|  |
| --- |
| **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**  **"The Wonder of Nineveh’s Repentance” Rev. Carl Haak August 21, 2011; No. 3581** |

Dear radio friends,

            One truth that the Bible sets before us repeatedly is the power of God’s Word to accomplish God’s purpose.  [Hebrews 4:12](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Hebrews+4:12), “For the word of God is quick (that is, living), and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword.”  [Jeremiah 23:29](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jeremiah+23:29), “Is not my word like … a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?”  [Isaiah 55:11](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Isaiah+55:11), “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth:  it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”

      Do you believe that?  Do you bow unreservedly before the power of the Word of God?  And do you praise God, knowing that the Word of God is never defeated, never inadequate, never comes up short?

      One of the greatest displays of the power of the Word of God to accomplish God’s saving purpose is found in the repentance of the Ninevites in [Jonah 3:5-9](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+3:5-9).   Returning today to our series on the book of Jonah, you will recall that God had brought His prophet to  repentance.  Jonah had deliberately disobeyed God when he was called to go to Nineveh, trying to flee from God’s very presence.  But the hand of God arrested him in the storm, and when Jonah was cast overboard from the ship, God prepared a fish to swallow him alive.  This fish, after three days, according to the command of the Lord, has spit Jonah back upon the dry land, and God has come to His prophet, calling him again to “Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.”

      Jonah goes to Nineveh.  He declares God’s Word.  And that Word brings the Ninevites to repentance.  We see a marvelous display of the grace of God in the repentance of the Ninevites.  Men who were infamous for their cruelty and barbarism now are humbled under the Word of God.  Yet, for all of that, those men of Nineveh were no worse than you and I.  God’s grace is always a wonder.  And God’s grace works through the power of the Word of God.

      Let us consider that today:  the repentance of the Ninevites.

      How prompt was Jonah’s obedience!  The man who had tried to put an ocean between himself and God now hardly takes time to collect his senses.  We read, “So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh.”  He has just been cast from the stomach of a fish upon dry land, but he immediately obeys.  We read that he entered into the city a day’s journey and began to preach.

      Do you see the difference that repentance has made in Jonah?  Jonah comes to the city of Nineveh, a great city of many miles across, and he does not pause trying to get the demographics of the city, to try to figure out the percentage of women and children, or the dispositions of the people.  He simply enters into the city and he cries out and says, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”  That he cried does not mean that Jonah wept and became teary-eyed, but that he lifted up his voice so that he could be heard above the din of the city.  It refers to his courage.  He did not creep into the city, advancing cautiously.  He did not first seek to set up little chat groups.  But he lifted up his voice and preached the preaching that God gave to him:  “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”  That means that he declared, “I am God’s prophet.  The living, true God has sent me to you with His Word.”

      Perhaps Jonah’s own person, his appearance, aroused interest in the Ninevites.  Perhaps he bore the marks of being in the whale’s belly for three days.  Surely he spoke personally of his own experiences.  He spoke to the Ninevites of the things that he had seen and heard and was a witness of.  But his preaching was the preaching of the Word of God—a preaching that summoned men to God’s judgment throne and made known to men their guilt before God.  He proclaimed to them their own evil way.  He explained to them the violence that was in their hands and how it appeared before the living God.  He opened up to them the law of God, the Ten Commandments, and showed to them their loss and guilty state in the light of that law.

      You see, Jonah’s preaching cut right against the grain of that society.  He said to the Ninevites who were proud and arrogant and believed that they had come to their day of attainment, he said to them, “You’re not OK.  You’re not independent.  It’s not just you.  You’re God’s creatures and you are accountable to the living God.  You are guilty, lost sinners.  The one living God, whom I declare to you, is going to judge you.  You stand before Him as rebels who have broken His holy law.  And the righteous God will not wink at your sin.  You must turn, turn from your sin!”  And, no doubt, Jonah went on to explain to them the grace of repentance and the promise of God in a Savior, Jesus Christ, the only sacrifice for sin, who would be provided by the mercy of God.

      And the result of this preaching?  Well, we would expect that the Ninevites would mock him, laugh, play with him, tar and feather him, or, perhaps, cut his throat and add his blood to all the rest that soaked their streets.  But instead we read this in [Jonah 3:5](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+3:5):   “So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth.”  The king arose and covered himself in ashes.  The animals were left unwatered and unfed.  They began to cry and to bellow.  And the people brought supplications to God.

      Now how would you explain that?  Should we see this simply as a sociological phenomenon, an instance of public fear?  No, no, there is only one explanation:  God’s mighty grace, made known through His Word.  We read in [Acts 13:48](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Acts+13:48), “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.”  God’s Word powerfully brought the salvation of His own elect children.  On a morning that was no different from any other morning in Nineveh, business as usual, the merchants setting out their wares, the farmers plodding to their fields, the wives kneading dough for bread — God sent His Word through His prophet Jonah.  And His Word, according to His own eternal decree, worked faith and repentance.  Jonah preached.  At sundown an amazing sight was to be seen.  The people sat down in hair-cloth.  And the king was among them, with ashes upon his face.  The people were crying out to God to turn His wrath away.  It was a display of the power of the Word of the living God.

      But we might ask, Was this a true repentance before God, a genuine, Spirit-worked repentance?  We are not asking the question whether that was true of *all* in Nineveh.  We know that not necessarily every man and woman repented.  But we are asking the question, was this a real repentance?  We are not left in doubt as to the answer.

      First of all, we have the Lord’s imprimatur, His stamp of genuineness, in [Matthew 12](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Matthew+12) and [Luke 11](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Luke+11).   There the Lord was speaking of His generation, of an age of Jews who lived in Palestine to whom God had given His Word and who now saw the fulfillment of that Word in the Son of God in the flesh preaching among them.  There, as Jesus had preached to that generation of Jews, they had rejected His Word, even though they said, “A man never spake as this man speaks.”  They said to Him, “Show us a sign, and then we will believe you.”  And the Lord said, “You are an evil and adulterous generation.  Instead of embracing the Word of the Son of God, you have responded in religious, stinking pride.”  It was in that context that the Lord said, “The men of Nineveh will rise up in judgment with this generation and shall condemn it, because *they* repented at the preaching of Jonah.  And behold, a greater than Jonah is here.”  Now, if the Ninevites’ repentance was false and temporary, produced only as a work to escape judgment, how then could the Ninevites condemn the generation of the Lord’s day?  Then the Ninevites would not condemn that generation but would join that generation in their condemnation.  Then the Lord would say, “You people of My day are just like Nineveh.  You’re all show but you’re no substance.”  No, the Lord puts His own stamp of approval on the repentance of the men of Nineveh.  They heard the word of Jonah and they repented.

      But more.  In [Jonah 3:5](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+3:5) we read, “So the people of Nineveh believed God.”  Now take note of that.  Whom did they believe?  Jonah?  No, it does not say that.  It says they believed God.  They saw beyond the messenger to God, the One who had sent the messenger.  They heard the incredible message that Jonah brought to them that Nineveh would be overthrown, and they believed God.  True faith is in God.  It is not in the messenger.  Messengers are sent.  Preachers are sent.  The Word of God is sent to you.  But faith is in God.  True repentance is known in this, that in your life there will be one great reality:  God.  How shall I stand before God?  It will be the personal awareness worked in you by His Spirit that you are a sinner, undone before Him; that you are accountable to Him, and that God’s wrath burns against sin.  Repentance is when you believe in God.  Not some great power in the sky; not some benevolent force over mankind; not some warm fuzzy; but the almighty God!  And you tremble before Him as a sinner.  That is the mark of true repentance.  You know God and you know your own sin before Him and you are overwhelmed by grief.

      Beloved, God has also sent to us His holy Scriptures.  God has also commissioned the church of Jesus Christ to preach the holy Scriptures.  That Word of God comes to you today.  Do you believe God?  We preach to you Christ crucified.  Do you believe God?  Perhaps you are a child of God who gathers with others in God’s house and you hear the servant of the Lord on the Lord’s day proclaim God’s truth.  Do you understand that then you are not dealing with a mortal man but you are dealing with God and His message?  We must not come to a church seeking to hear a man who is going to share his religious experiences and reflect on real life stories.  But we must go to a church where a man, sent by Christ through the church, will stand before the congregation and open the living Word of God and preach that Word without compromise; preach to us that God *is* God; that we are called to repent and believe in His Son Jesus Christ; to obey and to trust Him and to turn from our sins.

      If the church of Jesus Christ today is going to be an instrument of God in the advance of His glorious kingdom, then there must be faithful preaching in the church of Jesus Christ.  And there must be, among the people of God, a desire to hear the living Word of God.  The church of Jesus Christ, then, must stand up without apology and without shame and say, “We preach Christ crucified.  We bring to you the living and abiding Word of God, the only and the great truth, the very message of the living God.”

      What is needed in your church is not liturgical renewal, that is, to spruce up the worship service to attract the mentality of the present age.  Your church does not need youth services, religious drama, and dance.  You do not need a worship service that is the brain-child of a worship committee—something that is innovative, something new and fresh, and, oh yes, somehow to tuck the pastor’s message in there for ten or fifteen minutes at the most.  That is not what you need.  What you need and what is the great need in America and the great need in the great cities in America, is the preaching of the clear and timeless truths of the Word of God—God’s own message, a sermon prepared by a believing man, sent from Christ and the church, a man who believes the Word and brings his message from the Word of God—a message that is prepared with some spiritual sweat and agony and trembling—a man, then, under the conviction of the Spirit who cries out, “Woe unto me if I do not preach Christ and Him crucified.”

      The educated leaders of the church are going to scoff at that and say to us, “Preaching is out of date.”  And most of the church is going to agree.  Regardless of that, hear the Word of God.  God’s Word is the power.  If we are to be a blessing in our generation, if we are to have a blessing unto ourselves, if the church is to be faithful and true to her God, then we must have the faithful preaching of the Word of God.  And look to God to add His blessing.

      It was through that preaching that the Ninevites turned from their sins.  It is very noteworthy in the passage of [Jonah 3](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+3) that that repentance was not vague and general.  It was personal and specific.  The king said to the citizens, “Yea, let everyone turn from his evil way, and from the violence (literally, plunder) that is in their hands.”  There was an outward expression of their repentance.  They cast themselves down in sackcloth (gunnysacks), and had dust upon their heads.  Visually you could see that something had happened to these people.  But their repentance was primarily inward.  It did not stop at the mere external.  They cried to God in prayer.  And they turned from their evil way and from the violence that was in their hand.

      Now note that.  The sin most characteristic of Nineveh was violence, plunder, rough oppression, war-like swagger, “I’ll take what I want when I want.”  They turned from their evil way, from the specific, concrete expression of sin in their life, not just vague and general, but from the specific expression of that sin in their life.  Sin expresses itself differently in each one of us.  It is all pride, but it expresses itself in different ways — sexual indulgence, selfishness, greed, jealousy, envy, laziness, lack of love one for another, materialism.  Repentance was found in the Ninevites in that they wrestled with God in prayer, they cried exceedingly.  And they turned from their evil way, their *own*evil way.

      Is this the wonder of God’s grace in you?  Hearing the Word of God, do you, by His grace, tear the roots of sin out of your heart—not just its fruits, not just its mere outward expressions, but its very roots in your heart?  You see, repentance toward God is not that God comes and takes a few things of sin away from your life.  But repentance toward God is that He turns you from sin so that you hate sin.  Repentance toward God is not that we simply have a new wrinkle in our life, but it is a profound change that only God can make through His Word, that we no longer see sin as nice, but we see it as an offence to God and we would be a holy people before Him.

      Nineveh turned from their sins and pleaded for the mercy of God.  They cried out, “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?”  Jonah had also proclaimed to them the message of the sovereign mercies of God, that God, through Jesus Christ, pardons sinners, passing by His judgment and giving His own Son upon a cross to bear the penalty for His children.

      That, too, is a part of repentance.  You see, the grace of repentance is not only a sorrow for sin, but it is a hope in the mercy of God.  Where else shall we go?  When God brings us to repentance, He does not leave us alone with our sin and our guilt.  He does not leave us to ourselves oppressed by the weight of our sin.  He does not tell us, “Now see your sin?  You had better start trusting in your own works.  You had better start seeing what you can do about it.”  If we do that, we only sink down deeper.  No.  God brings the wonderful Word of mercy to sinners.  If there were no mercy of God, then we would have no hope.  We would only pine away in our sins.

      But there is mercy with God, that God may be feared and worshiped.  That is the wonder.  The Word of God comes to you, the Word of the living God; the Word that cuts right down into your heart; a Word that, by His grace, gives you to believe in God as your God; a Word that works in you so that now your sin is evil and loathsome in your sight; and a Word that gives you to hope in the wonderful mercy of Jesus Christ and to know Him as Lord and Savior.

      The men of Nineveh are going to stand up in the last day.  They are going to testify against every wicked generation that refuses the Word of God and does not repent before the preaching of the Word of God.

      Now hear God’s Word.  Repent.  Turn from your sin.  Believe in the living God of the Bible.  His Son, Jesus Christ, is coming.  Repent.  Hear His Word.  Do you hear?  Forsake your sin.  Turn from your evil way.  Believe in Christ crucified.

      Let us pray.

      Father, humble us before Thy Word.  Cause that Word to live in our hearts and to bring us to repentance and trust in our Savior Jesus Christ.  In His name, we pray, Amen.