where we're going this morning is turn now and continually to Christ for life.

Turn now and continually to Christ for life. Oddly enough, our prime subject this morning is not Jonah, but these Ninevites, these wicked Ninevites, and what happens when God shows up. Point one is turn immediately. Turn immediately. Praise God for second chances. When we find Jonah in our verses, we encounter a new man.

[9 : 10] He isn't running anymore. He ran and was swallowed by the fish and is delivered back in Joppa, ready to receive the word a second time. And this time, Jonah obeys immediately.

Now, if you'll notice, and you probably flop open your Bible and both of these chapters are right here. Literally, chapter three is almost identical to chapter one, verse one and two.

He gets the same call from the Lord. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. We have in our verses, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city. Arise and go.

Just like we said before, these words are clustered together to say, go now to Nineveh. And look at verse three. Jonah arose and went. There's a new Jonah in town.

You know, he hears the word rise and go, and he arose and went. Look at the end of that verse.

According to the word of the Lord.

[10 : 09] This Jonah is obedient. Arises and wins and does it all. According to the word of the Lord. The last 36 hours of his life have been terrible. But now things are looking up with a second chance.

He obeys right away. Surprising enough, when Jonah arrives in Nineveh, the people there turn immediately as well. After hearing the word, we can imagine Jonah was in Joppa. Now, Joppa was about 500 miles from Nineveh. So, Jonah traveled in between our verses. Jonah traveled all the way to Nineveh. But when he arrived, he began to preach. This Jonah had a word to share. Now, we've talked about this before. But Jonah was, I mean, Nineveh was a great city. It's repeated throughout the whole book. This great city is a capital of the Assyrian Empire. Metropolis. A home to 120,000 people. About 60 miles in circumference.

[11:08] Takes about three days to walk through it. And preach through it. And so, Jonah begins to do it. Now, we know it's a wicked city. We've known that at the beginning.

God sent him to Nineveh. Saying that his evil or their evil had come up to the Lord. And so, Jonah goes to tell these wicked.

And this enemy nation, the judgment, is coming. And all eyes are on how they respond. In so many ways, this whole book has been a buildup to their response.

And look down in verse 4. Jonah began to go into the city. Go into days of journey. He called out. Verse 5. Now, that was easy, Jonah.

What was all that balking about? I mean, he just goes in there, preaches the word.

[12:13] Judgment is coming. And the people believe God. Now, if we just sink in here. This incredibly wicked nation. How do they believe God immediately?

What is going on? You know, again and again, as I pointed out. And even in these verses, the author seems to consciously refer to them like Sodom and Gomorrah. Which are the wickedest nations in the history of the world.

At least from a biblical standpoint. Maybe Babylon in the end of Revelation is pretty wicked too. But this idea, it is the most wicked nation. So how did they respond like this?

Well, Jesus tells us that just as his death and burial and resurrection will be a sign to all that the gospel is real. And the only message that saves men and women. So to Jonah's three days and three nights in the belly was a sign to the Ninevites.

What Jesus says in Matthew 12. That the word is true and the threat is real. So the idea is that when Jonah arose, arrived in Nineveh, word had gotten out about him.

[13:24] He came into town, but the town already knew about him. Jonah was this man that ran from the Lord and the Lord ran after him. There was the great storm. He was thrown overboard. He was buried underneath the waves.

He was rescued on the verge of death by a fish. And what this man Jonah did, they did not know. But they did know that Jonah's God was real and not to be dallied with.

I just find this so interesting. How many people do you think would have come? How many Ninevites would have come to Christ if Jonah had gone the first time? Most likely none. He'd have been killed.

Because the Lord was after something else. So that he came as a man on a mission because he was a man with a message.

Having been rescued by God. Look at verse 5. They just respond immediately. I mean, they're just running to response. You know, they believed God. They called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.

[14:32] Revival breaks out. That's what's going on here. The whole city is just responding and worshiping the Lord. This whole wicked city. Here's one word of the threat.

And turns. Jonah obeys immediately. The people turn immediately. Praise God for second chances. All of us are Jonahs. All of us are like that prodigal son.

We have run from the Lord time and again. But the point of this passage is not rest assured you'll get a second chance.

What the Ninevites heard. What they would tell us. According to Matthew 12 is second chances are never guaranteed.

Turn now. Lot's wife did not get a second chance. Uzziah did not get a second chance when he reached out to grab a hold of the cart that was carrying the Ark of the Covenant.

[15:36] He was struck down immediately. Nor did Ananias and Sapphira. Remember they just kept back a little bit of money, you know, for this little thing. And nevertheless, they lied to the Holy Spirit. They were taken out.

There's no reason to think that the Lord would treat us any differently if we fail to listen and turn. It's a sobering passage. The question is, where are we living as if second chances will always come? Where are we hearing the word of the Lord? Speak, but failing to turn immediately. Is it bitterness that has become our closest friend and our greatest comfort, even though we know it is not right? And let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Is it, have we stopped listening because we're just, is it just a few more lustful looks? It's a few more minutes of scrolling. Just a few more hours of overwork. Or a few more helpings of food. Are we turning immediately or after just one more?

[16:50] Is it harshness with our spouse and children that we excuse because there will always be tomorrow? This passage is waking us up.

Is it fear that we refuse to let go and causes us to let opportunities of evangelism, of serving, of prayer, of love pass by?

Is it the quiet refusal to turn your life over to Jesus Christ? Is it the gospel? Is it the gospel calls us to turn immediately? The gospel says we have a problem.

We have sin that has separated us from God. A cast, a breadth we could not reach across. And yet God has sent Jesus Christ to stand in our place objectively.

He died 2,000 years ago on a Roman cross so that we might be forgiven. His objective is out there. We're called to respond. We must choose to follow him or refuse him.

[17:49] There's no third option. You can't not choose. Point two, turn completely. Turn completely.

After Jonah's preaching and the immediate response, the text zeroes in to describe in detail how they respond. Like what goes on after they respond.

You can look down there in verse 6. It seems to be kind of repeating itself. People believe they call for a fast, put on sackcloth. Verse 6, the word reached the king in Nineveh.

I love the way it's so vividly described. He arose, removed his robe, covered himself in sackcloth, and sat down. Then he lets out this proclamation.

All of Nineveh is to mourn in fasting, sackcloth, and animals. Even the animals are called to cover in sackcloth and ashes.

[18:51] In fasting, they're called to deny themselves food sustenance and satisfaction to demonstrate that they will only rest in God alone. In sackcloth, they're denying themselves a nice soft clothing and covering themselves with coarse sackcloth to say, I refuse all comforts and only want comfort and peace from God.

The idea with these two things is they're acting out repentance. They're outward expressions of inner sorrow and anguish.

They flow from a heart turning to the Lord. They're turning with all their hearts. Joel 2, which we have for you.

One of Jonah's contemporaries says, Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts, not your garments.

These are powerful verses. While repentance may include fasting, weeping, grief, promises to quit, resolves to do better, it is not mainly about those things.

[20:02] It's mainly about rending your heart, literally tearing your heart. Incredibly vivid is what Joel is talking about. Tear open your heart before the Lord.

Make it completely open. It's no surprise that at Pentecost, when Peter preaches the Word of God, it was said to cut to the heart. To literally divide the heart.

That's what's going on here. There must be no secrets or hiddenness in our lives, but also in our hearts. All of us are naked and exposed to Him whose Word discerns the thoughts and intentions of our heart.

The Lord knows. Sin divides our hearts. How many times does this psalmist pray, Unite my heart to fear your name. Sin allows us to live with masks on, But in turning, by the grace of God, we're uniting our hearts to fear the Lord.

We're rending it. We're breaking it open. That's what's going on. I mean, how do we do this? Seems astonishingly high.

[21:02] I think the point is not that we're trying to perfectly strive, But that we're finally walking into the light.

Letting self-pity, lust, pride, sorrow be exposed. We must turn with all our hearts. But He doesn't stop there. He says, we must turn with our hands. We must turn with our hands.

Look down there in verse 8 at the end of it. He says, let everyone turn from his evil way And turn from the violence that is in his hand. The idea is don't just fast and mourn. Turn from your evil ways and your evil works.

It's not just your heart that needs to be saved. Your hands need to be saved. The scriptures continue to call along these lines. Isaiah says, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. One of the most often quoted verses of our Lord from the Old Testament.

Let the wicked forsake his way, Isaiah. And the unrighteous man, his thoughts, let him return to the Lord. John the Baptist says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. The idea is they're not calling us to make our repentance, or they're calling us to make our repentance visible.

[22 : 12] It cannot just be tears and mourning and anguish. It cannot just be in our hearts. It cannot be all talk. More than that, though, they're calling us to show us how repentance works.

It doesn't go through the motions. It bears fruit. It takes shape. It leads to the renouncing of certain things and the embracing of other things and keeps doing it.

Godly repentance and ungodly repentance both have sorrow, sadness, and grief. But only godly repentance bears fruit. One of my favorite stories of revival, which this is basically a revival, is the Welsh revival, country of Wales in the early 1900s.

Methodist preacher Evan Roberts had a longing for God to act in his country, began to fervently pray and to passionately preach. And the word brought many souls to Christ.

Roberts was praying for 100,000 souls to be brought to Christ. And many believe that an estimated 100,000, that works out kind of nice, 100,000 confessed Christ.

[23 : 35] That's what the historians say, all right? Hundreds and hundreds devoted themselves to pursuing God, living dependent on the Spirit, gathering together to sing and to worship and to study the Word of God.

Jonathan Edwards once said about revival, the revival that broke out in the Second Great Awakening, that men would, as it were, step over bars of gold to get to the church to hear the Word of God.

Not literally, but it was the same contagious craving for the Lord. One writer said, when the Welchmen sang, they sang the words like men who believed them.

Man, there's a difference in singing that happens when you're converted to Christ. They abandoned themselves to it. But it wasn't just worship. Their lives were different.

Wales was different. The whole country was different. The fact was undeniable. One of my favorite effects of it is the coal mines famously slowed because the horses wouldn't move.

[24 : 49] Miners who were converted no longer kicked or cussed the horses, and the horses didn't know what to do. Judges closed the court doors because crime slowed.

One newspaper article, a newspaper article wrote, it was, quote, an almost complete realization of the golden rule, doing to others you would have them doing to you, in all affairs of daily life.

The gospel transformed them. Flannery O'Connor said it well. You shall know the truth, and truth shall make you odd and stand out. And that's what happened. When we turn, it cannot just be with our hearts.

Our hands had to be cleansed of blood and filled with fruit. But we must turn also for all our life.

Repentance implies turning and never turning back. To repent literally means to change your mind and your direction. What Luther was talking about is repentance being the continual calling in the Christian life is this idea that it's a change of direction, of following Christ, taking up the cross for life.

[26 : 10] One author said it well. Recalling and confessing our sin is like taking out the garbage. Once is not enough. It stinks. This idea that we take it out daily.

We repent. Just like Jesus warned no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom. Jesus warns, remember Lot's wife. He calls us to repent.

This text, the Bible, calls us to repent. Repent with all our hearts, with all our hands, with our hands, with all our life. It's called us to repent the whole way.

This idea that we're to follow Jesus Christ and continue to turn to him again and again and again.

But I don't know about you, but it seems like such a high bar. I mean, who can reach it? Who can possibly turn from all their hearts?

Sin is always crouching at the doors, what the scriptures say. And it clings so tightly, what the scriptures say. And who can possibly turn from all their bad ways? Who can rid their hands of everything bad, all the bad works?

[27 : 17] Who can turn for all their life? I mean, who has the strength and the energy to hold the line that long? And if we do it, if we do it all the way, if we do it all the way to the end, how do we know it'd be enough?

How do we know? I think C.S. Lewis captures our predicament quite well.

We're called to respond to something. At times, we're not so sure what'll happen.

It tells the story about Jill in the silver chair bursting into an opening in the forest, and she's dying of thirst. She sees this running stream, and she wants to run to it, wants to jump in it, wants to drink from it.

But she stands back because there's a lion beside the stream. The lion says to her, If you are thirsty, you may drink.

[28 : 36] Pauses for a moment. If you are thirsty, come and drink. And of course, she remembered that she could go and drink in this world and realize that it was the lion that was speaking to her.

And the lion said again, Are you not thirsty? She said, I'm dying of thirst. I'm dying of thirst. Then drink. Said the lion.

Maybe I could I, I mean, would you mind going away for a while so I can drink? The lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl.

As Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move for her convenience. The delicious, rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic, nearly mad.

Will you promise not to do anything to me if I come? I make no promise. Said the lion.

[29 : 44] Oh, Jill was so thirsty, Lewis writes, now that without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. She had begun to come nearer and nearer to the water.

She said, Do you eat, girls? He says, I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms.

Said the lion. He didn't say it as if he were boasting or as if he were sorry, nor as if he were angry. He just said it. I dare not come and drink, said Jill.

Then you will die of thirst. said the lion. Some days, the call to repentance feels about as fruitless as that.

What promise do we have that all our turning will be received by the Lord that he'll rescue us?

[30 : 47] Point three, turn in obedient faith. Beneath all our turning, there must be faith. It seems that the Ninevites are expressing a kernel of faith.

In verse nine, when they say they did all these things, they said, Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger. You see that repeated word. Don't you? Turn, turn, turn all throughout this passage so that we may not perish.

You know, it's striking how similar that prayer is to the sailors in chapter one. They say, Perhaps God will give a thought to us that we may not perish. You know, it seems that they're expressing faith in some way because they're realizing that their sorrow, sadness, grief, sackcloth, ashes are not enough.

All they're turning is not enough. None of it is enough to secure forgiveness before this God and to appease and turn away his anger and so they turn in faith.

Obedient faith is what I want to call it. Let me explain. In the opening verses of Romans, Paul includes a curious phrase, to me at least.

[31 : 56] Romans 1, which we have for you. It writes, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. So, verses later, through whom, Jesus Christ, we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith.

The obedience of faith. I think, what could that possibly mean, the obedience of faith? Faith is a gift. You don't obey when you receive a gift.

Right? And so, I think it could mean one of two things. It could mean faith that leads to obedience, which is obviously true throughout the New Testament, that true, genuine faith bears fruit.

we see that in Acts, I mean, in Hebrews 11 and other places, James 2, faith without works is dead, but I think it could mean, I think it does mean faith which is obedient.

Let me explain. Faith is a gift, yes, but faith is obedience. Faith is not just the response to the gospel and the word when we feel miserable or unhappy.

[33 : 08] It's not when we really understand how we need the Lord. Faith is not when we just really want to follow or when we have warm feelings and goosebumps or when we really feel like repenting.

Faith is always an act of obedience. It's a step we make in response to the word. Theologian D.A. Carson captures this well by imagining us and taking us to the night of Passover in the Old Testament.

The night of Passover was when God promised that he was going to strike dead. First born a son of every family in Egypt. Carson tells a story about two men there.

We'll just call them. He says, we'll just call them Smith and Brown. Good Jewish names. Smith says, what do you think about tonight? Are you nervous about tonight?

Brown says, nervous, nervous. Why would you be nervous? I mean, didn't you slaughter the lamb and spread the blood on its doorpost of your house like he said?

[34 : 17] I mean, didn't you have the Passover meal with your family? Didn't you do all that he said you should do? And Smith says, yeah, yeah, yeah, I did all that. But it's just been a little crazy lately.

Cattle are dying. Son, frogs are falling from the sky. Gnats are everywhere. And tonight, tonight it's, it's, it's almost spooky.

I mean, it's the firstborn son of everybody is supposed to die. And, and, you know, it's all right with you. You have three sons, but I only have one son. I don't know what to do.

I mean, it's scary. Brown responds, yes, yes, I know. But I say, bring it on. The promise of God said it, and I will trust it.

On the night of the Passover, the angel of death passed over both Smith and Brown's house. Now, what's the point of that illustration?

[35 : 23] The point is, it's not the strength of your faith that matters. It only matters that your faith is obedient and responding to the word of God and the gospel.

You're not covered this morning, praise God, because of the intensity of the certainty of your faith.

You're not covered by how much you feel it this morning. You are covered because you have run to Jesus Christ in obedient faith.

faith. And that's what I think is going on with these Ninevites. And that's what's supposed to be going on in our lives.

Yes, they turn in response. They turn with all their, they turn quickly, they turn immediately, they turn with all their hearts and with all their light, but at the bottom their turning is in faith.

They respond because of what the word has said and how they want to respond to the Lord. It seems that this is exactly what Matthew picks up and what Jesus picks up in Matthew 12, which we have for you.

[36 : 30] And he says, an evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The idea is what Jesus is saying to them is you don't need another sign. You don't need to wait until you feel it. You don't need to wait until you convert it. You don't need to wait until you're miserable.

You need to respond now in faith.

This is the sign. That's what Jesus is saying. Just like Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, he walked into town having been delivered by God, so too the sign for all the ages will be, I will suffer in your place.

I will die for your sins. I will be buried in your place in three days. I will rise again. You don't need to convince yourself of anything else to respond. You must not wait.

You must not delay. The sign of Jonah was great, but the sign of the greater Jonah is greater. And it calls us to respond.

[37 : 35] Miraculously, while the focus of the passage has been on the turning of the Ninevites, it does not conclude there. Look down in verse 10. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented.

Not just Jonah and not just the Ninevites, God turned from the disaster that he had said he'd do to them and he did not do it.

I think the Lord would say to us, are we still turning? The Lord is here. Are we still fighting? Are we still confessing and forsaking?

Are we still praying? Are we still taking up our cross? Turn now and continually to Christ for life. let us pray.

Father in heaven, thank you for this word and your word and we cry out to you this morning and we humble ourselves before you for your great name and confess our need that we long to live in the good of these things and the rest and the truth of your word.

[39 : 04] Lord, we long to have lives that are defined more and more by turning to you. Oh Lord, I pray that there's any person in this room that must do business with the Lord but let them not leave before they do.

Let us all do business with you, humble ourselves before you that we might give our hearts and our lives completely to you.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.