AN INCREDIBLE REPENTANCE

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Presented by:
Solid Bread Community
Fort Collins, CO
www.solidbreadcommunity.com

Review:

- In our study of Jonah last week, we mostly focused on ***Ch. 3:4*** and the short blunt message that God gave Jonah to proclaim to the Ninevites.
- That message was, *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."* Some scholars feel Jonah's message just HAD to be more than that.
- Various commentators try to make the case that Jonah HAD to have 'preached the Gospel,' HAD to have challenged the city to repent, or HAD to have told Nineveh how they might escape God's judgement. These folks feel there HAD to be more….
- But - - there are problems with reading more into the text than what it says. There are always problems when we manipulate God's Word so it meets us halfway across the bridge.
- THIS message – *'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned'* – is the ONLY message that Jonah records as receiving from God - and subsequently proclaiming.
- We're not told of any additional content, and so we are best advised to receive this story at face value. We must assume this was his whole message.
- I personally don't think anything more was proclaimed since Jonah subsequently seeks out a front row seat in ***Ch. 4.***
- He expects to see the city destroyed – after all he's been telling them over and over that it would happen in *'forty days.'* In fact, as we will learn, Jonah WANTED to see this destruction happen!
- We can also assume from the context that Jonah constantly repeated this very basic message from God, and that he did this for a period of at least three days.
- That's how many days it took to visit the entire city according to ***vs. 3,*** and I think that's part of the reason that tidbit of information is there.
- So - it's reasonable for us to think that for at least three days, Jonah drummed this simple message into all corners of that city, '*Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.'*
- **Now last week, we looked at several takeaways from this short blunt message God gave Jonah to proclaim to Nineveh:**
    - **The first is this:** God's word, delivered God's way, will always accomplish God's intentions.

- Concerning this point, we learned it is important for truth to be direct.
- Part of proclaiming God's Word responsibly is declaring HOW it says WHAT it says - - and not changing anything to suit our personal comforts.
- Truth NEEDS to be direct. Any effort to round the corners of truth or soften its landing ultimately reduces truth's effectiveness.
- **The second takeaway** was God's word is powerful.
- We noted how the frank, literal, and expository teaching of Scripture is rare these days.
- The tendency of most churches is to be topical, to leapfrog passages, and to extract applications and themes that may not be in the text.
- Therefore, the **power of God's Word** is missing in many churches and bodies of believers. God's Word is not being taught the responsible way.
- **The third takeaway** was God prepares hearts to receive His truth. This is a big deal to think about.
- Jonah's message wasn't his – it was God's. And so, it was God's responsibility to <u>prepare the way</u> - - - it was Jonah's responsibility <u>to obey.</u>
- It's God's message that will always accomplish its intended purpose. And so God will prepare hearts to receive His truth.
- **A fourth takeaway** was God holds people and nations accountable.
- Sometimes, as in Nineveh's case, they don't need to know more than the very basics. If they had needed to know more, God would have given them more.
- The bigger point here is the Ninevites just needed to respond the right way to the message that God DID provide to them.
- God sovereignly takes care of 'next steps' from there. ***Romans Ch. 1*** says the same thing. But God holds people and nations accountable to the truth.
- **The fifth and sixth takeaways** were our God is a God of mercy and compassion - - and, complete transformation is possible.
- Nothing is beyond God's ability. God is incomprehensible. He sovereignly displays all His power and attributes to achieve His divine purposes.

NOTE: That brings us to *Ch. 3, and vss. 5-9.*

NOTE: There is a lot to consider in these five verses – there are some things we need to see and understand in the details we are told, so let's just wade into it….and I'll do this behind a five-point outline, with each key word starting with the letter 'R:'

1. The **response** of Nineveh ***(vs. 5)***
2. The **regret** of Nineveh ***(vss. 5 and 6)***
3. The **rule** of Nineveh ***(vss. 7 and 8)***
4. The **repentance** of Nineveh ***(vs. 8)***
5. The **reliance** of Nineveh ***(vs. 9)***

This outline will help us appreciate what happened in this remarkable portion of Scripture. I think we should be able to get through this outline today.

A. THE RESPONSE OF NINEVEH

NOTE: We've seen Jonah's message was brief and blunt, and we've seen Jonah's message was from God. And now the opening line of ***vs. 5*** puts it all together.

1. **The Ninevites believed God.**
    - Notice, it doesn't say they believed Jonah – it says they believed God.
    - Jonah's message is not recorded as being *"GOD SAYS in forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."*
    - Jonah just said what God told him to say. I doubt very much that Jonah was motivated to add to God's instructions.
    - And here in ***vs. 5,*** we can see the Ninevites responded to God's message, and they responded to God.
    - Why? As we learned, God had prepared their hearts to receive the truth.
    - And as we also learned, God is sovereign, and God is a God of mercy and compassion.

2. **Let me suggest there's another factor in the way the Ninevites responded here: it's Jonah himself.**
    - What I mean by saying this is Jonah had been stripped of all his human tendencies by this point.
    - His own soul had been laid bare before God through all the circumstances and all the trials he had endured.
    - He was a clean slate before God now - a malleable lump of clay on the potter's wheel.
    - He no longer had any of his own ideas, reluctances, and personal issues which got in the way of God's intentions.
    - Jonah was a clean tool, an open channel. He was now prepared to be used by God - - and so God's message now came to the Ninevites with the full power of the Spirit, and the city's inhabitants were deeply moved.
    - I'm sure the ramifications of this are clear to all of us – just as Jonah needed to endure some trials before he could be used by God, so it is often the case with us.
    - 'A Christian is like a teabag - - they're not much use unless they've been through some hot water.'
    - Our trials and challenges mold us and shape us – or in the words of ***James 1:4,*** they make us *"mature and complete, not lacking anything."*
    - Jonah was not in the way anymore. He was no longer an impediment to God's plans, and so the Ninevites responded as they needed to. They believed God.

B. THE REGRET OF NINEVEH

NOTE: In the balance of ***vs. 5 and into vs. 6,*** we see Nineveh's belief becoming action. Their actions prove their belief is sincere.

1. **We see several things here which underscore the sincerity of the Ninevites' belief and their regret: fasting, sackcloth, and ashes – or dust.**

- First, they fasted. It's natural to not desire food when one is mourning or is under great distress. ***Job 33:19-20*** says,

"Or someone may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in their bones, so that their body finds food repulsive and their soul loathes the choicest meal."

- We know Job's story well enough to know he endured profound distress – but what we read here in Jonah is not a passive thing; it's an active choice.
- It's a true 'fast,' which is a conscious decision to refrain from eating. Again, this is an 'action' that is based on a spiritual response.
- It's an outward expression of an inward attitude. The focus of the Ninevites was getting right with God – and so they fasted.
- They reduced the distractions in their life in acknowledgement of their regret for their sins.

A COUPLE POINTS ABOUT FASTING: The Bible does not **command** Christians to fast. God does not require it of us in order that we be in a right relationship with Him.

- ✓ <u>However</u>, the Bible does show fasting as something that is profitable and beneficial.
- ✓ We see in ***Acts 14:23*** that early church believers fasted before they made important decisions, and deep prayer accompanied this. Fasting and prayer are generally linked together.
- ✓ Fasting is not supposed to be a focus that moves away from food – but rather, the purpose of fasting is to focus on moving TOWARDS God.
- ✓ Fasting is a way to demonstrate to God that we are serious about our relationship with Him.

- And this point goes back to the Ninevites. Their fasting had a purpose.
- They regretted their many sins, and they were serious about getting into a right relationship with God.

2. **The other two things we see defining the Ninevites' regret are sackcloth and ashes (or dust).**
    - Sackcloth and ashes often appear together in the OT as symbols of shame, mourning, and repentance (Job, David, Mordecai, King Hezekiah, Daniel, etc.). Over and over, we see 'sackcloth' or 'sackcloth and ashes' showing up.
    - If someone wanted to demonstrate and vent their absolute grief and shame, they would wear sackcloth, sit in an ash heap, and put ashes on top of their head.
    - Sackcloth was a coarse and low quality material usually made of black goat's hair – or perhaps camel hair. Not unlike wearing an old scratchy burlap bag….
    - Sackcloth was quite uncomfortable to wear, but it was an outward symbol of an inward passion.

- NOTE: The two witnesses of ***Rev. 11:3*** (likely a physical return of Moses and Elijah) will wear sackcloth. They will be appealing to Israel for repentance and a return to a right relationship with God.
- They will show mourning for the Jews' spiritual state of affairs during the Tribulation.
- As far as ashes are concerned, the ashes signified desolation and ruin. A fire burns wood, and ashes are all that is left after that wood is destroyed or consumed.
- Very simply, sackcloth and ashes were used as an outward sign of one's inward condition, and these two elements show up many times in the OT to demonstrate someone's sorrow, repentance, grief, and humility.
- It's important to understand that this whole 'sackcloth and ashes' thing was an outward sign of an inward change. It was the OT epitome of displaying shame and humility before God.
- These symbols were not supernatural rituals in and of themselves. One didn't wear sackcloth and sit in an ash heap and suddenly their halo glowed and miracles happened.
- Rather, these things were physical displays of one's change of heart. They were outwardly visible signs; they demonstrated to everyone utter humility before God.

C. THE RULE OF NINEVEH

NOTE: We see in ***vs. 5*** that the people of Nineveh started a trend of fasting and wearing sackcloth. More of them began to do this - - and eventually, in ***vs. 6,*** word of this goes all the way to the top.

- It all gets to the king, and that's when he makes a rule - he issues a decree or proclamation.
- Now, it's significant here that the king **demonstrates** something, and he **declares** something.
  - He demonstrates his own deep mourning and despair by removing himself from his throne. This throne was a symbol, and a place of his own power, and he removed himself from it.
  - He also removed his royal robes and put on sackcloth too. This royal apparel was a sign of his authority and position, and these things no longer mattered to him.
  - It's much the same as the way King David removed his royal attire when the Ark of the Covenant returned to Jerusalem. He just wanted to be David before the Lord - - an ordinary person, not a king.
  - The situation Jonah laid out was urgent, and so the Ninevite king (in the same manner as David) led by personal example. He also sat in an ash heap. His mourning was sincere.

- We should not be tempted to diminish his actions. The king set a tone for all of Nineveh to follow. He led by example – that's the best kind of leader.

- Then the king laid out some clear terms in his ruling or proclamation. There are five things to take note of:
  - **First**, he declared that no person or animal in his kingdom was to eat. He declared that the fast needed to be universal. That included the livestock. That's rather unconventional.
  - **Second**, he also declared that all people and animals were to be covered in sackcloth. This is a surprising and **another** unconventional move - - it clearly shows the king felt this situation of Nineveh's pending destruction to be dire.
  - **Third**, he declared that all people needed to urgently cry out to the Lord. This was an 'all hands on deck' situation.
  - In the same way ALL the sailors had cried out to their 'gods' on the boat during the storm that God had sent, now the king of Nineveh declared that everyone needed to cry out to the One True God.
  - **Fourth,** the king decreed that everyone needed to *'give up their evil ways and their violence.'*
  - This is rather revealing. It shows the king recognized the sins and the wrongs of his city and citizens.
  - I don't think this was a new revelation to the king. I don't think he had been unaware of Nineveh's evil and violence before this point, but this was probably the first time he did something about it.
  - **Fifth,** he instilled a sense of hope and purpose in his kingdom. Look at ***vs. 9.***
  - The king publicly proclaims the possibility that God may relent, that that he may replace his anger with compassion.
  - He's hopeful – and he wants others to be the same way. He wants his citizens to all be pointing their noses in the same direction.
  - This is a wise king. This is a humble king. He knows his place in the grand scheme of things - - and he knows God is God and he's not.
  - He knows Nineveh is on a fast track to perishing, and so he's not concerned about appearing weak or directionless.
  - He sets a proper tone. He wants no questions swirling here. He wants no uncertainties to cloud people's judgment.
  - There's no wiggle room here for anyone. And so the king lays things out plain and he lays them out fully.

D. THE FOURTH AND FIFTH POINTS OF THIS OUTLINE ARE THE REPENTANCE AND RELIANCE OF NINEVEH

NOTE: (I'll deal with these things together, in this order, since they are closely aligned – not just in this story, but always…)

- The king appeals for 'repentance' in ***vs. 9*** where he says, *'give up'* your evil ways; *'give up'* your violence.
- We've learned in past lessons that to 'repent' means to turn around, to go 180 degrees in the opposite direction. We don't contemplate this fact sufficiently.
- Most of us – I imagine – think of repentance in similar terms as the definitions of regret. We regret our situation. We regret our sins. We regret who we are and what we do.
- But we tend to go no further – we don't DO anything about it. We recognize our problem, and we admit our faults, but we mostly stop there.
- True repentance means we DO something about what we know. It's taking action. True repentance is changing one's trajectory. It's going the other way.
- In ***Mark 1:15*** it says that Jesus came into Galilee and proclaimed the Gospel of God and saying, *'repent and believe in the Gospel.'*
- When we properly repent, we execute a change of mind and a change of behavior. We become different.
- We are still sinners, but we are saved by grace, and so we face the calling to make a change.
- This is a lifelong battle. Sinful habits are hard to give up – nobody is denying that. But true repentance appeals to our direction in life. We turn away from what is wrong and we turn TO what is right.
- And turning TO what is right requires the second element here, and that is a full RELIANCE on God.
- This is what the king of Nineveh appeals to here, and it has a widespread effect. It is *'from the greatest to the least'* in ***vs. 5.*** It is *'everyone'* in ***vs. 8.***
- You can see in his decree that he recognizes the powerlessness of himself and his people. They are trapped – just as he is trapped. Their sins have mounted up before God, and they've reached a dead end.
- They need to fully rely on God now so they do not perish. They cannot dig their way out of their dilemma; only God can save them.
- They have no choice but to have full reliance on God. This is a position of absolute trust and dependance. It's a position of complete and total humility.

NOTE: As we noted last week, the greatest revival in human history that we know of took place in the ancient city of Nineveh. If there was a sixth 'R' word to use in today's outline – it would be that one: **'revival.'**

The population of Nineveh at that time was at least 600,000 people, and a great awakening – a revival - swept through the entire city. God used a reluctant and rebellious prophet to bring about this unlikely turn of events.

Let's wrap up with a few applications for you and me.

1. LESS IS MORE.
    - We're always thinking we need to be 'more' of something in order to be used by God.

- We need to be more articulate, more open in our schedules, more educated, more trained, more networked, and so on.
- But sometimes we need to be 'less.' We need to show less of our carnal tendencies. We need to be less scared, less worried, and less self-absorbed.
- Jonah was reduced to the bare basics. It wasn't until Jonah fully let go of everything that had defined him up to this point that God could effectively use him.
- That's partly why the message to the Ninevites was effective; Jonah was not in the way anymore.
- Sometimes, we get pretty caught up in what we bring to the table – God is much more concerned with us just letting His power being made perfect in our weakness ***(2 Cor. 12:9)*.**
- We don't like to be weak. We don't like to be less of anything. We are always told we need to pursue the idea of MORE. We need to BE more, HAVE more, and so on.
- But many times, LESS is the key. Emptying ourselves of who we want to be and what we want to do is critical.
- That's when we are most capable to carry out God's plan IN and FOR our lives.

2. WE NEED TO STOP UNDERESTIMATING GOD.
   - One of the greatest faults of our human nature is we want everything to be well thought out - well-planned and carefully choreographed.
   - Fundamentally, this is a responsible way to conduct many aspects of our lives, but often we come too close to planning God out of the situation in the process.
   - Because we cannot measure what God can do, because we cannot contain God in a box, because we cannot define milestones around God's ways, we are inclined to underestimate God.
   - Rather than conforming to God's ways and God's terms – which are always higher and greater than ours – we are tempted to confine Him to our limited parameters of understanding.
   - We underestimate what He can accomplish IN us and THROUGH us. In terms of the old cliché, we need to 'let go and let God.'
   - No, we won't have all the answers we covet in that process. But if we can genuinely say that we are being faithful step by step in the journey, then we need to stop underestimating what God can accomplish.

3. WE NEED TO BELIEVE GOD'S WARNINGS.
   - The Ninevites took Jonah's message seriously, and that led them to promptly change their behavior.
   - God's warnings to us about our sin; about our nation's affairs; about the pitiful, desperate, and wretched condition of our churches today (and so on) - - should not be regarded lightly.

- His warnings are clear. His patience will not last forever. Some of you may not like to think that – you are tempted to equate 'grace' with 'patience' and you're walking in a spiritual mine field if you think that way. They are not the same thing.
- The apostle Paul describes God as kind, forbearing, and patient in ***Romans 2:4*** where he writes, *"Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"*
- God's patience is indeed great, but it is intended to lead us to repentance. It is designed to prompt us to change – to give us an opportunity to do what is right.
- But that patience does not last forever. God will judge any person and any nation that condones and carries out the things God has condemned.
- God's patience ran out with Sodom and Gomorrah. It ran out with Israel during the time of the judges. It will run out with those who reject the Gospel during the Tribulation, and so on.
- God's patience has a timeline, or there would be no reason for His judgement.
- We need to pay attention to God's warnings. We need to humbly do what we can to heed his messages to **us** just as the Ninevites heeded God's message to **them**.

NEXT TIME: "God is Pleased, But Jonah is Not" (God relents from His judgment, and Jonah is unhappy about the situation)

SOLID BREAD

Solid Bread Community was started with a passion to teach the truth of God's Word – every part of it, as it was divinely inspired to be understood.

The rules are simple. First, teach what IS there. Don't pretend the Bible is not saying what it is saying.

Second, don't teach what is NOT there. Don't force a passage to mean something it really doesn't.

And – number three, if the Bible states it plainly, we should too.

Contact Solid Bread Community at:
PO Box 431
Windsor, CO 80550
www.solidbreadcommunity.com
Email: connect@solidbreadcommunity.com

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