

See Jonah Reap

The Prodigal Prophet – Part VI

Jonah 3:4-10

Introduction

A recent *Wall Street Journal* had a front page article entitled, “Confession Makes a Comeback”. It opened with the comment that, “sin never goes out of style, but confession is undergoing a revival.” The article went on to catalog several different events that are growing in popularity where people can confess their sins.

There are web sites where people can anonymously confess their sins and others can come along and read all about it.

In Colorado Springs, people can confess their sins during their trip to the Citadel Mall. Catholic Friars come to the mall in their brown friar gowns to listen to their confessions. So, they can shop, grab a Caramel Latte, pop in for a confession and head home absolved for yet another day.

This article went on to mention that just a year ago, the second-largest North American branch of the Lutheran Church (the Missouri Synod) voted to revive private confession with a priest.¹

I also discovered creative ways for someone to confess if they are too embarrassed to confess in person. For a modest fee, one company allows them to talk on the telephone to one of their personnel and confess whatever they want to confess.

Another company will let people hire them to actually go to confessional for them or, if it is someone they want to apologize to, the company will do that for them too.

Frankly, our world is filled with people struggling with guilt and an awareness of sin and they do not like it!

I read of one man who went to his psychiatrist and said, “I’ve been doing a lot of bad things, doctor, and my conscience is bothering me.”

The psychiatrist asked, “So, you want something to strengthen your willpower?”

The man said, “No, I want something to weaken my conscience.”

I went to one online site where people could anonymously write out their sins in hopes of finding relief from their guilty consciences. Anyone can literally read paragraph after paragraph of the kinds of sin people are dealing with. There are secret affairs, secret abortions, secret plans, sexual diseases kept secret, theft undiscovered, secret motives behind relationships, and on, and on. It was actually heartbreaking to read a few paragraphs – which was all I could take.

These people left that online site with their consciences unrelieved, and their sins unforgiven.

True confession cannot be done online or on the telephone. We cannot hire someone to do it for us. In fact, true confession is never a secret we keep.

True confession is admitting our sin to Jesus Christ. It is not for some priest on earth, since Christ is now High Priest and the one and only . . .

*. . . mediator ... between God and men...
(I Timothy 2:5)*

To avoid the Lord is to avoid true confession and to avoid true confession is to miss true forgiveness, since Jesus Christ is the source of true and lasting forgiveness.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians,

In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

which He lavished on us. . . .

(Ephesians 1:7-8a)

If we want to see true confession; if we want to see hearts exposed, sin admitted, and consequences accepted, the place we might never turn to in the Bible happens to be a perfect description.

Where do you think you could turn to find all this? The book of Jonah. Shocked, aren't you?!

Jonah's Sermon – and the Results

Jonah has begun to preach the word of God in Nineveh. In the English language, his sermon was eight words long.

Actually, this is what we call “the main idea” in Bible Exposition class. We are given Jonah's main idea; his basic homiletical point. Look at Jonah 3:4b.

. . . “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Now we can be certain that Jonah spent time telling the people about the true and living God, because we are told in the very next verse,

Then the people of Nineveh believed in God... (Jonah 3:5a)

The Ninevites would have to know something about this God of Israel in order to transfer their faith from Dagon, the fish god, over to Elohim, the true and living God of heaven.ⁱⁱ

The people of Nineveh believed in God.

The Hebrew word translated “believed,” or “aman,” comes from a verb with means, “to confirm or to support”. The tense of the verb indicates that they considered what Jonah said to be true.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was an extremely simple message, and the people believed in, not Jonah, by the way, but God.

True faith never rests in the messenger, but in the God of the message. And God brought these people out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the most effective preachers of the last few centuries in the English-speaking world, was saved by such a simple message. He was a young man at the time and had gone to a primitive Methodist chapel to hear a man he had heard of speak. When he arrived a bit late, he discovered that the pastor was not there and they had a guest speaker. It must have been their summer

series! Actually, no one knew where the pastor was, and so, after an awkward amount of time, one of the laymen stood to preach. Spurgeon later recounted the event in detail.

This man had no education and could barely read or write. He preached on the text,

Look unto Me, and be ye saved... (Isaiah 45:22)

He stuck to his text, for he had little else to say. “My dear friends,” he said, “this is a very simple text indeed. It says, ‘Look.’ Now lookin’ don’t take a deal of pain. It ain’t liftin’ your foot or your finger; it is just, ‘Look.’ Well, a man needn’t go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. Any man needn’t be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, ‘Look unto Me’. Many of you are lookin’ to yourselves, but it’s no use lookin’ there. You’ll never find any comfort in yourselves . . . look to Christ. The text says, ‘Look unto Me’.”

One of Spurgeon's biographers said that after about ten minutes of such preaching, this layman had quite exhausted what he had to say. But then, he noticed young Spurgeon sitting in the back under the balcony. Not recognizing him and noticing his downcast expression, he focused on Spurgeon and cried out, “Young man, you look miserable. And you always will be miserable – miserable in life, and miserable in death – if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved. Young man, look to Jesus Christ! Look! Look! Look!”

This was the end of the sermon. But God's invitation from His Word, delivered in this simple message, penetrated Spurgeon's heart. That day, he looked to Christ alone and was indeed saved and his life changed.

With a simple, direct message, Jonah had invited the Ninevites to look to the God of Israel – and they looked and believed.

Now, the proof of true confession is repentance; an about face. Repentance means we turn around and head in the other direction.

In fact, the New Testament word for “repentance,” “metanoia” (μετάνοια), literally means, “a change of mind”.^{iv}

So, did these cruel, barbaric, arrogant, idolatrous people really change their minds and believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

Proof of true confession

Notice two proofs of true confession in this text.

1. First, the Ninevites' confession radically changed their personal lives.

Notice Jonah 3:5-6.

Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.

All the people, from king to commoner, exchange their normal clothing for sackcloth. Sackcloth was a coarse, rough, dark-colored cloth, usually made of goat hair or cotton. It was used for making sacks for grain – think of a burlap bag. Whenever it was used for clothing it represented humiliation and mourning.^v

Notice in verse 6 that the king is sitting in ashes, which even further signified grief and humility.

Verse 8 informs us that the people even covered their animals in sackcloth. This was not because they believed animals sinned or that animals could repent, but so that even their property would become an expression of their humility, sorrow, and grief over their sin.

According to verse 7, they are fasting as well – going without food in order to dedicate their time to pray to God for His mercy.

Perhaps you are thinking, “Well, that’s the only reason they’re doing all this – they don’t want to be judged by God.”

Okay – is that a bad thing?

“Well, it seems to me that if someone wants to follow God because they don’t want to go to hell but want to go to heaven – that sounds pretty selfish to me.”

If that is all there is to it, then yes, you are right. However, will you say this verse with me?

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16 KJV)

In other words, God loves you and sent His Son to die for you, and if you believe in Him, you will not die and go to hell, you will go to heaven.

In fact, the context of John 3:16 is that Nicodemus, an unbeliever, has come to Jesus during the night and asked how he can get into the kingdom. Jesus did not say, “Well that’s kind of selfish, so never mind.” No, He told him how to be born again.

The Ninevites, by the grace of God, have believed the word of God and placed their faith in God. Now, they want to avoid the impending judgment of God.

There is something else that proves their genuine confession is more than just self-seeking. Their confession radically changed their personal lives and something more.

2. Secondly, the Ninevites' confession radically changed their public behavior.

Notice Jonah 3:7-8.

[The king] issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.

But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.

The first proof of confession is personal, but this second proof of true confession is public. This is a radical change in their public lifestyle.

Notice that the king does not even bother to prove to the people that they are wicked. He simply says, “Every one of us needs to turn from our wicked ways and from the violence that we are known for around our world.”

In other words, “Let’s repent; let’s turn around; let’s change our minds and change our lives!”

Can you imagine a king making this proclamation?

When I, along with some of my family, was in London a few weeks ago, we had an opportunity that had only recently opened up in the downtown area. The underground offices and sleeping quarters of Winston Churchill, the chiefs of staff, and their support staff had been opened for viewing.

During World War II, this was the underground bunker where Churchill and the brain trust of Great Britain monitored the war efforts and survived the

bombings of Hitler's air attacks. Everything was literally the way it had been, because after the war, it was simply sealed and left undisturbed for over sixty years. Chalkboards still had details written on them; maps still showed troop locations; even candy was still sitting by a typewriter. We were able to listen to recordings of telephone conversations between Churchill and Roosevelt.

Several times during the dark days of the war, the King of England, as well as the President of the United States, called for national days of prayer. As wonderful as that may seem, the king and our President did not then, and have not ever called for a national day of repentance.

Have you ever heard of one of these?

It is one thing to call for people of a nation to pray; in fact, it is still politically correct in a crisis. But it is another thing to call for a national day of repentance for sin.

Do you understand the significance of this Ninevite king's proclamation? He is not just calling for personal prayer. He is calling for personal holiness. He is calling for national repentance.

The king is saying, "Listen, we're not going to rationalize our sin; deny our reputation for violence because everybody else does it too. We're not going to excuse our sin, minimize our sin, or cover it up. We're going to confess it and – get this – we're going to stop it!"

I have to tell you, I do not get excited when I hear some leader call for prayer. Something bad happens, and from the President on down to the news anchors, they talk about their prayers. All this does is make unbelievers feel good and religious for a few days, and then it is back to living like a Ninevite always lived.

This was not the case in Nineveh, however. This is true confession; this is genuine repentance that affected the personal lives and the public lifestyles of these people.

Notice the open and honest hearts of these Ninevites, in Jonah 3:9-10.

Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.

(And how wonderful it is to read that He did!)

When God saw their deeds that they turned from their wicked way [this is genuine repentance], then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He

would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

From the human point of view, it looked like God changed His mind, but from the divine point of view, it was simply God responding, as He had already purposed, to the change in the Ninevites' hearts toward Him.^{vi}

Application

Frankly, if we learn anything from this amazing response of the Ninevites, it is to remain open to the work of God's grace. God's mercy and grace can come to the most unlikely.

I doubt any faithful Jew anywhere in Samaria or Jerusalem had the Ninevites on their prayer list! "Don't forget to pray for the Ninevites!"

Ninevites were nowhere near the list of "most likely to believe".

Sometimes God's grace breaks through in unexpected ways and in unanticipated places. Who would have ever believed this would happen to Nineveh?

This is the point – if Ninevites can repent, no one is beyond writing on your prayer list; no one is so violent, cruel, sinful, or idolatrous that Christ cannot redeem them.

Evan Roberts was the preacher whom God used to bring about an amazing awakening in Wales in the early 1900s. It all began at a small meeting where he was preaching to young people in his home in Wales. He astonished them by giving four things to radically change their lifestyles as believers.

1. First, confess all known sin;
2. Second, get rid of anything doubtful in your life;
3. Third, be ready to obey the Holy Spirit instantly;
4. Fourth, confess Jesus Christ publicly.

By the end of the first week, sixty people responded and took up the challenge of these four activities.

They were confessing all their secret and public sin.

They were getting rid of all the compromise in their lives – no more doubtful activity. In other words, they raised the standard of holy living as high as they dared.

They openly lived with a sense of anticipating whatever it was that God would want them to do.

We can imagine how this changed their work ethic; their relationships; their character.

Finally, they told people whenever they had the chance that they belonged to Jesus Christ. Implied in this, of course, was an invitation to others to believe in Christ as well.

By the end of the second week, Evan Roberts started on a whirlwind tour of South Wales with a team of singers. Within a year, 100,000 people genuinely converted to Jesus Christ and were added to the church.

Let me read one description of the Welsh Revival:

As people confessed their sin and pleaded for the controlling of the Spirit of God, they did all they could to confess wrongdoings and to make restitution (another proof of genuine repentance, by the way). This unexpectedly created severe problems for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years workers had pilfered all kinds of things. Everything from wheelbarrows to hammers had been stolen. However, as people sought to be right with God, they started to return what they had taken, with the result that soon the shipyards of Wales were overwhelmed with returned property. There were such huge piles of returned tools that several of the yards actually put up signs asking the men to stop. One sign read, "If you have been led by God to return what you have stolen, please know that the management forgives you and wishes you to keep what you took."

What a change of heart! What a radical change in lifestyle! And the world did not know how to handle the awakening in people's lives.

When we began this chapter in the book of Jonah, I mentioned that it held the answer to another reformation. It begins with the commitment of preaching the words of God. It follows up with the commitment of people to the heart of God.

1. Confess all known sin.
2. Raise your standard of holy living beyond any doubtful activity.
3. Stay alert to obeying whatever it is, no matter how mundane, that God wants you to do.
4. Confess Christ in your public sphere of influence.

Ladies and gentlemen, this may, in this century, bring about a great awakening.

I do know it will bring about a great revival in your heart and mine when we embrace this kind of personal living and public lifestyle.

By the way, we know from biblical history that Nineveh enjoyed a generation of pursuing God. This was not just a one week revival and then, back to Nineveh. This was genuine. This took root!

Sadly, most of their descendants would turn back again to idolatry and one hundred years after Jonah preached this sermon, God would destroy Nineveh in judgment.

However, this generation, along with their children, believed! They truly confessed – they repented and followed after God. We will one day meet converted Ninevites in heaven.

I have found it interesting that Assyrian Christians; that is, people from this region who trace their roots to ancient Nineveh, to this day point to their faith as inspired by God's compassion toward Nineveh – in sending Jonah to their forefathers and accepting their repentance.^{vii}

By the way, let us all make sure we identify with the Ninevites. They were lost in sin, hopeless and helpless before the coming judgment of God, but they believed in God. And it radically altered their personal lives and their public lifestyles. This was evidence that the grace of God had been lavished upon them, as it is upon us who make true confession – who truly believe.

However, do not stop –

- Continue confessing all known sin – you do not need a priest or a confessional, you can confess to your Father immediately and regularly;
- Keep avoiding doubtful things that muddy your mind and cloud your fellowship with Christ;
- Stay obedient to the Holy Spirit – open to His work and His will no matter how difficult or mundane;
- Commit to making your relationship with Jesus Christ "public knowledge" as He gives you opportunities to speak on His behalf.

Now, the work is not yet finished in Nineveh. In fact, there is one person who will hold out on God.

Jonah!

Everyone else has opened their hearts to God, but Jonah has closed his. So, our gracious God who used Jonah's words will now begin to deal with Jonah's heart.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/19/2008 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2008 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

ⁱ “Confession Makes a Comeback,” The Wall Street Journal (Sept. 21, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Amazed (Victor Books, 1996), p. 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ William L. Banks, Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet (Moody Press, 1966), p. 85.

^{iv} W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 952.

^v Banks, p. 88.

^{vi} Wiersbe, p. 88.

^{vii} James Bruckner, The NIV Application Bible: Jonah (Zondervan, 2004).