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C0823 – July 16, 2008 – Jonah 3:5-10 – The Faith Of The Ninevites

Now, last time we saw the obedience of Jonah in contrast to his disobedience in chapter 1. But we learned in v 4 that it was a grudging display of obedience, Jonah had to literally force himself to go into that city. And what this shows is how the form of a single verb can cast a whole new light on a passage that can't be seen in the English. These verbs and nouns in the original text give nuances that are there by design and color historic facts, so these are not here by chance, language did not evolve out of a chance evolutionary process. If you want to start with the evolutionary premise and try to move to an inerrant Bible you can forget it. In evolutionary thought the words in your Bible are just a conglomeration of human thought that arose out of a sea of chaos. There's no God who speaks into the creation to get language started. But on the creation premise where you have an eternal God pre-existing the creation, language first exists amidst the Triune God so that you could have the Father eternally speaking to the Son and the Son eternally dialoguing with the Spirit and so forth. So you first have language in the Creator realm among the Godhead then when God does create and He makes man uniquely in His image so what do you expect to find in man that you don't find in animals and plants? Language, the ability to communicate in a complex structure of nouns and verbs showing categories and relationships. So with the creation premise an inerrant Bible logically follows. So the precondition for language and meaning is that you have a God who is Triune, multiple persons, otherwise who is He going to speak to, then you have to have the creation event where man is made in God's image, if man is not made in God's image then there's no capacity in man for speaking, and finally you have to have God speaking to man, that's what gets the ball rolling with this language bit, that's how we get an inerrant Bible. So we pay close attention to these verbs and nouns, they are chock-full of information. And perhaps you saw for the first time, that this man Jonah who is so quickly

run down in evangelical circles as an ungrateful, unloving, rebellious believer is not so unlike ourselves. Every time we get the idea that there are people, races, religious groups, cultures, and so forth...that do not deserve the grace of God like we do we're no different than Jonah. And of course this is going on in our minds all the time but it's a total annihilation of grace because grace by definition is underserved. You didn't deserve grace, I didn't deserve grace, nobody deserves grace, no matter how great we might appear from the human view point we all deserve a nice warm spot in hell. The very fact we're not there now is solely by the grace of God. So yes, Jonah went to these people, which is probably more than you or I would do, but he did go grudgingly, and he went with the message of v 4, "Yet forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Now is that the gospel message? No, the gospel message is good news. This is not good news at all. This is bad news, news of impending judgment, but there's an ounce of grace in there too because they're being given **forty more days**. And forty in Scripture is the period of testing. So Almighty God says, "I'm giving you nasty Ninevites forty more days to get with the program," because these people had become a menace to society, they had corrupted themselves to the point where there was no other solution but to just cut them out of the human race. When a whole culture goes negative volition to the word of God it gradually declines into a garbage heap that just has to be disposed of. And mind you this is the tendency of the metropolis, it has always tended toward collective depravity, it happens in the rural community too but the difference between the rural town and the urban metropolis is accountability. You do something evil in a small town and I guarantee everyone will know about it and you'll be avoided like the plague. But in the metropolis you just move across town and start a new life of evil, and before you know it everyone has become so desensitized to evil they just all join hands in one big program and this is what happened at the tower of Babel so you had everyone oriented to the same basic way of thinking which was "rebellion against God," we will make a name for ourselves" and they begin to build a pagan kingdom of man. This has always been the tendency of man, to come together with other sinners and when that happens the culture paganizes much more rapidly. So that's what's happened at Nineveh, this is the largest city of the ancient world. Archaeologists who have investigated the ruins of this city found it was spread out among four major mounds or tells that have a circumference of ~60 miles, so it takes you about three days to walk around the edge of the city. This is why in v 2 God calls Nineveh, "**the great city**" and in v 3 we get the report that Nineveh

was “**an exceedingly great city, a three days walk,**” and that refers to the circumference of the city. So the population here is in the range of 600,000 to 1 million. We know that not only because of the size of this city but because in chapter 4 verse 11 we’re told there were 120,000 who didn’t even know their right hand from their left, so those are obviously the children. So what happens in v 5 becomes even more amazing when we contemplate the number of people who went positive volition to the word of God. To put this in perspective this is greater than anything Billy Graham ever dreamed of. This is the greatest response to the word of God recorded anywhere in history and the only greater response we know of will be in the future Tribulation with the nation Israel.

So in v 5 let’s read the response, **Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.** It didn’t matter what social class they were a part of, rich or poor, it didn’t matter whether they were a part of the business guild or not, or a part of the pagan religious system or not they all believed in God. Now you say, “That’s impossible, how did this happen?” Well, let’s turn over to the NT to see how this happened, Luke 11:30. Often we find that the NT authors actually expand our knowledge of the OT. And of course if they do that they’re presupposing its historical occurrence to begin with, you don’t elaborate and build doctrine on a mythological story. We’re talking about real history here, real converts. Now remember the recent events in Jonah’s life. He rebelled against God and went on a little boat ride, got tossed overboard and swallowed by a great fish. And apparently some of this news seeped back to Nineveh before he arrived. So all this happened to Jonah and it’s clear that it had to happen this way, there was no other sequence of events that could have happened, this was the providence of God, yes, even Jonah’s rebellion was providentially determined by the plan of God so what you have on one hand is human responsibility but it’s working under divine sovereignty. And Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster and we know that expression did not mean a literal 72 hours but part of a day, a whole day and a part of a third day, that’s the Jewish reckoning of three days and three nights. So this expression comes to parallel Jesus’ time spent in the grave. So three days and three nights, must have been a physically distressing experience with all the stomach acid eating away at his flesh. And the historical observations of sailors and medical doctors is that the stomach acid will cause discoloration of the skin, it will become white wherever the

acid splattered on the skin. So that's going to be the physical evidence to the Ninevites, that not only do we hear the words of Jonah but "Yes indeed, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish." Now how would they know it was caused by a great fish, that's the other part of the physical evidence and the fact is that when a fish dies it vomits up what's in its stomach and since Jonah was vomited up on the shore where did that great fish die? On the seashore. So you could go over there and see it for yourself, the remains of this great fish. So you have these two evidences, Jonah's skin discoloration and this great fish on the beach. And so now we come to Luke 11:29 where Jesus is speaking to the nation Israel and he makes a comparison with Jonah and the nation Nineveh. "This generation is a wicked generation;" speaking of the nation Israel, "it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah. ³⁰"For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation." Now a sign, a *semion*, is something that must be seen, its physical evidence. How was Jonah a sign to the Ninevites if there was no physical evidence he's been inside the great fish? Yes, we've heard of the great fish that washed up on shores of the Mediterranean but how do we know you were inside the fish? There has to be some physical evidence and we believe it was that his skin had turned this dreadful white color. And so, v 30 concludes with the fact that the Son of Man would also be a sign to that generation of Israel. Now what was the sign to the nation Israel, the physical resurrection of Jesus. Remember, a sign constitutes physical evidence. It has to be able to pass a medical examination, these are high standards. It can't just be, "I thought I saw an apparition or something." "I saw an empty tomb." That's not enough, there has to be physical evidence that the person laid in that tomb was resurrected from the dead. And this is why we have a medical doctor writing this, Luke was a medical doctor and if you have someone claiming that a man raised from the dead I can assure you that would be some of the most important medical research to be involved in and Luke was interested in this because of his medical background so of all the NT authors Luke goes to the greatest pains to investigate very carefully the birth and resurrection because these are unique claims and as such need to be verified.

So we have on one hand, with Jonah the sign consisting of two physical evidences, the great fish visible for anyone to see and the discoloration of Jonah's skin. Now what's the sign of Jesus consist of? Two physical evidences, one an empty tomb and second the scars on his wrists and side. See, it was

those two physical evidences that anyone could check out for forty days, everyone had access to go check it out for themselves. Don't we have an interesting story with doubting Thomas who said I won't believe it until I see it with my own two eyes and so Jesus took his hands and showed him the scars and put his hand on His side. The results, Thomas believed. And the result at Nineveh was the same, when Jonah came waltzing through town all white from being inside that fish it was a sign to them and when they heard the words of v 4 they believed." And this just shows once again that faith is never some kind of a subjective feeling, it's never a leap out into the nothingness, some irrational feeling. It's not that at all. God always gives a basis for faith in history so that what you believe has substance to it, its rationale. What's irrational is not to believe the Scriptures, that's the height of irrationality. The most rational thing a person can do is believe the Scriptures. So God makes it obvious to people, "Hey look, the tomb is empty, look at the scars from when I was nailed to the cross. They killed me but look at the evidence, I'm alive forevermore." And that's the power of our faith, it has substance, and that's why the gospel has a draw to it, this really happened and if you don't respond to what God has done in history then "Sorry, this happened and I gave you numerous opportunities." And indeed that generation of Israel had their opportunity and they rejected history, negative volition. But the generation of Nineveh saw the sign of Jonah and they heard the message of Jonah and they accepted history, positive volition. So that's why Jesus says in v 32, "The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah." They responded to history, you did not so that guarantees a future historical event; judgment. See, history is important, we're responsible for our decisions here in history and we know that because what happens at the end of history? Judgment and key figures and generations are involved in this judgment. So what Jesus is saying is that the male subset of Nineveh are going to stand up, that's resurrection, they're going to be resurrected along with Jesus' generation, the nation Israel of the 1st century, they'll be resurrected too, and the Ninevites will be on one side and Israel on the other and the Ninevites will condemn the Israelites because they repented at the preaching of Jonah but the nation Israel did not repent at the preaching of Jesus. So this is real history to Jesus, he built the doctrine of future judgment on the historicity of the Ninevites repentance. You erase one you erase the other.

So in Jonah 3:5 obviously the most rational thing those Ninevites could do, having been presented with the evidence was to believe in God. Jonah came and said, “Hey look, you want to argue with me argue with this. The God who sent a great fish to rescue me, I survived three days in that sucker and was spit out on the sandy beach. Now this is the God of the land and the sea so you better heed His message, you’ve got forty more days and boom, a nuclear blast is gonna wipe you off the map.” And boy did they respond. Let’s follow their response in v 5ff.

⁵Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. What does it mean they **believed in God**? From the gospel accounts we must conclude in the very least that the content of their belief, whatever they believed was sufficient to deliver them from eternal hell. We conclude that because Jesus said this generation of Ninevites would stand in judgment over His generation of Israelites. And the difference between those two generations was belief. Therefore I take it that this belief in God was sufficient for God to justify each person who believed. We don’t know exactly the content they believed. Obviously they didn’t have as much information as we do. But the information they dragged out of Jonah was sufficient for God to justify them as they believed it. Following this belief we have some more activity; **they called a fast and put on sackcloth.** Now if you were to put on sackcloth you wouldn’t like it very much. Imagine putting on a potato sack and working all day and sleeping all night in the thing. This was a very uncomfortable garment that was put on in the ancient world to show genuine humility, a renunciation of a prior way of life. So not only have they believed but now they are going to live a different lifestyle because obviously God is pretty upset with their evil lifestyle, that’s what’s got Him all bent out of shape.

By the end of the first day the word reaches the governmental level. Verse 6, **When the word reached the king of Nineveh**, the king at this time most likely being Ashur-Dan III. We don’t know a lot about this king. All we know is he reigned from 772-754BC and was a contemporary of King Jeroboam II. So his administration had foreign relations with Jeroboam II’s administration. We also know that during his administration you had a plague that ravaged Nineveh in 765BC and a total eclipse of the sun two years later in 763BC. So there were some rocky years in Ashur-Dan’s administration and here comes Jonah with some more bad news, another

impending judgment. So the king by this time has got to be about sick of this. He's got to deal with the political pressures of a nation that has been ravaged by famine and fearful of divine judgment. It's interesting because one of the responses to a rocky administration by kings through history is to sort of separate yourself from the people, get out of the limelight and serve your own self-interest, it's a pagan coping strategy to deal with life's pressures. But the opposing principle is carried out by a good king; he cares for his people, he's benevolent, he does what is best for his people, he serves the people and keeps their best interest at heart. Now in light of that we learn a little about the character of Ashur-Dan III in v 6. This is a man who had the highest rank, the man who had the greatest authority and when he gets word from his top political advisers what was his response? **he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.** The man with the highest rank and greatest authority got right down with the peasants? That's the point of this verse. Forget the royal robes of silk and gold, give me the sackcloth and a pile of ashes. Now that's got to be humiliating and people must have been murmuring under their breath, "Is that the king sitting over there in a potato sack and ashes?" "Is that our king? Boy, this must be serious." So this is the fruit of the genuine change of mind that took place. He had been chief instigator in mass flayings of human flesh. He had gone along with the pagan religious system in town. And now he's obviously had a change of mind. So in verse 7 he does what is the very best for the people (not to mention what was best for him too). But notice he's submitted here, he's submitted to the God of the universe. He's effectually stated, "I am not the final authority, God in heaven is the final authority." And so, verse 7, **He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. ⁸"But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹"Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."**

Now, that's a true king, he recognizes that "Yes, I have authority but my authority is under God's authority." He's got the divine institutions in the proper order, unlike king Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel who had to crawl around on all fours eating grass till he was finally willing to come

under the sovereignty of God. He realizes that God makes nations, God makes kings and the rules that govern them. It's always God then the state, never the state then God. And as leader of the state under God he does what is best for his people. And so this **proclamation** goes out and notice, also by **his nobles**, his cabinet was in agreement with the king and so he commands them to fast, both food and water are to be eliminated for man only or man and ? Man and beast. Notice his recognition that everything belongs to God. He's the God not just of man but the God of man and nature. He has a pretty good idea of who God is, that He is God over all, so he instructs the cattle to come under the fast. The rest of vv 8-9 are obviously very interesting because verse 10 answers to that. The king was right in how to avert God's wrath. So we want to spend the rest of our time looking at this.

In verse 9 the king says, **“Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.”** ¹⁰**When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.**

Notice the fact that there's a sequence here. God sent a message, they turned from their wicked ways, God saw this, God relented. That's an in-time interaction of God and man. He proclaimed, they turned, He saw, He relented. God actually responded to man's response to Him. So our first observation is that *there is a sense in which “God responds to our responses to Him.”*ⁱ It's intensely personal. Now we have to be very careful here. What attribute are we hovering around here? His immutability. What that means, how we define that according to Scripture is crucial. This is a real slippery attribute theologically. There are lots of sharp detours off the main road here and if you get off the main road you're going to find yourself in deep water very quickly. So we have to be very careful here.

God is immutable. This is one of His attributes, a characteristic of His Person. Remember we have the Creator-creature distinction so God's attributes are always infinite. Then down here in the creation we have man and man's attributes are finite. So God has a characteristic and man has a corresponding attribute. They are similar but they are never identical. Don't ever think that what we have is identical to what God has. That's mistake number 1. So God is sovereign, man has choice, God is omniscient, man has

knowledge, God is holy and man has conscience, God is omnipresent and man has space, geometry. There's always two levels, the Creator and the creature and you can't export what you have and put it onto God. It doesn't work that way. What you have is a finite representation of what He is but you never have what He has. So God has these infinite attributes and one of those is God is immutability. We define that by saying God's character is forever perfectly stable. Notice what I did not say. I did not say that God is like a Greek statue that never moves. I did not say that God never gets emotional. I didn't say any of that, because the Bible doesn't say that. If you define immutability the wrong way you've got a problem with the Scripture. Why? Because you can look at texts like this. God said in v 4 "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown" but in v 10 it says "God relented...He did not do it." What are you going to do with that one, He's changing His mind. So you can't define it as the fact that God doesn't respond to history, vigorously, emotionally, with compassion. We're not talking about a static God, we're talking about a God who is dynamic, involved, emotional, but His character is stable. His character never changes. So our second point is that *God's character never changes but He is involved in history.*

Now you see the word "relent" in v 9 and 10? In some translations it says, "He repented" in others "He changed his mind". I like the translation "relent" and I like it because it avoids a lot of baggage that comes with the verb "repent." That's another verb we want to understand in more detail later but right now we want to work with the Hebrew verb here *nacham*. This is a verb used in Exod 32 after the people made the golden calf and God gets pretty ticked off and says, "Alright, I'm done with these people, I'm wiping them out." And Moses intercedes with one of the most fantastic prayers in the Bible. It's a model of godly prayer where he actually gets in God's face and puts the ball right back in God's court. And it's remarkable, can you imagine standing up to the living God? Moses does and the Lord says, "Alright, I relent, I won't destroy the people." That's the sense of *nacham*. When God responds to man by backing off of a proposed course of action. That's our third point, *nacham* in these contexts means *God is backing off of a proposed course of action.*

Now, why is this? What kind of situations will He do this in? Turn to Jer 26. There are limits as to when God will relent. He won't always do this. Now here's Jeremiah the prophet with a message to Judah, and he says in v 2,

“Thus says the Lord, ‘Stand in the court of the Lord’s house, and speak to all the cities of Judah who have come to worship *in* the Lord’s house all the words that I have commanded you to speak to them. Do not omit a word!

³‘Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may repent,’ there’s our word *nacham*, “that I may repent of the calamity which I am planning to do to them because of the evil of their deeds.” Now, what do you notice about this message? Is Jeremiah saying, NO matter what you Judahites do God is going to stomp you? Is this an expression of the eternal and unchangeable plan of God? No, obviously it’s not because if, v 3, they listen and turn from evil then God will *nacham*, He will not send the calamity. What’s going on here? Because whatever is going on here is the same thing over in Jonah. This is what we call a conditional proclamation. Sometimes its explicit as here. Other times it’s implicit, you have to gather it from the context, that’s Jonah. So this is what we call a conditional prophecy. This is where God states what will happen unless the people change. So the fourth point is that *God will relent only in conditional prophecy*.

Of course some prophecy is unconditional. No matter what man does X will happen. Example, the birthplace of the Messiah would be in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2). He would be born of a virgin (Isa 7:14). He would suffer and die (Isa 53). Those are unconditional. They express the plan of God which cannot be thwarted. But then we have these conditional prophecies. So, our fifth point is that when you see a conditional prophecy you are not seeing God express His master plan, what you’re seeing is *God testing the people*. Conditional prophecies are designed to test the people.

And in Jonah we know this is a test. We already saw that God was giving them how many days? Forty days? What’s forty in Scripture? The period of testing. So there’s always some time involved, time is allotted to man to think about God’s word and respond to God’s word. That’s our sixth point. *God gives a time period to respond to His grace before judgment*. So there’s still an opportunity for positive or negative volition to the proclamation.

Alright, putting this all together turn back to Jonah 3:10. Our first point is that there is a sense in which God responds to our responses to Him. This does not mean a change in God’s character which never changes but rather that He is involved in history. What God does in conditional prophecy is propose a course of action, then give people time to respond and if they do

then he will relent. In verse 10 how did the people respond? They turned from their wickedness. They went positive to the word of God. So God relented. They became wicked again later and God had them judged in 612BC but that generation responded positively to the grace of God.

Did Jonah know that God might relent? Did Jonah know this principle? In 4:2 he knew. Jonah “prayed to the Lord and said, **“Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.”** Jonah knew the character of God. Jonah’s problem was He didn’t like the character of God. He did not like who God is and he would rather create his own god, a god in accordance with his own sinful desires. Now that’s the stubbornness of the human heart. We would rather have a god who carries out our desires. Now its very subtle how this works in our thinking. But isn’t it true every day when things don’t go according to our schedule and we get all angry, “Aren’t we saying the same thing?” It’s the simple things, the little things that don’t work out according to our plan and we get all bent out of shape. All we’re saying is “God, I’m not malleable here, I want you to be malleable, I want you to work this way.” Sorry, that’s not who I am, this is who I am, this is what I’m doing, get in line over here.” “Yeah, yeah, I know who you are but I don’t like the way you are, I don’t like the way you’re working this in my life over here.” “Sorry, you’re going to adjust to Me, I don’t adjust to you. And by the way, who do you think you are anyway? You don’t dictate who I am. I dictate who you are.” This is the mental attitude of arrogance, the very height of autonomy. That I will decide who God should be and what God should do and He will satisfy My desires. Wrong. That’s Jonah.

Now, does any of this impinge on God’s omniscience? Did God know how the test would come out? Yes. Is it therefore insignificant? Is the test just superfluous? No, our responses to tests are important to God. Was God not interested in how Abraham responded to the test of slaying little Isaac? James recounts that God was very concerned with his response to that test and that by passing that test he was justified by works. He was putting his faith to work and when He did this the Lord relented of having Isaac murdered.

So let's close with an opportunity for any questions. Anything about the sign to the nation Nineveh or the sign to the nation Israel?

¹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 498.

[Back To The Top](#)

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