

Jonah Pt 5: When Even the King and the Cows Repent

Isaiah Wilson / General Adult

Introduction

Jonah 3:6–10 ESV

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

⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through 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,

⁸ 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.

⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

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.

In the last lesson we saw Jonah finally obeyed God and went to Nineveh. He walked one day into the city and preached the shortest, strangest sermon in the Bible: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

Five words in Hebrew. No mention of God. No explanation of their sins. No call to repent. Just a bare announcement of disaster.

We talked about whether Jonah was sabotaging his own message. Was he trying to ensure their destruction by giving them as little information as possible?

Whatever his motives, it didn't work. The people of Nineveh believed God. They declared a fast. They put on sackcloth. From the greatest to the least, they responded immediately.

This week we're going to look at what happens next. The news reaches the king. And what follows is a dramatic picture of repentance.

Part 1: The King Gets Off His Throne (3:6)

Read Jonah 3:6.

"The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his

throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes." (Jonah 3:6, ESV)

The Word Reaches the King

Notice that Jonah didn't reach the king. Jonah only made it one day into the city. He didn't walk into the royal palace. He didn't preach in the throne room.

But somehow, his five-word sermon went viral. Without social media. Without YouTube. The message spread through the entire city and reached the most powerful man in the empire.

He Arose From His Throne

When you first read that line, you might think, "Uh oh. This is not going to end well for Jonah."

This is the king of Assyria. The most brutal, violent empire the world had known. When the king rises from his throne, people usually die.

But that's not what happens.

He Removed His Robe

The king takes off his royal robes. These robes are symbols

of his power, his authority, his right to rule. They represent his ability to define what is good and evil in his kingdom.

And he takes them off.

He Covered Himself With Sackcloth

Sackcloth is rough, uncomfortable fabric made from goat hair. It's itchy. It's miserable to wear. That's the point.

Wearing sackcloth is a way of saying, "I am lowering myself. I am identifying with the sin and brokenness of my people. I am putting aside my comfort and my status."

He Sat in Ashes

This is the final image. The king doesn't just take off his robes and stand there. He goes lower.

He sits in the dust. In the ashes. The lowest place he can go.

This is the symbolic picture of humility, regret, and repentance. The most powerful man on earth is lowering himself before God.

Teaching Point

The king's problem wasn't just that he was doing bad

things. His problem was that he was on the throne. He had put himself in God's place. He had taken the authority to define good and evil for himself and his empire.

And what did that lead to? Brutality. Violence. Oppression. Injustice.

But now, confronted with God's judgment, he gets off the throne. He takes off the symbols of his autonomy. He lowers himself.

This is what repentance looks like.

Part 2: The King's Decree (3:7-8)

Read Jonah 3:7-8.

"And he issued a proclamation and published through 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.'" (Jonah 3:7-8, ESV)

A Citywide Fast

The king doesn't just repent for himself. He issues a decree

for the entire city.

No one is to eat or drink. Not people. Not animals.

Wait. Animals?

Even the Animals Repent

This is one of the comic, exaggerated elements of the story. The king makes the animals fast and wear sackcloth too.

You're supposed to laugh at this. Picture cows in burlap. Goats crying out to God. Horses with no food or water, standing in the streets in sackcloth.

It's absurd. It's extreme. And that's the point.

The author is showing you how intense this repentance is. The change of heart is so complete, so urgent, that even the animals are involved.

Maybe the king is thinking, "What if the cows did something wrong? What if the milk they produced fed the soldiers who committed violence? Let's cover all our bases. Let's make sure everything repents."

It's comic. But it's also deeply serious.

Call Out Mightily to God

The decree continues. Everyone is to call out urgently to God.

Not to their own gods. Not to the Assyrian pantheon. To God. The God of heaven and earth. The God Jonah serves.

Somehow, even without Jonah mentioning God's name in his sermon, the Ninevites have filled in the gaps. They know who is behind this judgment.

Turn From Evil and Violence

And here's the heart of the decree.

The king says, "Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands."

The Hebrew word for "turn" is *shuv*. It's the basic word for repentance. It means to turn around. To go the opposite direction.

Picture yourself walking down a road. Someone tells you, "That's the wrong way. That road leads to destruction."

What do you do? You stop. You turn around. You go the other direction.

That's *shuv*. That's repentance.

From Evil and Violence

Notice that the king names specific sins. He doesn't just say, "Let's be better people." He says, "Turn from your evil ways and from the violence that is in your hands."

This connects directly back to Jonah 1:2, where God says, "Their evil has come up before me."

The Ninevites were known for violence. They were brutal conquerors. They skinned people alive. They impaled captives on stakes. They built an empire on bloodshed.

And the king is saying, "This has to stop. We have to turn from this. We have to change."

Teaching Point

Real repentance is specific. It's not vague. It's not just feeling bad about being "a sinner in general."

Real repentance names the actual thing you're doing wrong and turns from it.

The king doesn't say, "Well, we're all imperfect. Let's just try to be nicer."

He says, "We are violent. We have blood on our hands. This

has to stop. We have to turn."

That's what *shuv* looks like.

Part 3: "Who Knows?" (3:9)

Read Jonah 3:9.

"Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." (Jonah 3:9, ESV)

Humble Hope

The king doesn't demand mercy. He doesn't say, "We repented, so now God owes us forgiveness."

He says, "Who knows?"

This is humble hope. This is repentance that doesn't try to manipulate God or bargain with Him.

The king is saying, "We have no claim on God's mercy. We don't deserve it. But maybe, just maybe, if we turn from our evil, God will turn from His judgment."

God May Relent

Notice the language. The king hopes that God may "turn"

(*shuv*) from His anger.

The same word used for the Ninevites turning from their evil is now used for God turning from His judgment.

This is the wordplay the author is setting up. The Ninevites turn. And God turns.

When people *shuv* toward God, God *shuv* toward them with grace.

Part 4: God Sees and Relents (3:10)

Read Jonah 3:10.

"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." (Jonah 3:10, ESV)

God Saw What They Did

God doesn't just hear their words. He sees their actions.

He sees the king get off his throne. He sees the people put on sackcloth. He sees them stop their violence. He sees them turn.

Belief without action is empty. The Ninevites believed God (verse 5). And they proved it by what they did.

They Turned From Their Evil Way

Here it is again. *Shuv*. They turned.

God doesn't relent because they felt bad. He relents because they actually changed direction.

God Relented

And here's the shocking part. God changes His plan.

The disaster He threatened? He doesn't bring it.

The destruction He announced through Jonah? It doesn't happen.

Why? Because the Ninevites turned. And when they turned, God turned.

The Wordplay on "Overturned"

Remember Jonah's sermon? "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

The Hebrew word is *haphak*. It can mean destroyed, like Sodom and Gomorrah were overturned in fire and judgment (Genesis 19:21).

But it can also mean transformed. Turned over. Changed into its opposite (1 Samuel 10:6).

And that's exactly what happened. Nineveh was overturned. But not in the way Jonah intended.

Nineveh was transformed through repentance. The city turned from evil and found mercy.

Jonah's words came true. Just not the way he wanted.

Part 5: The Nature of Repentance

Let's step back and look at the bigger picture. What does this passage teach us about repentance?

Repentance is Belief Expressed in Action

The Ninevites believed God (verse 5). How do we know? Because of what they did.

They fasted. They wore sackcloth. They called out to God. They turned from violence.

In the Bible, belief is not just a mental thing. It's not just agreeing with facts about God.

Belief is a whole-life response. It's trust that leads to action.

Repentance Names Specific Sin

The king didn't say, "We're all sinners. Let's just be better."

He said, "We are violent. We have evil in our hands. This has to stop."

Real repentance is honest about what you've done wrong. It doesn't hide behind vague language.

Repentance Turns

The core of repentance is *shuv*. Turning around.

It's not just feeling bad. It's not just admitting you were wrong. It's actually going a different direction.

If you're walking toward destruction and someone warns you, the loving response is to stop and turn.

That's what the Ninevites did. And that's what God asks of all of us.

Repentance Trusts God With the Outcome

The king said, "Who knows? Maybe God will relent."

He didn't demand. He didn't bargain. He turned and trusted

God with the result.

That's the heart of faith.

Part 6: The King as a Picture of the Gospel

Verse 6 gives us a powerful image. The king gets off his throne. He takes off his robes. He lowers himself. He sits in the dust.

This is a picture of repentance. But it's also a foreshadowing of something greater.

The King Who Left His Throne

There is a King who looked out over His world and saw that people were ruining themselves and each other.

Out of love, He rendered judgment. He said, "This is not right. This has to be dealt with."

But then He did something no one expected.

He got off His throne. He took off His robes. He came down.

In the words of Philippians 2, "He humbled himself by becoming human, taking on the status of a servant."

He didn't just sit in the dust. He went all the way to the cross.

And on the cross, He absorbed His own judgment. He took the consequences of our violence, our selfishness, our rebellion into Himself.

He died. But because His love is stronger than death, He rose.

The Gospel and Repentance

Here's the good news. The King didn't stay on His throne and demand that we figure out how to get to Him.

He came down to us. He made the way. He made grace possible.

And now, when we hear His judgment on our lives and we turn to Him, what do we find?

We find grace. We find forgiveness. We find life.

Part 8: Application

What Throne Are You On?

We all have thrones. We all have areas where we've put ourselves in God's place. Where we define good and evil in ways that conveniently excuse our behavior.

Maybe it's how you spend money. Maybe it's how you treat people. Maybe it's what you look at online. Maybe it's how you talk about others. Maybe it's the bitterness you're holding onto.

God's judgment is an invitation. It's not meant to crush you. It's meant to wake you up and invite you to turn.

Are You Willing to Get Specific?

The king didn't say, "We're all sinners." He said, "We are violent."

Real repentance names the actual thing.

What is the actual thing in your life that God is confronting right now?

Will You Trust God With the Outcome?

The king said, "Who knows? Maybe God will relent."

He didn't demand. He didn't bargain. He turned and trusted.

Are you willing to do the same?

Remember the King Who Came Down

You're not going to stay off the throne on your own. None of us will.

But Jesus came down from His throne to save people like us.

Turn to Him. Trust Him. And let Him do the work in you that you can't do on your own.

Conclusion

Jonah 3 is one of the most dramatic pictures of repentance in the Bible. The worst city on earth hears a five-word sermon and turns to God.

The king gets off his throne. The people turn from violence. Even the animals wear sackcloth.

And God, out of His great love, relents.

This is the goal of God's judgment. Not destruction. Grace.

When we turn, we find that He has been waiting for us all along.