

The King of Turnovers Jonah 3:6-10

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. If you were with us last week, then you know we took a break in our current sermon series in the book of Jonah titled, "The Pursuit of Those Far From God". But even though we weren't in Jonah, we were still hitting our Fall emphasis on the Antioch identity of Eyewitnesses. And we were doing that by admitting that we have overemphasized the work of the traditional missionary to the neglect of the everyday work of all Christians. As a way of continuing to say that both are equally important to God's mission, we're creating a series of videos that gives a glimpse into the work of Antioch members. Let's check out the first one right now: [James and Amanda Belmonte video]

We're going through the book of Jonah because it puts a mirror on us to reflect how much we're embracing or resisting our identity as Eyewitnesses, as people who have encountered God. Today the mirror will come from Jonah 3:6-10 with a message I have titled, "The King of Turnovers". Here is the main idea in case your attention span is about as short as mine: Eyewitnesses lead the team in turnovers. But in order for that to make sense, we'll need to look at the two key characters in the passage: first, The King of Nineveh - vv. 6-10 and second, The King of Heaven - v. 10.

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Jonah 3:6-10. That's page 775 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

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.
Jonah 3:6-10

May the Word preached here today echo in our hearts and among the nations. And all God's people said, *Amen*. You may be seated.

Exposition

To this day, I still regularly have nightmares about playing Kentucky high school basketball. It's true, you can ask Katie. I wake up soaking wet with sweat, my heart racing, wanting to crawl in a hole and die, and then there's this sweet relief that it was just another dream. That may sound strange to you, but the standard of excellence for basketball in certain parts of Kentucky, like my hometown, puts this collegiate-level pressure on teenagers to perform. Painfully, I remember my eighth grade year becoming the starting point guard on the varsity, a team full of seniors. If you know anything about basketball, the point guard is kind of supposed to be the leader, but the only thing I led the team in was something called "turnovers".

A turnover is when your team has the ball and you make a mistake that gives the ball to the other team. I have a vivid memory of being so nervous and making such a bad pass that the ball hit someone in the stands--I can't remember who it was because instead seeing their face all I saw was the popcorn they were holding explode in a thousand directions. Obviously, the trauma is still with me. But if I was ever going to become a leader who handled the ball more than anyone else, then I had to embrace the fact that I was probably going to lead the team in turnovers.

Similarly, in the book of Jonah, we have been like that spectator with the exploding popcorn watching Jonah, God's chosen eyewitness, make turnover after turnover. In contrast what some of you may have learned growing up, Jonah is not a hero of the Bible. In his most recent episode, Jonah has been told to preach to the cruel and violent city of Nineveh, a people he can't stand. So he gives them a five-word sermon--enough to say he was obedient, but in all likelihood not enough to have any effect on them. It's his way of keeping God's mercy for himself and people like him. It's almost more than a turnover--it's like throwing the game (intentionally trying to lose). Yet to his surprise and ours, God uses the weakest sermon to bring about the greatest awakening that Nineveh had ever experienced.¹

We read this in verse five:

¹ Jonah 3:1-5; Trey Moss, "Call and Response, Jonah 3:1-5"; Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy*, 96

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. Jonah 3:5

It's city-wide faith and repentance. And to prove that it truly was the greatest to the least of them, the author of Jonah devotes the next four verses to examples of both: the least being even livestock that are told to fast and wear sackcloth; the greatest being the highest person in Nineveh, the king.² The king will be the first character we focus on this morning.

I. The King of Nineveh - vv. 6-9

We read this about him in verse 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

So first of all, we don't really know what the king heard. Did someone actually quote Jonah's sermon to him? Or did he just hear of his citizens' reaction? Either way, it seems to go straight to his heart. Four simple things happen: he stands up from his throne, takes off his royal robe, puts on sackcloth, and sits back down in ashes.³ These are all outward signs of an inner posture: rejecting and grieving over the way things have been. It's as though you can hear the king saying along with Johnny Cash, "You could have it all, my empire of dirt".⁴

Here in Jonah 3 the king of Nineveh literally removes himself from his throne sits in dirt, in ashes. I mean, how does this happen?! How does a pagan king hear the rumblings of a five-word sermon that doesn't even mention the Israelite God and repent like an Israelite it supposed to?⁵ There can only be one answer: God. In the letter of Romans God says of himself,

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." [Thus Paul, the author of the letter, concludes,] 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. Romans 9:15-16

This is why a common practice among eyewitnesses throughout history has been to call seekers to desperate prayer. I know today Christians more commonly lead people

² T. Desmond Alexander, *Jonah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 135

³ Alexander, 135

⁴ Johnny Cash, "Hurt," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt1Pwfnh5pc>

⁵ John H. Walton, *Jonah*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Loc 2223-2228

through a “sinner’s prayer,” and churches usually offer an invitation to respond to God. But in days gone by people interested in becoming Christians would be told to seek the Lord, to fast and pray, to wait to see if God would be merciful and bring about real conversion--because, it was up to *him!*⁶ To us is left the praying, but him is left the heart-transplanting.

And the crazy thing is, the pagan king of Nineveh is somehow one of those eyewitnesses of old. Look in verse 7:

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 [here’s the part] 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.” Jonah 3:7-9

‘Seek the Lord,’ he says. ‘Fast and pray, wait and see if God will be merciful.’ But he goes even further than that: ‘Put down your weapons’--yeah, that usually goes over real well with violent people, right? But what’s going on when the violent people themselves become ashamed of their violence and lay down their weapons together?

What if you saw a group of white supremacists publicly calling themselves evil and crying out for God’s mercy? It would be a miraculous work of God. And that’s what’s happening in Nineveh. They go from burning everything down with a rebel yell to sitting in the ashes of their own ruins weeping.⁷ This is what repentance looks like. It’s the realization of violence in your hands and the turning away from it sick to your stomach.

And repentance itself *is a work of God.*⁸ It’s not a work of ‘whenever I feel like it’. I remember being at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes event at age thirteen and feeling such a heavy weight for resisting God and this need to stop running; and yet at the same time everything within me didn’t want to take that step. But one of the things that helped tip the scales was the thought that maybe I would never have a moment like this again, that maybe God would stop trying so hard with me.

Jesus tells us,

⁶ Ichabod Spencer, *A Pastor’s Sketches: Conversations with Anxious Souls Concerning the Way of Salvation*

⁷ Keller, 85

⁸ Keller, 87

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. John 6:44

I know this messes with the American value of independence, but spiritual life from beginning to end depends on God. So if you find your heart so hard that you're not moved to step off your throne and sit in ashes, then I want to encourage you to call out mightily to God.

Maybe you don't even see how your unwillingness to deal with your past is killing your present. Call out mightily to God. Maybe you can't even visualize admitting a certain struggle to others. Call out mightily to God. Maybe you're saying, "I see the problem, but I don't know how to be different!" Call out mightily to God. Who knows? God may turn from his fierce anger, so that you may not perish.

II. The King of Heaven - v. 10

Speaking of God, let's return to the story to see how he reacts. Verse 10 brings a second key character into focus, the King of Heaven. We read,

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

Now, if you know much about God then you read this and go, "Yeah, I totally saw that coming." You know he is the God well-described as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love".⁹ But if you're not familiar with him, or you and him aren't on the best of terms right now, then you might read this verse and go, "You know God seems a little wishy-washy." He's bringing disaster--he's not bringing disaster. The King James Version even says that "God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them". It's like how can we trust this God is any different from those of Greek mythology who act on the whim of emotion and need to be appeased like spoiled toddlers?

Well, let's let him speak for himself. He says in Jeremiah 18,

⁹ Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 86:15, 145:8; Joel 2:13

7 If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. Jeremiah 18:7-8

And again in Joel 2,

*12 “Yet even now,” declares the Lord,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
13 and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster. Joel 2:12-13*

His words seem pretty consistent with his actions. And this is actually something called God’s “immutability”.¹⁰ It’s a big word that basically means “unchangeable”. No matter what, God is true to himself--and that’s something we can appreciate because of how much American culture values staying true to yourself.

The difference is where you and I waver in being true to ourselves, God doesn’t. Where you and I are fickle and can be easily swayed by forces outside our control, God is in control of everything and therefore isn’t ever forced to change his mind. So when someone is worthy of disaster, he is true to himself to give them disaster. And when someone is worthy of mercy, he is true to himself to give them mercy. And this is why God is able to turn, to freely change his mind, and still be consistent to who he is.

It is this word, “turn,” that is the heartbeat of this passage.¹¹ But it’s not so much the turning of the Ninevites. Yes, they lay down their violence and pick up sackcloth and ashes, but there’s no evidence that they became Jewish converts or that the movement lasted for very long.¹²

This could be an instance where something called Engel’s Evangelism Scale might help us make sense of this:

¹⁰ Alexander, 137; Eric Redmond, Bill Curtis, and Ken Fentress, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk*, Loc 1056-1064

¹¹ Keller, 84

¹² Alexander, 138; Keller, 87-88; Walton, Loc 2219-2222

Serves in leadership roles	+12
Spiritual giftedness confirmed	+11
Disciples new & immature believers	+10
Deepens Bible/theology knowledge	+9
Participates in Christian service	+8
Identifies with Christ in baptism	+7
Identifies with other believers	+6
Witnesses to unbelievers	+5
Experiences sin & confession	+4
Begins Bible reading & prayer	+3
Gains assurance of salvation	+2
Experiences initial life changes	+1
<i>Repents & trusts Jesus</i>	
Counts cost of a faith response	-1
Confronted with a faith response	-2
Senses personal spiritual conviction	-3
Understands some gospel concepts*	-4
Interested in Jesus and the gospel	-5
Exposed to other Christian concepts	-6
Realizes there is only one true God	-7
Vulnerable to false religious beliefs	-8
Seeks to fill personal spiritual void	-9
Senses personal spiritual emptiness	-10
Aware of higher Power or powers	-11
Born with a God-Vacuum	-12

The idea it communicates is that there are usually multiple steps involved before someone enters into a relationship with God, especially for anyone that comes from a background with no knowledge of God. Those steps are represented by the negative numbers on the bottom, leading to conversion at the point of zero.¹³

Perhaps this was one of those steps toward conversion for the people of Nineveh. Or if it was conversion for any of them, it's likely there was no further instruction for them,

¹³ "The Good Soil Evangelism and Discipleship Scale," <https://www.goodsoil.com/docs/about/GSSW-scalepageWeb.pdf>

and they were abandoned as spiritual babies. This is why it's important to never separate evangelism from discipleship, to reach and also teach.

The turning that is in focus here in the passage is not that of the Ninevites, but of God. Remember the words of Jonah's sermon? "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That last word "overthrown" might also be translated "turned" or "turned over". We will see in chapter four that Jonah said these words with perverse hope that they would come true in disaster for Nineveh.¹⁴ But to turn or turnover something can also have a positive meaning, especially when God is involved. So, ironically, Jonah's cruel prediction comes true--God turns over the city--but from disaster to freedom, from violence to peace.¹⁵ He is the God of mercy! He is the King of turnovers!

Conclusion

And man is that good news for anyone chosen to be an eyewitness like Jonah. Because, like Jonah, you're going to be called as a vessel of God's mercy to people that you think don't deserve it. Don't know who those people are for you? God will find them for you.

On Wednesday of this week Gregory Alan Bush tried to enter the predominantly black First Baptist Church of Jeffersontown. When he couldn't find a way in, he headed to Kroger and killed two black shoppers. Do I want to share about God's mercy with him? Honestly, I don't even want to pray for him. He disgusts me. I want him to be the farthest from my thoughts until I hear somewhere down the road that he's getting what he deserves. And so here I am again, leading the team in turnovers, letting the enemy win. And yet God takes my heart in the hands of his mercy and he turns it over to pray that this man would trust in Jesus, and that good would somehow come from this tragedy.

And when you're chosen to be an eyewitness like Jonah you're going to be given opportunities that even when you try, you're only going to cough up a lousy five words. Just a couple days before my mom died, I had the opportunity to communicate God's mercy to her--twice. And both times, she shut me down. How do you think that sense of failure has showed up over the last four years? Once again, when it really counted, another couple of turnovers. But has God used those turnovers to declare his mercy? He's doing it right now! He is the King of turnovers.

¹⁴ Keller, 96

¹⁵ The Bible Project, "Jonah," <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/jonah/>

God's eyewitness is rarely the flawless prophet and social media hero. Instead, *24 the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, 25 correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. 2 Timothy 2:24-26*

When Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses..." he knew what he was getting into. And yet the good news of God's mercy would still cover the world. Not because we would learn to be virtuous, but because we would learn that God is merciful. The Bible tells us,

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Romans 5:6

The eyewitness is the one who by nature says, 'While I still didn't have it together, God had me in mind.' While I still didn't have it together, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **We are announcing that while we still didn't have it together, Jesus Christ died for us, rose again, and called us to be his eyewitnesses.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember what Jesus has done for you. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, let us know so we can help prepare you for baptism and communion. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let's pray.

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