

## i am Jonah, Part 3: **The Choice to Repent**

### **Jonah and the Whale Joke**

As Craig pointed out last week, the story of Jonah and the whale (or literally, “great fish”) has certainly attracted its share of skeptics. For example, I read the following story of a little girl talking to her scientifically minded teacher about whales:

The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small.

The little girl stated that Jonah was swallowed by a whale.

Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible.

The little girl said, “When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah.”

The teacher smirked, “What if Jonah went to hell?”

The little girl replied, “Then you ask him.”

### **What Is Repentance?**

As amazing as the story of Jonah and the great fish is, there is an even more remarkable story in the book of Jonah. It is the story of the repentance of the Ninevites. It occurs in the third chapter, which we will look at later today.

But first let’s agree on what repentance is. Repentance is one of those “churchy” words that may or may not be fully understood.

“Repentance” literally means “To change one’s mind or purpose for the better.” In that sense, it applies equally to Christians and non-Christians alike.

In addition, for the Christian, repentance more specifically means “a turning from sin and a turning to God.”

A prime illustration of repentance in the Bible is found in the story of the Prodigal Son. He turned from his life of sin and back to his father, who represents God the Father.

It should be understood that as I am using the word “repentance” today, such repentance assumes an acknowledgment of and apology for one’s wrongdoing. Confession of and contrition for one’s sin or wrongdoing are integral to any genuine act of repentance.

Some people mistakenly think that regret and remorse are the same thing as repentance. They are not.

Repentance involves regret and remorse but goes beyond them:

“Regret” says “I wish I hadn’t done that.”

“Remorse” says “I am sorry I did that.”

“Repentance” says “I wish I hadn’t done that” and “I am sorry I did that” but also, “I want to change and never do that again!”

## **Famous Failures to Repent**

As we look at the repentance of the Ninevites today, there are two things I want us to keep in mind:

- First of all, that repentance is a choice. When anyone does wrong, they can then choose to repent or not.
- Secondly, bear in mind that true repentance is a choice that relatively few people seem to make. In our society, it is the rare individual who will readily admit and repent of their wrongdoing.

To illustrate this, let’s look at some famous, very public failures to repent.

### **A. President Richard Nixon**

There is an Academy Award-nominated movie out now called “Frost/Nixon.” It is about a series of interviews conducted in 1977 between David Frost, a British television talk-show host, and the disgraced former US President Richard Nixon.

One of the things the interviews focused on was Nixon’s involvement with the Watergate scandal. In 1972, five men broke into Democratic headquarters at the Watergate Office complex in Washington, DC. Subsequent investigations revealed that this burglary was one of many illegal activities authorized and carried out by Nixon’s staff. Furthermore, secret tape recordings revealed that Nixon himself had obstructed justice and attempted to cover up the break-in.

Yet, Nixon never admitted any guilt or offered any apology for the Watergate scandal. In 1974, he resigned rather than face certain impeachment.

If you have seen the previews for the movie, you’ve undoubtedly watched this key scene where Frost asks Nixon,

*“Are you really saying the President can do something illegal?”*

Nixon responded, *“I’m saying that when the President does it, that means it’s not illegal!”*

Clearly, Nixon remained defiant regarding any personal wrongdoing even five years after the incident. And he most certainly did not repent of his deeds.

## **B. President Bill Clinton**

What about another President caught in scandal, Bill Clinton?

While he was in office, President Clinton had an extra-marital affair with a 22-year-old White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. Yet, he fiercely denied that the affair ever took place. In January 1998, Clinton famously stated the following in a White House press conference:

*“I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I’m going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time; never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for the American people. Thank you.”*

After DNA evidence emerged that proved Clinton had a sexual relationship with Lewinsky, he grudgingly admitted in grand jury testimony in August 1998 that he had had an “improper physical relationship” with Lewinsky. Yet, he continued to deny that he had had “sexual relations” with Lewinsky. This led to his being charged with perjury.

## **C. Governor Rod Blagojevich**

We don’t have to confine ourselves to past Presidents to find other examples of public figures who refused to repent for their blatant wrongdoing.

Have you followed the current news about Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich? He may have set a new low in terms of those who refuse to repent after being found with their hand in the cookie jar.

Mr. Blagojevich was arrested on Dec. 9, 2008, on federal corruption charges. He was caught on tape conspiring to profit from his authority to appoint a successor to Barack Obama, who resigned his Senate seat after being elected president. Mr. Blagojevich called the opportunity to choose Mr. Obama's replacement a “gold mine.”

In addition, the “wiretapped conversations caught him discussing gaining ‘a substantial salary’ at a nonprofit foundation or organization connected to labor unions, placing his wife on corporate boards where she might earn as much as \$150,000 a year and trying to gain promises of campaign money, or even a cabinet post or ambassadorship, for himself.”

Even though he was caught red-handed making these remarks on tape, he denied any wrongdoing and launched a public relations campaign to proclaim his innocence, appearing on Larry King Live and other talk shows. Yet, he refused to defend himself at his own impeachment trial, boycotting it until the final day because he denounced it as “unfair and fixed.”

P.S. He was removed for abuse of office last Thursday by the state senate after being found guilty by a 59 to 0 vote in a weeklong impeachment trial. He protested his innocence to the bitter end.

## **D. Ted Haggard**

Well, I don't want to only pick on politicians. The church has sure had its fair share of public scandals — those involving ministers who refused to admit their guilt despite overwhelming evidence of illicit behavior.

Just this week, Ted Haggard was back in the news. As you may recall, Ted Haggard was president of the National Association of Evangelicals as well as the pastor of a large church in Colorado Springs.

Back in 2006, he was accused and later found guilty of a three-year sexual relationship with a male prostitute. At the time he vehemently denied the affair and that he was homosexual and insisted on his innocence. An independent oversight board at Mr. Haggard's church found that he had 'committed sexually immoral conduct' and dismissed him as senior pastor.

Of course, before Ted Haggard the church suffered through similarly embarrassing scandals involving Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, among others. They were just as slow to confess any wrongdoing as Ted Haggard was.

So what is the point of recounting these cases of public disgrace? I want us to see what all these individuals have in common:

- All were guilty of legal and/or moral misdeeds and of betraying the trust of others.
- They all lied, denied their guilt, rationalized or even justified their behavior.
- Ultimately, and most important for today's discussion, they were all guilty of refusing to admit their misbehavior and repent of it (at least in a timely manner).

Granted, I have chosen easy targets, well-known public figures. But, I want us to realize that any one of us are capable of the very same sins. Lest any of us feel a little self-righteous by comparison, I would caution us all that "there but for the grace of God, go I."

How many of us have at times refused to admit a certain sinful behavior, much less repent of it?

## **A Remarkable Repentance**

Let's keep these cautionary tales of the refusal to repent in mind as we now examine their polar opposite. We're going to read about an entire city of people who chose to repent of their evil deeds. After discussing so many tragic stories of unrepentance, let's look at one encouraging story of a remarkable repentance.

Please turn to Jonah 3.

Jonah 3:1 — *Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time:*

<sup>2</sup>“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

<sup>3</sup>Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city — a visit required three days. <sup>4</sup>On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” <sup>5</sup>The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. <sup>7</sup>Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup>But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

There is a lot to discuss in this passage and I believe Craig will preach on this chapter in detail next week. Today, I want to focus on only one thing — the absolutely remarkable repentance of the Ninevites at the preaching of Jonah.

You see, the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah isn't the story of the great fish... it is the incredible contrition and repentance of the Ninevites and their king!

To appreciate how astounding their repentance was consider this:

We know from Jonah 1:2 that Ninevah was a wicked city. That is why God sent Jonah to preach his judgment on it in the first place.

Nineveh was an extremely violent place. It was known for its ruthless treatment of slaves that were captured in battle. The king of Nineveh, for sport, would mutilate people.

Nineveh was one of the largest cities in the ancient world. It was a city of about 600,000-700,000 people.

That is over twice the population of Newark, NJ.

So, imagine now, a city even more dangerous than Newark and twice as large. One day a stranger from a far-away place (like maybe South Carolina!) starts preaching that God will destroy the city in 40 days. Now, you would expect the people to either ignore or ridicule such a person, at best, and perhaps to even beat him up or kill him.

But how do the evil Ninevites respond? They actually believe God is speaking through Jonah! Immediately the entire city of 600,000-700,000 people — led by their vicious king — begins to fast in contrition, dress themselves in uncomfortable sackcloth, call out to God, and give up their evil and violent ways!

THAT is a miraculous repentance! As a result, God shows them compassion and relents from destroying the city.

### **Jesus' Commendation of the Ninevites**

In contrast, Jesus tells of a people who refused to repent and incurred God's judgment as a result.

In the gospels, Jesus references the book of Jonah for two primary reasons:

One, is to point out the prophetic symbolism of Jonah being in the belly of the great fish for three days and nights.

The second reason Jesus references the book of Jonah is to commend the remarkable repentance of the Ninevites.

Let's read Matt. 12:38-41:

*<sup>38</sup>Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."*

*<sup>39</sup>He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup>For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup>The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.*

v. 38: It is preposterous that the Pharisees and teachers of the law are asking Jesus for a miraculous sign. He had just healed the man with the shriveled hand right in front of them (vv. 9-14)! And after that, Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was both blind and mute (vv. 22-24). While the Pharisees did not see that miracle first-hand, they heard about it. And they must have believed it occurred because they responded that Jesus could only heal a demon-possessed man by the power of Satan.

So, clearly, the Pharisees are being disingenuous in asking for another sign here. Miraculous signs would never convince them that Jesus was the Messiah.

vv. 39-40: Jesus accuses the religious leaders and other like-minded people in Israel at that time of being a wicked generation that was unfaithful to God. He says the only other sign they will be given is the sign of Jonah. In other words, he is pointing to the miraculous sign of his rising from the dead after three days in the grave. The great irony, of course, is that by the time Jesus rises from the dead it will be too late for the religious leaders to embrace him as the Messiah. They will have already rejected and crucified him.

As an interesting aside... by virtue of citing the story of Jonah being in the belly of a huge fish for three days, Jesus testifies that it is a factual account. The story of Jonah and the great fish is not a myth or a parable or a figurative illustration. It literally occurred as it was reported in the book of Jonah. To believe otherwise is to accuse Jesus of being a liar.

And if he is a liar, then he certainly wasn't sinless. And if he wasn't sinless, then he isn't the Son of God! Therefore, if we believe that Jesus is the sinless Son of God, then we must believe the story of Jonah is literally true.

v. 41: Finally, Jesus condemns the religious leaders for their lack of repentance. He unfavorably contrasts their stubborn lack of repentance with the commendable repentance of the Ninevites. If the Ninevites repented at the preaching of a mere man like Jonah, how much more should the religious leaders and others in Israel have repented at the preaching of the Son of God! How contemptible that a pagan people were more responsive to the word of God than were God's chosen people, the Israelites.

## **Why Is Repentance So Difficult and What Can We Do About It?**

Whether it's the Pharisees, former Presidents, disgraced ministers — or us — why do we find it so difficult to repent? And even if we know why, what can we do about it?

I'm sure there are a multitude of reasons we find it difficult to repent, but there are three prominent reasons I can think of:

### **A. Pride**

First of all, there is our pride. None of us likes to admit that we're wrong or that we've done something wrong. Pride has been called the root of all sin. And it is probably the one sin that clings most tenaciously to us even after our salvation and we become Christ's followers.

Pride is the primary characteristic that prevents many people from repenting when they should. In the case of those people we've discussed, pride seems to be the fatal flaw in both Nixon and Blagojevich. They exhibit almost pathological arrogance that keeps them from admitting what is clear for everyone else to see, that they were guilty of serious crimes.

All of us are just as capable of being too proud to repent. Fortunately, God has provided an antidote to such pride. That antidote is humility.

When we know we've done wrong, sinned against another or against God, the surest way to short-circuit pride is to remember to respond with the humility of Christ. If we humble ourselves and confess our wrongdoing, it is a short step away to full repentance.

### **B. Shame**

Shame is another powerful enemy of repentance. When we refuse to repent because of our shame, that is actually evidence of a perversion of our conscience. What do I mean by that?

Just this...the Holy Spirit acts through the agency of our conscience to convict us when we do wrong. This should lead to the healthy response of rightful guilt. Such guilt should prod us to confession and repentance.

But the process gets derailed when we respond with shame instead of rightful guilt. Shame, in the sense that I am using the word, is a self-centered, self-pitying reaction that is motivated by a fear of public humiliation. Shame comes from a fear of others thinking less of us, a fear of loss of respect.

Unlike pride, shame at least internally acknowledges that a wrong has been committed. But instead of exposing that wrong to the light through confession and repentance, shame seeks to bury the wrong, to hide it from view.

It seems to me that such shame is what motivated Ted Haggard's denials and his resistance to repentance. As a Christian who was familiar with God's view of homosexuality and as a pastor who had preached against homosexual behavior, he must have felt an especially acute sense of shame at falling into that particular immoral activity.

Shame may also prevent many of us from repenting of wrong deeds. We know we've sinned but we're afraid to fess up because of a fear of what others will now think of us.

Here again, God provides a solution. God's answer to our sense of shame is his mercy and forgiveness. If we will bring what shames us before God, he will assure us that there is no shame beyond the reach of his merciful grace.

After the Fall, Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden because of their shame, which was symbolized by their awareness of their nakedness. They should have run straight to God, confessed their sin, and repented. But like we so often do, they chose instead to hide in shame and then make excuses for their wrong behavior when they were discovered.

Instead of destroying them, in his mercy God clothed them with animal skins. He covered their shame with his grace, the sacrificed animals being a foreshadowing of the sacrifice Christ made to cover all of our sins.

The mercy and forgiveness found at the Cross are more than a match for our deepest shame. No matter how ashamed we may feel, we must resist the urge to hide. Rather, we should quickly expose our shame to the light of God's mercy and forgiveness. It is his lovingkindness that will lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

### **C. Fear of Consequences**

A third reason we find it so hard to repent is the fear of consequences if we make our misbehavior known.

We may think, "What will happen to me if I confess my sin?"

"Will I lose this friend? Will it harm my marriage? Will it hurt my children? Will I forfeit a chance to be promoted? Will I be fired? Will I get sued? Could I get arrested?" etc.

Because we fear these consequences, or others we deem just as dire, we deny our misbehavior. We refuse to repent.

Fear of consequences may have been Bill Clinton's main reason for not admitting his immoral behavior. After all, he was the President of the United States. He felt he had much to lose by going public with an admission of guilt. The irony is that by lying to the American public and denying his moral failure, by fighting the allegations tooth and nail, he alienated himself from the public that probably would have supported him if he had just shown honest contrition. Ultimately, his refusal to confess and repent led to his being impeached by the House of Representatives. Though he was acquitted in the Senate, to this day he has yet to recover his reputation.

God has a response to our fear of the consequences that may follow should we admit our sin. His response is simply this: trust in his love. The opposite of fear is not courage; it's love. God's love will calm our fears if we will just trust him to do so.

We may think, "But God, what will happen to me if I let people know I did this? I'm scared to tell anyone. I don't want to lose anything!"

God's likely reply may be something like this, "Do you trust in my love? Then do what you know is right. Confess your sin and repent. And leave the consequences to Me."

The bottom line is this:

For every reason we find it difficult to repent — pride, shame, fear of consequences — God has a solution. God provides the means of grace to enable us to repent despite these obstacles.

- If the obstacle is pride, God calls us to humility.
- If the obstacle is shame, God covers us with his mercy and forgiveness.
- If the obstacle is fear of consequences, God asks us to trust in his love.

## **Conclusion**

I want to close with one more positive example of repentance.

Those of us who are reading through the chronological Bible just finished the book of Job yesterday. Through several long monologues, Job was guilty of questioning God's wisdom and justice. At last, God answers Job by rebuking him for his arrogance.

Job responds to God's chastening by uttering these final words:

*"I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance."* (Job 42:6)

God accepted Job's repentance and, in an amazing display of his unmerited favor, he *"blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning."* (Job 42:12)

He restored Job's health, gave him twice as much wealth as he had before, plus ten more children to replace those who had died.

Not only in Job, but throughout scripture the lesson is clear:

- Unrepentance displeases God and earns his righteous judgment.
- On the other hand, repentance pleases God and earns his forgiveness, compassion, and grace.

Which will we choose?

To be a people like the Pharisees? To be a people who follow the predominant worldly example of denying our wrongdoing and stubbornly refusing to repent?

Or will we choose to be a people who follow the example of Job and the Ninevites? To be a people who are quick to admit our wrongdoing and who fully repent?

That is the choice each of us have on a regular basis as we walk out our lives as followers of Christ.