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| **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**  **"God's Mercy with Repentant Sinners”**  **Rev. Carl Haak**  **September 4, 2011; No. 3583** |

Dear Radio Friends,

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    Returning once more to our study in the book of Jonah, we have come today to [Jonah 3:10](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+3:10).   We read, “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.”

      Last week we saw that God brought Nineveh to repentance through His Word.  We saw that God was the author of this repentance, verse 5:  “So the people of Nineveh believed God.”  The dramatic change in the city of Nineveh was not caused by buildings falling down, walls and towers collapsing, or a fear of terrorists.  Nineveh was the terrorist nation of the then-known world.

      But the repentance was caused by the Word of God.  Jonah had preached the preaching that God had bidden him to preach.  And the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, had gone forth to conquer and to bring men and women to repentance before God.  Is that so with you today?

      We learn, further, that the people of Nineveh had thorough dealings with their sin against God.  They turned from their own evil way and from the violence that was in their hands.  They saw sin no longer in general terms, but they looked upon their own hearts.  They were not satisfied any longer simply to nod their head in agreement that men are very bad and sinful.  But they saw their own evil way and they dropped the sin that was in their own hand and fled from it in repentance.

      Further, we saw that they pleaded for the mercy of God.  They had heard the message of the mercies that were in God through Jesus Christ.

      Now, in verse 10, we read of Jehovah’s response, or Jehovah’s dealings with those who have been brought to repentance.  This verse is written in order of time as we see it.  We see it this way:  Nineveh repented; and God did not destroy them but showed mercy.  The Scriptures tell us that eternally God had willed their repentance.  From all eternity God has determined the salvation of His people and, by His grace, He has purposed to accomplish it.  We read in [II Timothy 2:25](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=II+Timothy+2:25), “If God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.”  And in [Romans 2:4](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Romans+2:4), “The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.”  And [Acts 15:18](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Acts+15:18), “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.”

      But let us not miss the clear and very wonderful meaning.  God treats repentant sinners in mercy.  “I will heal their backslidings,” He says through the prophet.  “I will have mercy and compassion; I will abundantly pardon.”

      What a fitting thing for us to contemplate today — God’s dealings with repentant sinners.  God did not do with us as we deserved.  He did not pour out upon us the evil that we had coming.  But He gave Christ for all the sins of His people.  And the Holy Spirit gives us to know this wonderful mercy of God.  When we know that mercy, that God has dealt with us in mercy, then our hearts must soar in gratitude.

      If we look at the verse again, we see that God’s dealings with the repentant sinners are described for us in three verbs:  God *saw* their works, God *repented* of the evil, and God *did* it not.

      First of all, God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way.  There was a look of favor upon them.  Now, what does that mean that God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way?  Does it mean that there were some things that God notices and there are other things that He did not?  Obviously, that is not the meaning.  The Scriptures teach us that the knowledge of God is infinite.  “The eyes of the Lord,” say the Scriptures, “are in every place, beholding the good and the evil.”  God knows all there is to know about all things in all places all the time.  He knows all things in all places eternally.  He says in His Word, “As I have thought, so shall it also be.”  If you want to know how small you are, think about that.  That will bring you to your knees with Job to say, “I am but as yesterday,” or with David in [Psalm 139](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Psalm+139), “Such knowledge is too great for me, it is high; I cannot attain unto it.”

      Then, what *does* it mean that God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way?  It means that God looked upon the repentance of the Ninevites with favor, with pleasure, with acceptance, as something that was true and genuine.  Now, let us remember:  God sent His Word and His Spirit among them.  He had brought His Word through a man, Jonah, to whom the Lord had granted first repentance and obedience.  Jonah preached the Word of God.  Jonah had not preached a wannabe God who was looking for man to accept him.  But Jonah preached the living God, in whose hands man is.  Jonah proclaimed the issues of sin, of a holy God, and of judgment.  Jonah declared the truth of accountability to God, answerability, and being exposed to the wrath of God for sin.  Jonah had proclaimed the promises of God in Jesus Christ.  Jonah brought God’s Word to them.

      And what did God see as the response?  He saw their works, that they turned from their evil way.  Was that the Ninevites’ works?  Well, yes, but only because God had first worked it in them; only because, as we read in [Philippians 2:13](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Philippians+2:13), “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”  So God looked with favor upon His own work.  God admires what He does.  God admires all of His works, and God especially admires and is pleased with His work of grace.  God saw His grace, which produced true, sincere, rare repentance.  God saw His grace working in Nineveh a sorrow after a godly sort, seen in humble, trusting obedience to God.  God saw that their repentance was not a sham, not merely an outward sacrifice.  It was not rooted simply in the emotions, but it was rooted in the new heart that God had given.  And God was pleased.  God was glorified.  God expressed His favor upon the Ninevites and upon His grace in them.

      Let us apply that for just a moment.  The Word of God comes to you, too.  You, too, today, in this program, and, I trust, in a faithful church, have heard the preaching that God has sent — the preaching of His Word — the preaching of the Word, of the Holy Scriptures, which tells you that you are not independent, out to make your own way, but you are accountable, created by God and answerable to God.  The preaching tells you of your sin and of Christ alone as Savior.  Now God looks to see His grace.  God looks to see His grace within the hearts of His children, that we walk with humble and thankful hearts before the living God.  Yes, the eyes of God today are on all that goes on in the Oval Office and in Cabinet meetings; all that happens throughout the whole world in the strategies of men, in business rooms, in court rooms, and on Wall Street.  Yes, the eyes of God are everywhere, ruling and judging and determining.  But the focus of the eye of God is not on the pronouncements of men, not on the ragings of unbelief against His Christ.  His eye beholds where His Word is heard and brought to the heart.  There God rejoices.

      Is that true of you, by the grace of God?  God rejoices, God looks with pleasure and favor upon His children when, by His grace, they walk in repentance.  When, by the Word of God, they are changed unto new creatures; when God brings them to repentance, that they know their sin and they see it as God sees and they are broken and humbled before God.  God looks with favor on the lonely and broken and lowly heart of the child of God who feels as if he is forever abandoned because of his sin.  Hear the Word of God:  God looks with favor upon such a heart, with His approval and blessing.

      The next thing we read, “And God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them.”  What was the evil that God had said He would do to Nineveh?  In verse 4 of chapter 3 we read that Jonah proclaimed, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”  The evil that God said He would do was to judge their wickedness and to call down upon their heads what their sins deserved.  The evil that God would do, then, was not a moral evil.  God does not do wicked things.  But it was in the sense of calamity and destruction upon Nineveh—the evil, as men would see it.  Men would think that it is good that they go on in their sins.  But God, in justice, visits men with destruction because of their sin.  God takes men up in His hands to reckon with them.

      God repented of the evil that He had said that He would do.  He repented.  He did not bring the overthrow that He said He would.

      Now, what does that mean?  Immediately wicked men twist the Word of God.  As Peter says in [II Peter 3](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=II+Peter+3), they wrestle with the Scriptures unto their own destruction.  Immediately someone would take this verse, and others like it (perhaps in [Genesis 6](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Genesis+6), where we read that it repented the Lord that He had made man and it grieved him at His heart), and they would say, “Ah, God changes His mind.  God is fickle.  God reacts to man.  It does matter what man does.  God waits to see what man will do and then God makes up His mind as to what He will do.”

      Now we ask the question, How do we square this Word of God (God repented of the evil that He had said He would do) with the decrees of God?  The answer is this:  This verse (God repented of the evil that He had said He would do) does not mean that there was a change in the eternal plan of God.  It does not mean that God purposed one thing eternally and then altered, or changed, His mind.  Repentance, as in a change of purpose, is something that God does not and cannot do.  [Numbers 23:19](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Numbers+23:19), “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent:  hath he said, and shall he not do it?  or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?”  [I Samuel 15:29](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=I+Samuel+15:29), “And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent:  for he is not a man, that he should repent.”  [Romans 1:29](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Romans+1:29), “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”

      What does it mean that God repented of the evil?  It means, from our point of view, it seemed that God would do one thing and then He did it not.  As we behold the unfolding of God’s eternal purposes, it has the appearance of a change of mind toward His creatures.  That is not, of course, the case in reality.  Eternally God wills all, God knows all that He shall do.  And, remember, God had never said that He would overthrow a repentant Nineveh.  It was the Nineveh whose sin came up against Him that He said He would overthrow.  By His grace, He had purposed that Nineveh would repent.  God’s will is fixed.  God’s decree is eternal.  But as it unfolds, it unfolds in justice.  Sin brings judgment.  Repentance brings blessing.

      Let us apply that a moment.  God says that there is an unbreakable bond between sin and judgment on the one hand, and repentance and mercy on the other.  From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible makes that plain.  Sin brings judgment.  And, in the way of the grace of repentance, we experience the favor of God.

      Then the hope of the child of God is not that God will change.  God does not change.  The wages of sin is death.  The way of evil is destruction.  But the hope of the child of God is that God is unchangeable in His mercy.  God brings the grace of repentance, and with that grace of repentance comes the assurance of God’s favor and blessing.  We read in [Proverbs 28:13](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Proverbs+28:13), “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper:  but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.”  When God makes you humble and lowly, and when God gives you grace to confess your great misery as your sin, you shall find mercy at the hand of God.  Mercy awaits, gracious mercy, mercy that God promises in the way of repentance.  God does not change.  No, from all eternity His purposes towards His people in Christ are purposes of tender mercy, to bring us to repentance, that we might know the blessings of His mercy.

      Finally, we read that God did it not, that is, He did not overthrow Nineveh at that time.  From a study of the Word of God as set forth in the books of the Kings and Chronicles, Nineveh continued for a period of at least another hundred years.  That is, we believe that the repentance, then, took root in that generation and in the one following — they taught the way of the Lord to their children.  And we have here already a foretelling of the glorious advance of the gospel and of the truth that the desert shall blossom as a rose.  The judgments of God did not come for that generation.

      Why did not God bring judgment?  Was it because they repented?  Now the answer is this:  The judgment of God’s people in Nineveh was diverted from their own head because it was inflicted on the Christ.  Hear me carefully!  Repentance does not atone for our sins.  Repentance does not erase our sins from the sight of God.  Repentance does not pay for our sin and avoid the judgment.  The blood of Jesus Christ alone erases sin and pays for our judgment.  Repentance is the gift of God in Jesus Christ worked in the hearts of those whom God has chosen in Christ and redeemed in the blood of His Son and to whom He has given His Spirit.  God did not pour His judgment upon us, upon His children, a judgment that would have made us perish.  But God did cast that judgment upon His own Son.  The Word of God, [Romans 8](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Romans+8), “He spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all.”  He was delivered for our offenses.  He was crucified for our transgressions.

      Does God know you, by His grace, as a repentant sinner?  Do you say, “Even though my very repentance is imperfect and something that I need to repent of, yet God knows that He has worked it in me”?  Do you say, by His grace, “I acknowledge my sin before God.  I loathe myself.  I am the sinner, and it grieves me that I have offended my God”?  Then hear the oath of God:  “I will have mercy.  I am a God of lovingkindness and tender pity.”  Believe that faithful promise of God, who hath blotted out your sins and now looks upon you with pleasure.  God delights in showing mercy.

      That is wonderfully brought out in the parable of the prodigal son.  There God shows that He does not have “half-way” houses.  The repentant children of God are not sent to a shack out in the back.  But God brings them from the pig-pen to His own house.  “Put the robe upon him and put a ring upon his finger and let us make merry, for my son who was dead is alive!”

      Very often a verse in [Luke 15](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Luke+15) is misquoted.  There we read the Scriptures:  “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.”  Very often that is thought to mean that the angels rejoice over a repentant sinner.  But that is not what it says.  Whose joy?  “I say that joy shall be in heaven.”  Whose joy?  The angels?  No!  That is God’s joy!  In heaven God rejoices!  God rejoices when He sees the grace of repentance.  For His great delight is to show mercy to His people.

      Now believe this promise of God.  He hath not dealt with us according to our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.  For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him.

      Let us pray.

      Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word.  We would ask that Thou wilt write it upon our hearts.  We pray through Jesus Christ, Amen.