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A Greater Miracle Jonah 3:1-10

Intro: There are many passages in Scripture that describe how the Lord, like a loving parent, brings strong discipline to His wayward children in order to guide them back to a life of obedience in which they walk the good path He's laid out for them to walk in ([Prov 3:11-12](#)). This is exactly what happens in the 2nd chapter of Jonah. Jonah had been fleeing from the Lord from the very beginning of the story, a flight that carried him in an increasing downward spiral. The Lord actually disciplines Jonah by pushing him further down this path – to the very bottom of the sea! It's almost as if the Lord was saying to Jonah, "You want to run from Me? Let Me show you exactly where this path will lead!"

The end result of the Lord's discipline is that it brings Jonah to the end of his own strength and ability. When Jonah finally comes to the end of his own strength and ability, he also comes to his senses! Jonah turns back to the Lord, calling out to Him for help ([2:2](#)). This is one of the goals of the Lord's discipline of His children when they disobey. His desire is not to punish them but to bring them back to Him in obedient faith, walking in His paths and in close fellowship with Him. The Lord corrects those He loves because He desires that close, intimate fellowship.

Without a doubt, the events of [ch1-2](#) are among the most exciting, remarkable passages in the Bible. But the truth is, as fantastic as they are; they're not even the high point of the story! However remarkable the previous actions have been, however great the miracles, the most remarkable action and the greatest miracle of the Book of Jonah occur in ch3 and they occur as a result of Jonah's preaching! Jonah is going to deliver a simple, straightforward message that will result in the greatest and most thorough revival that has ever taken place in the history of the world for never again has the world seen anything quite like the results of Jonah's preaching in the great city of Nineveh.

If the miracle of the fish was amazing, then the miracle of this revival is even more amazing. The 1st amazing fact about this revival is that it began with God's call to just 1 man—Jonah; a very reluctant man. And this was after he

had apparently disqualified himself from any future service to God.

1-2 – Its impossible for us to consider this from God's perspective because we're not in the place of God but if we were God and were confronted with a similar situation; I would dare say that at the end of ch2, we'd probably say that we'd had just about enough of Jonah and his rebellious attitude. I mean, Jonah was a man we had chosen to be a prophet; one to whom we'd granted a special measure of understanding in spiritual things. We'd already given him a full and blessed ministry in Israel and then we called him to do a tremendous work in Nineveh. Jonah should have been delighted. He wasn't - he actually refused the call! In fact, he was so determined in his rebellion that he would rather die than be obedient and return to the place of blessing. He asked to be thrown overboard. Even in this we were gracious to him. Instead of letting him drown, we saved him. We brought him to a place of repentance, then spoke to the fish and it had returned Jonah to the land.

How gracious we had been! No one could expect more. So if we were in God's place and we determined that after all of this, Jonah disqualified himself from ever being a prophet again, who could blame us? If we said, "Go home now, Jonah. I am glad you have repented of your disobedience, but you are no longer useful to me," we'd be just and reasonable in so doing. But this is not God's way. Instead of reading that God rejected Jonah, we find these words: "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time" (1). The important point is that God came to Jonah the second time and that this commission was virtually the same as the 1st one (**1:2**).

Does God always do that? Does God often stoop to use those who have rejected His calling, turned a deaf ear to His word and pursued a life of determined disobedience? Yes, He does; God is just like that. He continues to use such people as messengers and I'm thankful that He does for if He didn't, none of us could serve him.

We see this principle often in Scripture: of the Lord coming to an individual a second time. We see it in God's dealing with Abraham. God came to Abraham and called him out of the Ur of the Chaldees; to leave behind all that he ever knew and move his family to the land of Canaan. Abraham did leave Ur but he stopped in Haran. Seems he would have stayed there too had not God come to him a 2nd time and called him to go on to Canaan.

Moses, through God, became one of the greatest leaders in human history but he started out as a murderer. As a Hebrew child raised in Pharaoh's house, he eventually came to realize that God would use him to rescue Israel from Egypt. But he took matters into his own hands and had to flee for his life. After living 40 yrs in the back side of the desert, God appeared to Moses a 2nd time. We see the same thing in Peter's life. He boasted that no matter what anyone else did, he'd never desert his Lord. And yet, for all his bluster, Peter denied Jesus 3 times. Where did that leave him as a disciple and servant of Christ? Should he be cast aside? Was he to be disqualified from further service? No! The Lord appeared to Peter a 2nd time and recommissioned him to service.

The Lord comes a 2nd time to all His true children. Have we, like Abraham, ever stopped at Haran? Of course, we have. We're given a task but some sin or preoccupation detains us. Have we, like Moses, ever taken matters into our own hands and followed our own plans? Yes, we have. Like Peter, we've even denied our Lord on occasions when we should have spoken for him. We've disobeyed Him; we've run from Him. Some of us, like Jonah, have run far. Are we cast off? Does God disown us? No! He disciplines us, sure. But, doing that and bringing us to a place of repentance, He returns a 2nd time to recommission us to service. He also comes a 3rd, a 4th, even a 100th or a 1000th time, if needed. None of us would be where we are in our Christian walks if God hadn't worked this way. Oh, the great unmerited grace of God! We deserve nothing. Yet we receive everything, even when we foolishly turn from it.

So, in **vs1-2**, it's as if everything is back to square one. Jonah rebelled against the Lord's first call to preach to Nineveh and as a result, he experienced the Lord's discipline and His merciful deliverance. Now, as a further sign of God's mercy and grace, Jonah is given a 2nd chance to bring God's message to Nineveh. The God of Jonah's 2nd chance is actually the God of a 1000 chances. The gracious mercy that was extended to Jonah, Abraham, Moses and Peter—is granted to all believers through the precious blood of Jesus.

3-4 – Having learned the consequences of running from God, this time Jonah was obedient. The story we have been anticipating from the beginning of **ch1** can finally start. What will be the result? Well, in **ch1**, when Jonah opposed God's will for his life he discovered that God opposed him.

God sent the storm. This time, Jonah obeys and he will discover that his obedience will be followed by an outpouring of God's own power. The difference between the 2 is that Jonah was now walking according to "the word of the LORD." The 1st time, Jonah was trying to get away from God's Word. This time, the Word was with him. It is through His word alone that God brings blessing and opens the closed and rebellious hearts of men (Heb 4:12).

The author pauses to give a brief description of Nineveh. The reference to a 3-day journey could describe the width of the city, the circumference or the amount of time necessary to see all of it. The point is: Nineveh was huge! This naturally implies that it contained many inhabitants; which explains why it was a great city to God. It was important to God because many lives were at stake!

As Jonah entered Nineveh, he proclaimed a simple message: only 8 words in English; just 5 in Hebrew! 40 days means Nineveh was given a significant amount of time to heed the message and turn from their evil ways. Failure to do so would be disastrous: overthrown means annihilation – like Sodom and Gomorrah. They're being warned that God's about to bring His justice to bear against them. Granted, it's not an impressive message (a simple prophecy) yet, those few unimpressive words were greatly blessed because they were truly God's words (2b) and not the words of Jonah. In fact, those words were used by God to bring about a genuine and comprehensive revival in that city.

5-6 – Picture the response of the inhabitants of the city. Jonah shows up on day 1 and begins to preach and as he speaks, people actually start to listen; activity in the market grinds to a halt; people begin to come out of their homes and places of business to hear this strange man speak and a holy hush settles over the ever-growing multitude. Soon, weeping can be heard and then other signs of genuine repentance from sin can be seen. Eventually, Jonah's message reaches into the palace where even the king was willing to divest himself of his magnificent royal robes and assume the place of a mourner alongside his repenting subjects.

What did the Ninevites believe? Whom did they believe? It's not that the people believed Jonah; we're told that they believed God. This phrase is used elsewhere in the OT to describe Israelites who put their faith and trust

in the Lord and that's what happened here! The entire city now believes Jonah's God is living and real and they turn to Him in humble repentance. Faith should never rest in the messenger, but in God who gives the message. This is one mark of all true revival and true preaching.

Sure, Jonah's message didn't mention repentance as an option but it didn't need to. Whenever a prophet declared that judgment was coming because of evil, it was understood that judgment would take place if repentance did not.

The Lord makes this especially clear in [Jer 18:7-8](#). The prophetic warning is an invitation to repent and the Ninevites take both the warning and the invitation to heart! Fasting is a way to humble yourself before God and devote time to confessing your sins to Him. Sackcloth was a sign of mourning. It's a way of grieving over one's sins. Along with the sackcloth, the king sits in ashes: another sign of deep grief in the ancient world. He goes from supreme authority to utter humility in the span of 1 verse!

7-9 – The king issues a proclamation for the entire city, calling for the most extreme forms of repentance possible. No food or water can be consumed, sackcloth must be worn by all and the whole city must pray fervently; even the animals were included in the outward signs of repentance. But, more importantly, the king insists that the people's outward signs of repentance must be matched by turning from their evil ways and the wrong they have done (**8b**). The king realizes that outward signs of repentance are useless if they're not accompanied by an appropriate change in life. You can't truly repent and then go about with business as usual. If there's no noticeable change in lifestyle then there hasn't been any real repentance.

Of course, all of this was enacted by the king and carried out by the people without any assurance that their repentance would be accepted by Jonah's God! "Who can tell..." The king hopes beyond hope that Jonah's God will see their repentance as being real and heart-felt and will relent in bringing His justice to bear against them (**9**). This brings us to the true high point of the story because this is exactly what happens!

10 – The point is: when Nineveh repented, God relented. Now, some people see a contradiction in this verse, that God should change His mind and relent (repent) of some intended action. But it shouldn't be a problem for anyone. What we have here is a clear case of using human language to describe something that's beyond human language. God is always beyond

our understanding. So, we shouldn't be surprised when phrases like this confuse us. We should balance them with other statements—like that of Balaam, who said, “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said and will He not do? Or has He spoken and will He not make it good?” (Num 23:19). If forced to choose between apparent contradictions, we must side with this truth: God isn't changeable and He doesn't deal falsely in the revelation of Himself to us.

But, in this case, there's no real contradiction because the city that God had promised to destroy, the wicked city of Nineveh, *ceased to exist* after Jonah's preaching. It was a wicked, violent, unrighteous, proud, and self-confident Nineveh that God threatened to destroy. He never threatened a city sitting in sackcloth and ashes, humbled in their repentance and self-abasement; fervently praying for His forgiveness. True, it did come back. Nineveh slipped into sin again years later. Nahum writes of a judgment that did eventually come. But for now the city ceased to exist as sinful Nineveh and so, came to enjoy God's blessing. God saw their works—that they turned from their evil ways—and God relented of the judgment He was bringing against them, and He didn't do it.

Ultimately, the problem posed by God's repentance is solved by noticing that God repents of the evil He would do by taking the punishment for that evil on Himself. When the Hebrew speaks of God repenting, most often the word is *nacham*. It refers to an inner suffering needing to be consoled. Did God suffer? Not at this time. But He did so later in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God took the world's evil on Himself precisely so that He might repent (relent) of the need to visit the consequences of evil on humanity. In all actuality, God's repenting in the face of man's repentance is Jesus Christ. Any time Scripture mentions God repenting is just a prophecy of Jesus Christ. He puts into effect both the justice of God and the love of God without damaging one or the other.

This message hits quite close to home. Like Jonah and the Ninevites, each person today needs to repent of sin and turn to the righteous and merciful God of the universe. But our repentance from sin, assuming we do repent, is only made possible because God first repented of His judgment against our sin by taking our judgment on Himself. Jesus bore our judgment. thus, our turning from sin must be a turning to Jesus through whom alone we find forgiveness.

The repentance of the Ninevites suggests 4 steps to follow for all who haven't come to this kind of repentance. 1st) there must be faithful preaching and faithful hearing of the Word of God. Jonah preached what God had given him to preach, and it was highly effective. It wasn't a lengthy message, or an intellectual message, or even an eloquent message, but none of that mattered. All that mattered was that it was God's message, preached and heard in the power of God's Holy Spirit. 2nd) there must be belief in God. The Ninevites did more than just hear Jonah's message, they responded to it by believing God. This is how it's always been and always must be. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God (**Rom 10:17**).

3rd), having heard and believed God, the city took action on its faith. There's no true belief without corresponding action. This principle is seen everywhere in Scripture: Abel believed God and offered a proper sacrifice; Enoch pleased God by walking close to Him; Noah built an ark; Abraham obeyed and left his home to go to a new land God would show him; Isaac blessed Jacob according to God's instructions; Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter but chose rather to be identified with the people of God. In each case belief resulted in specific action by which the person's trust in God was demonstrated.

4th) we must turn from specific sin. The Ninevites turned from the sin that was most characteristic of them: violence (**8b**). We also must turn from our specific sins: sexual indulgence, pride, selfishness, laziness, materialism; whatever it is. We can't repent in vague terms but specifically, if we're to be blessed by God and come to know him fully.

God sent Jonah to Nineveh to preach a message of imminent doom. The point is: God, in His holiness, must bring justice to bear against evil and evil Nineveh is about to experience it. But, the Lord's true desire for Nineveh is not their destruction but their deliverance! The message he sent Jonah to preach was as much an invitation to repent of evil as it was a warning of the consequences of evil. Miraculously, they accepted the invitation to repent with honest humility. In response to their repentance, the Lord extended His gracious, merciful forgiveness. This had been His real desire all along (**II Pet 3:9**; **I Tim 2:4**). God manifests His sovereignty, not in being stubborn but bring gracious; not in being picky or demanding but in being willing to

forgive any people, or person.

Have you experience the grace and mercy of God personally? Do you know what it means to be forgiven of not just the consequences of sin but the very guilt of sin? You can know it today but you can only know it because God has already taken the just judgment of your sin upon Himself on the cross. His sacrifice was for your eternal benefit but it can only be yours if you repent and cry out to Him for forgiveness.

Jonah himself had already experienced the Lord's mercy and forgiveness for his own evil behavior – will he now be delighted that the Ninevites get to experience the same? 😊